

# Encountering the Medieval in Modern Jewish Thought

*Edited by*

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## CHAPTER TWO

### ON THE POSSIBILITY OF A HIDDEN CHRISTIAN WILL: METHODOLOGICAL PITFALLS IN THE STUDY OF MEDIEVAL JEWISH PHILOSOPHY

Sarah Pessin

This chapter explores the possibility that Christian ideas at play in the Western thought-space have tacitly influenced the way that we (moderns and beyond) read medieval Jewish philosophy. In this sense, we may speak of a subtly Christian influence on our readings of medieval Jewish philosophy—or of a subtly Christian construction of medieval Jewish philosophy.

In speaking of this kind of subtle influence, I rely upon the idea of a “thought-space,” and in particular upon the idea of a Western thought-space with decidedly Christian elements that has exerted influence over the way that scholars of philosophy have historically been trained and have historically read texts in the history of philosophy. By thought-space I mean to consider the wide range of factors—often hidden factors—at play in the subtleties of meaning-making within our contexts of thinking and living. In this sense, one might consider—without choosing between—a wide range of critical theories, including Heideggerian and post-Heideggerian traditions of hermeneutics, Foucaultian “archaeologies” of ideas, Kuhnian analyses of paradigms and paradigm shifts, feminist epistemologies of influence, Wittgensteinian-inspired considerations of “language games,” and insights from perspectivist philosophy.

The first point I mean to emphasize in reminding us that we are always thinking within a thought-space is that within a given thought-space, certain concepts and points of view will often “feel” more “basic” than others; this is a direct result of the swell of background factors at play in meaning. Throughout this chapter, I speak of having “intuitions” or “senses” about *x* or about *y* in precisely this sense. The second point I mean to emphasize in reminding us that we are always thinking within a thought-space is that the meaning that we “uncover” in texts within our own activities of interpretation is never neutral; it

is always subtly influenced by the myriad (and often hidden) background factors at play in the various contexts that inform our own thinking (and living). Within the limited context of this chapter, I ask us, along all these lines, to consider the possibility that scholars have subtle senses of (or “intuitions” about) terms in mind—often unbeknownst to them and always stemming from various factors within their context of thinking—when they think about given philosophical problems or given philosophical texts. In related fashion, I ask us within the limited context of this chapter to consider the simple dual possibilities that (1) there are Christian intuitions at play in the historical and academic contexts within which we think about Jewish medieval philosophy (and, as such, within which Jewish medieval philosophy is read), and that (2) this has at least sometimes had (limiting) implications for the way said texts have been interpreted.

To feel the subtlety of the concern in question, and before moving onto the case of Jewish medieval philosophy in particular, consider the fate within the Western thought-space of the concept of “holiness.” Consider the extent to which one might speak within the Western thought-space of “holiness” bringing with it certain resonances—and in particular, certain Christian resonances. Consider the extent to which various Pauline transcendent-friendly Christian frameworks can negatively limit readers’ ability to neutrally encounter Soloveitchik’s Jewish immanent-transcendent notion of holiness. Within the Western thought-space, it is very difficult for many to really hear an immanent Jewish holiness as the primary (or even as *a* primary) meaning of “holy.” This, of course, raises the deeper worry that said individuals are not even able to understand the concept (even if they think they do) as it is understood within a range of Jewish contexts. It is in this sense that we may speak of the exertion of a Christian influence over the very parameters and feel of a conversation in Jewish theology—even for readers and teachers of Soloveitchik not seeking to engage Paul, and not seeking to present Soloveitchik as a (non-normative) response to (normative) Christian theology. None of this is to say that it is impossible to explain—or even to valorize—Soloveitchik’s competing conception of the holy within the Western thought-space; it is, rather, to emphasize that in a Western modern/postmodern context, it is often hard to avoid a reactive (and in that sense, secondary and parasitic) overtone to any explanation (much less valorization) of an “immanent-transcendent” holiness. (When I recently spoke on a panel about the Jewish immanent conception of the holy, an esteemed

colleague segued into his own reflections on the Christian conception of holiness by expressing genuine perplexity at why anyone would describe as “holy” what I had just described; while anecdotal, I consider this story to be a representative outgrowth of precisely the set of conditions I am describing here.)

Why do I focus, though, on the hidden influence in this regard of Pauline Christianity in particular? Certainly this “other-worldly” sense of holiness is found in many religious traditions other than Christianity—to be sure, there are Jewish and Islamic conceptions of holiness in terms of an “other-worldly” transcendence too. While this is true, it still remains reasonable—for simple historical reasons alone—to point to Christianity (here, Pauline Christianity in particular)—and not, say, Islamic mysticism—when we are seriously looking to understand the background ideas that have, historically and socially speaking, molded tacit religious intuitions within the Western thought-space.<sup>1</sup> Noting that Islam has other-worldly conceptions of holiness too is fair enough; suggesting that Islamic other-worldly conceptions of holiness might have had, historically speaking, just as much a tacit and pervading impact on the Western thought-space as Pauline Christianity seems unfair. While it is theoretically possible that readers in the Western thought-space are tacitly influenced by Islamic theology in their day-to-day readings of texts, it is simply not historically plausible.

