

Philosophy in the Abrahamic Traditions 2018.

Maimonides and Abravanel

Some possible questions:

- What could Maimonides understand by a miracle? Is it connected to God's will and knowledge and, if so, how?
- Maimonides argues that God cannot be said to have a final cause because God is uncreated. Does he successfully argue that such a conclusion can also be applied to the world if it is not created *de novo*?
- How far is Maimonides' argument in 3:13 influenced by the wider context of his discussion about evil and a rhetorical attempt to draw his readers away from an anthropocentric point of view?
- Does Abravanel do justice to Aristotle? Is his understanding of the Stagirite different from that of Maimonides?
- Is Abravanel's interpretation of Maimonides convincing?

Samples from Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed*

Know that with a belief in the creation of the world in time, all the miracles become possible and the Law becomes possible, and all questions that may be asked on this subject, vanish. ...

And just as He brought the world into existence, having the form it has, when He wanted to, without our knowing His will with regard to this or in what respect there was wisdom in His particularizing the forms of the world and the time of its creation – in the same way we do not know His will or the exigency of His wisdom that caused all the matters, about which questions have been posed above, to be particularized. If, however, someone says that the world is as it is in virtue of necessity, it would be a necessary obligation to ask all those questions; and there would be no way out of them except through a recourse to unseemly answers in which there would be combined the giving the lie to, and the annulment of, all the external meanings of the Law with regard to which no intelligent man has any doubt that they are to be taken in their external meanings (2:25 Pines, p. 329)

Often the minds of perfect men have grown perplexed over the question of what is the final end of that which exists. Now I will explain that in all schools this question is abolished. I say then that in the case of every agent who acts with a purpose, the thing he has done must necessarily have some end with a view to which it has been done. According to philosophic speculation, this is clear and is not in need of demonstration. It is also clear that a thing that has been done in this way with a purpose must have been produced in time after not having existed. Among the things that are clear also belongs the fact, and this fact universally admitted, that He whose existence is necessary, who has never and will never be nonexistent, does not need an agent, as we have already made clear.¹ And as He has not been made, no question as to the final end arises with reference to Him. For this reason, one does not ask: What is the final end of the existence of the Creator, may He be exalted?; for He is not a created thing. Through these premises it has become clear that a final end can only be sought with

regard to all things produced in time that have been made through the purpose of an intelligent being. (3:13 Pines, p. 448)

What appears to result from the discourse of Aristotle is that, according to him, the ultimate finality of these species consists in the permanence of coming- to-be and passing-away, which is indispensable for the continuance of coming-to-be in this inferior matter, since it is impossible that the individuals composed out of it should endure. Still, the end that can be generated, I mean the most perfect thing that is possible, is generated from it. For the ultimate purpose consists in bringing about perfection. And it is manifest that the most perfect thing, whose existence out of this matter is possible, is man; he is the last and the most perfect of these compounds. Accordingly even if it is said that all sublunar beings exist for his sake, that would be true from this point of view; I mean because the movement of changeable things exists for the sake of coming-to-be in order that what is as perfect as it is possible to be should come about. Aristotle ought not to be asked concerning the finality of man's existence, seeing that he holds the doctrine affirming the eternity of the world. (3:13 Pines, 450)

Isaac Abravanel *New Heavens*

What is the final cause in view of which the heavens were created? This exploration involves two investigations. One is whether it is appropriate for us to seek [to know] a final cause to the whole of existence, and specifically the heavens, and the second is, if it is appropriately sought, what is it?

Regarding the first investigation, there are groups of people with different opinions.

One group thinks that it is improper to seek a purpose for the whole of existence or the entirety of the heavens, since it is said that particular activities have purpose, which unites them in the same entirety of the world or the sphere in which they are, as it is their final cause. But the entirety of the world or the sphere itself, what thing could be outside of them that could be supposed to be their purpose, so it could be said that they were created for its sake? Furthermore, inasmuch as the sphere and the whole world is an act of God, if God were to act for a purpose, God would be a deficient agent. Since God is not a deficient agent, God does not act for a purpose. That every agent that acts for a purpose is a deficient agent is clear because every agent that acts for a purpose intends through its action to reach that goal, and reaching the same goal is its perfection; without it, it is not perfect. The same goal perfects / completes the same agent and before attaining it it is deficient. Therefore the agent that acts for a purpose is deficient so long as it does not reach the goal.

The second group holds that it is proper and [even] necessary that a purpose for the entirety of the heavenly sphere and the world as a whole be sought and found, since the act of the world is from God, exalted, and God is the agent. If so, God's acting without purpose is frivolous and vain. Those who believe in eternity already admit that the divine intellect is the principal of all existents, and they say that God is the final cause of the world. Natural philosophy investigates the goal of each of the limbs of living beings and the goal of each natural existent, and philosophy / wisdom finds (or 'there exists in them something of wisdom so') that it is not possible that they do not turn toward a single goal. Aristotle says that nature

does nothing in vain. Were the action of principal divine intellect not ordered and intended for a certain final goal, it would be a frivolous and vain action. The last word is that investigation of the sciences and their perfection is through knowing the causes, and all the causes are for the sake of the final cause. Someone who says that one should not seek a goal for the species of things and their whole abrogates the nature of the intellect which cognises things because of their final causes. So Aristotle said in the first book of the *Metaphysics* that the intellect does what it does because of the goal intended in the actions, because it cognises the things through their final causes, since the final cause is the end of the intellect's activity. [This is] because the things are described as good and [having a certain] degree because of their final causes. In view of all of this, seeking the final cause of the whole of existence is necessary, both for the opinion of eternity and the opinion of origination. ...

Therefore, it is proper to seek the goal of the entirety of the world, also according to the philosopher, since it is an effect of God, and even more so according to us, who believe in the truth, which is origination. ...

What seems [to be necessary] in order to reconcile this massive doubt is [to note] that in the matter of final cause, we can ask one of two questions. One is the goal of the agent in what he does and the second is the goal of the activity (פעול) in view of which it is done. The difference between them is clear. It is as if you say about a tailor that he sews a garment for a certain person and it is asked "for what purpose does the tailor sew?" and the response is "in order to make money that he didn't have" or "for someone whom he loves" or "for a master whom he serves". The second kind of goal, which is from the point of view of the activity, is when we say "why does he make it into a garment?" and the answer is "so as to cover and protect its wearer." ...

For those who believe in origination, who are subject to this question, i.e., "why did God create this world?", the Rav mentioned that some of them thought that it is possible to respond that it was created for the sake of people, so that they praise God, but this necessarily raises doubts. It would follow that the heavens are unnecessary, since God could have created people without the heavens. And in any case, the question would still remain to be asked about people, what is the purpose of their creation? The Rav wrote extensively about this.

The entire intention is that when the question of purpose is asked from the point of the agent, it is impossible that there exist a goal external to his essence, but that the goal of his action is his will and wisdom, which is himself, that because of his perfection and goodness, the good of the existence in the world overflows. However, both the group who believe in eternity and those who believe in origination share the opinion that, with regard to the second kind of question about purpose, which concerns the activity, every one of the particular divine actions, and the all-encompassing sphere, and so existence as a whole, have a purpose for the sake of which they were created. There is no doubt that individual things have different goals, but these are all proximate goals, and the ultimate goal is that which is universal and common to all existents, through which they are united, and [because of which] the world is a unity, its parts connected with one another, and it has one agent, one form, and one goal. It was this kind of goal that the Rav was talking about in 3:25, when he said that all of God's acts, in their entirety and their parts, are good and perfect, intended for a purpose for the sake of which they were created.