

Maimonides' Rejection of the Avicennan Notion of Divine Will: How Far Does It Go?
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I. Maimonides' rejection of the Kalâm notion of Divine Will

"As regards the theory generally accepted by people, and likewise found in rabbinical and prophetical writings, that man's sitting and rising, and in fact all of his movements, are governed by the will and desire of God, it may be said that this is true only in one respect. Thus, for instance, when a stone is thrown into the air and falls to the ground, it is correct to say that the stone fell in accordance with the will of God, for it is true that God decreed that the earth and all that goes to make it up, should be the center of attraction, so that when any part of it is thrown into the air, it is attracted back to the center. Similarly, all the particles of fire ascend according to God's will, which ordained that fire should go upward. But it is wrong to suppose that when a certain part of the earth is thrown upward God wills *at that very moment* that it should fall. The mutakallimûn, are, however, of a different opinion in this regard, for I have heard them say that the Divine Will is constantly at work, decreeing everything from time to time. We do not agree with them, but believe that the Divine Will ordained everything at creation, and that all things, at all times, are regulated by the laws of nature, and run their natural course, in accordance with what Solomon said, As it was, so it will ever be, as it was made so it continues, and there is nothing new under the sun." (Eccles. i.9) This occasioned the sages to say that all miracles which deviate from the natural course of events, whether they have already occurred, or, according to promise, are to take place in the future, were fore-ordained by the Divine Will during the six days of creation, nature being then so constituted that those miracles which were to happen really did afterwards take place. Then, when such an occurrence happened at its proper time, it may have been regarded as an absolute innovation, whereas in reality it was not [...]."

Question: How does Maimonides' view differ from that of the mutakallimûn? Does Maimonides consider miracles to be natural in this passage? How does he distinguish between a miraculous and a natural event?

II. Maimonides' rejection of the Avicennan notion of Divine Will

"Know that among the latter-day philosophers who affirm the eternity of the world there are some [or: one] who maintain that God, may He be exalted, is the Agent of the world, who chose that it should exist, purposed it, and particularized it so that it should be as it actually is. They think, however, that it is impossible that this should have happened at one particular time rather than at another; according to them the world has always been and will always be like this [...] And they say it is also impossible that His act or His will should change, as we have explained [...].

"It has already become clear to you, who are engaged in the study of this my Treatise, that these people have altered the term "necessity," but have let its meaning remain...For the meaning of the assertion, as maintained by Aristotle, that this being proceeds necessarily from its cause and is perpetual in virtue of the latter's perpetuity – that cause being the deity. – is identical with the meaning of their assertion that the world derives from the act of the deity or exists in virtue of His purpose, will, free choice, and particularization, but that it has always been and will always

be as it is –just as the sunrise is indubitably the agent of the day, though neither of them precedes the other in point of time.

“But this is not the meaning of purpose, as we propose to conceive it. For we wish to signify by the term that...the world...does not necessarily proceed from its causes without being able to be separated from it or to change unless its cause or one of its modes also change...We affirm that all these things have been made by Him in virtue of a purpose and a will directed toward this particular being, which did not exist, and now became an existent in virtue of His will”(*Guide of the Perplexed* ii.21, 315, trans. Pines)

Question: How does Maimonides’ notion of Divine will and purpose differ from that of “some of the latter-day philosophers”?

III. Theological Implications of Eternity vs. Creation

“As prime matter, according to [the prophet Moses], has been brought into existence after non-existence and has been shaped into its forms, it is possible that God who has brought it into existence may destroy it again as well afterwards; likewise it is possible that He may change its nature and the nature of everything which is composed of it and may give it instantly a nature different from the regular one, as He has brought it into existence, instantaneously. So, according to Moses, a change of condition in anything belonging to the natural world of generated and perishable things is possible, so that God possesses the power to effect it and can exert His will upon it: if God wishes to maintain this world in its present state for all the eons and eternities He can do so, and if He wishes to annihilate the whole and to let nothing remain besides Himself he can do so and possesses the power to do so, and if He wishes to retain it in its present nature in all his parts and to change any existent thing among its parts from the course of nature He can do so[...]

“It is evident that for him who says that the world is eternal in this manner, God has no novel will (*mashī'a hadītha*) nor choice, and there is no possible thing existing on which He can exert His power and will, so that, e.g., He is not able to give us rain on one day and to withhold it on another day, according to His will, as the rainfall in this established nature follows the readiness of the vapors and the air which cause rain or prevents it. All this follows the readiness of matter, upon which God does not act and the matter with which God cannot interfere...”
I have explained to you that according to the belief in the eternity of the world, there does not remain with God any will or choice and there is no possible thing in existence which God could choose or produce [...]according to the opinion of those who say that the world is eternal, all these things which are possible for us, are impossible for them. For the one who believes in the eternity of the world, its forming cause, i.e. the cause of the existence of this entire world in its present state, is a necessary consequence of the existence of the Creator, likewise as the thing caused is the necessary consequence of the cause which is only to be found together with it, like the day being the necessary consequence of the sunrise and the shadow being the necessary consequence of an erect object, and similar cases.” (from the Critique Against Galen, in the last treatise of the *Medical Aphorisms*.)

Question: Does God have both eternal will and novel will, according to Maimonides?