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<sup>1</sup> I am thankful to Sander Gilman for sharing additional examples of this phenomenon, including the sense in which Jewish reformers of the Enlightenment often unknowingly hold Protestant presuppositions (as for example, some of the radical ideas of Reimarius). Interestingly, Gilman moves from cases like this to the alluring suggestion of the possibility that “the very dichotomy between Jewish and Christian thoughts/texts is false” (Sander Gilman, personal correspondence). In contrast, in this chapter I explore the possibility of tacit Christian influence within the field of medieval Jewish philosophy (a possibility that, when explored in full, might align with the suggestion raised by Gilman). One key distinction between the case raised by Gilman and the cases of Ibn Gabirol and Israeli that I focus on in this chapter is that, as Gilman himself notes, the Enlightenment Jewish thinkers were often trying to engage a span of views (a kind of Jewish and Christian “balancing act”), whereas part of my main emphasis when it comes to the medieval Jewish philosophers addressed in this chapter is that they are not themselves trying to engage Augustine or Aquinas. Rather (and this is my main concern), I worry that scholars of medieval Jewish philosophy are tacitly reading medieval Jewish philosophers as if the medieval Jewish thinkers were engaging with Augustine and/or Aquinas (or perhaps I worry that scholars of medieval Jewish philosophy are unknowingly engaging Augustine and/or Aquinas on Ibn Gabirol’s and Israeli’s behalf). My concern here is with the possibility of a methodological failure along these lines that compromises the history of ideas (and the “received traditions” of Jewish medieval philosophy—and Jewish Neoplatonism in particular).

However, as this is not a chapter about the construction of the entirety of ideas in a Western context, let me more fully justify my concern with Christianity in particular by even further restricting the sense of “Western thought-space” in this chapter to refer in particular to the various *academic discourses* around theology, the philosophy of religion, the comparative study of religions, and the history of philosophy within a range of historically influential European, Canadian, and American traditions of scholarship in particular. In the history of the Western academy—and in the development of the most basic theological and religious conceptual terms within a range of academic discourses—Christianity has held a privileged role. Unpacking the notion of “Western thought-space” in this more limited way explains why I focus on Christianity’s influences in particular. It is in this sense that I ask us to consider the extent to which Pauline overtones—and not, say, the equally strong other-worldly overtones of Jewish mysticism or Islamic Asharite theology—might have made (and might continue to make) their way into the “basic” sense of such terms as “holiness” within a range of philosophical and theological conversations in the Western academy. It is in this sense that I focus on Christianity—and not Judaism or Islam—as framing the tone of various philosophical, theological, and religious discourses.

To more fully justify my focus on Christianity in particular, though, let me limit even further the sense of Western thought-space that I rely upon in the remainder of this chapter to the context of medieval philosophy in particular, which is to say, *the intellectual context of medieval philosophy scholars trained in various curricula and versed in certain canons across various European, American, Canadian, and other “Western” universities*. Shifting our focus from the specifically Pauline influence highlighted above, in the context of *medieval philosophy* it is the influence of Augustine and Aquinas—and of Augustinian and Thomistic studies—that predominates. The Western thought-space (understood now, and throughout the rest of this chapter, as the intellectual training, background, and context of a broad tradition of “Western” scholars trained in medieval philosophy) is weighted. For various historical reasons (involving the history of religions, the history of the Church, the history of universities, the history of canons within the history of philosophy and within the history of medieval philosophy, as well as historically negative comportments toward Jewish, Islamic, and other non-Christian traditions), Augustine’s and

Aquinas's respective bodies of work have held strong sway. It is in this sense that we must consider the possibility that their ideas might tacitly influence (and limit) the way that scholars of medieval philosophy even hear certain philosophical or theological terms. And while it is certainly the case that various Jewish and Muslim philosophers have held ideas in common with Augustine and Aquinas, it would be unfair—in the sense of historically strained—to suggest that medieval philosophers trained in the West might be just as likely to be *tacitly influenced* by Jewish or Islamic (or Eriugenian Christian) ideas than by Augustinian or Thomistic ones.

Limiting our considerations now (and for the remainder of the chapter) to the particular context of medieval philosophy, we might summarize this chapter's question about Christian influences, thought-spaces, and textual interpretations simply as follows: Is it not possible that scholars trained in medieval philosophy (in the modern period and beyond) have tacitly held certain Christian intuitions (swelling up from the predominating canonical studies in particular of Augustine and Aquinas) that have limited (or overdetermined) their "basic" encounter with certain philosophical and/or theological terms, and, as such, their "basic" interpretive approach to certain texts? Is it not possible that the dominance in particular of Augustine and Aquinas across canons and contexts of medieval study (itself, we might add, related to—and illustrative of—various complex implications of the history of Christianity in the context of the Western world) have led (at least sometimes) to certain Augustinian and Thomistic presumptions that have (at least sometimes) tacitly colored the way scholars trained in medieval philosophy "intuitively" approach certain terms and concepts? In this chapter, I suggest that scholars are limited in precisely these tacitly Christian ways in their readings of Divine Will and creation in Ibn Gabirol and Isaac Israeli. It is precisely in this sense that we ought to worry about the extent to which our readings (and received interpretations) of medieval Jewish philosophy reveal the tacit influence of Christian (here in the sense of Augustinian or Thomistic) lenses—lenses that can subtly highlight certain readings of texts over others, and that can, as such, subtly preclude (or at least occlude) a range of viable textual interpretations from easy view. This is my methodological concern, and it is in this sense that I ask us to consider the Christian construction of medieval Jewish philosophy.



*Reconsidering Divine Will:  
Western Intuitions and the Construction of Ibn Gabirol*

One strong case in point of this concern can be found, I argue, in a range of “received” (and by now canonical) scholarly readings of Ibn Gabirol’s notion of Divine Will.<sup>2</sup> Some of the most influential scholars of medieval philosophy have unanimously read (and as such, have presented to the history of ideas a canonical reading of) Ibn Gabirol’s Divine Will as being completely unlike Plotinian emanation. In fact, these scholars have read Ibn Gabirol’s Divine Will as in and of itself overtly signifying the *complete rejection* of Plotinian emanation.

In considering the question of Christian influence on readings of Ibn Gabirol in particular, we can begin with the very straightforward historical fact that centuries of Christian scholars read the *Fons Vitae* as a Christian Augustinian text. And so, medieval Franciscans—undoubtedly reacting at least in part to the Latinized name affixed to their version of the *Fons Vitae* (variously recorded as “Avicebron,” “Avengebrol,” and “Avicembron”), and reacting (arguably already in that light) to various [what to their ears were] Augustinian-sounding elements of that text—come to believe that the text’s author is not only a Christian, but a true Augustinian Christian. Needless to say, this kind of Christian influence (of readers who overtly—or tacitly—set out to find Christian ideas in the text because they believe the author to be a Christian) will mute the voice of the text, overlaying its own perspective and tacitly “finding” Augustine in the text again and again.<sup>3</sup>

But this kind of overt Christian influence over the *Fons Vitae* gives way to the far subtler problem of *tacit* Christian influence. It is here that I ask us to consider the subtly limiting implications of the “Western thought-space” on the study of medieval philosophy that I have been exploring above. Beholden, I would argue, to certain predominant Augustinian and/or Thomistic intuitions about Divine Will, will,

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<sup>2</sup> Ibn Gabirol is a Jewish medieval Neoplatonist of the eleventh century and author of the *Fons Vitae*, as well as a number of other works, including Hebrew poetry. For an overview of Ibn Gabirol’s life, works, and philosophy, including text editions and references for further study, see Sarah Pessin, “Solomon Ibn Gabirol,” in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ibn-gabirol/index.html>).

<sup>3</sup> I have spoken of a similar kabbalizing problem on the part of readers who set out to—and then do—find myriad kabbalistic teachings in Ibn Gabirol; see the “methods” section in my “Solomon Ibn Gabirol” in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. There, I also address an “Aristotelianizing” problem.

and emanation within the Western thought-space, scholars of medieval philosophy—even once aware that the author of the *Fons Vitae* is a Jew (and that he is, as such, not necessarily using terms in line with Augustine or with any other medieval Christian author)—have continued to read Ibn Gabirol's Divine Will in the *Fons Vitae* as a clear rejection of emanation.<sup>4</sup> This *tacit* reading problem—not the problem (as above) of readers *overtly* reading Ibn Gabirol as if he were an Augustinian—reveals what is by far the more worrisome sense of Christian influence in the construction of medieval Jewish philosophy.

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<sup>4</sup> “Emanation” is a Greek philosophical doctrine that has its roots in Plotinus, the third-century Greek figure who, in his *Enneads*, develops a cosmology that is in later modern scholarship identified as “Neoplatonism.” Neoplatonism exerted influence on a number of medieval Jewish philosophers through the “Theology of Aristotle” (an Arabic text—of which shorter and longer versions, with some key differences, were in circulation—that turns out to have been an edited version of Books 4–6 of Plotinus's *Enneads*), and through an Arabic tradition of the *Liber de Causis* (an edited version of parts of Proclus's *Elements of Theology* circulating under the Arabic title *Kalam fi mahd al-khayr*, lit. the Book of the Pure Good). In brief, Neoplatonic cosmology is generally identified with the following teachings: (1) There is a unified God (called “The One” by Plotinus) which is so unified as to exist even “above” (or “beyond”) Being and Intellect; (2) There are three “hypostases” (or levels of reality): The One, Intellect, and Soul, while Nature (not itself a genuine “reality”) follows in fourth place; and (3) The three hypostases “emanate” (or “overflow”) one to the next. Jewish medieval Neoplatonists are generally thought to deviate from these teachings in the following key way: While Jewish Neoplatonic philosophers clearly are said to hold emanation doctrines regarding the “level of Intellect and downward,” it is contended (and in this essay, I suggest that we question the idea) that Jewish medieval Neoplatonists, in their doctrines of “creation,” firmly reject the thesis that God Himself emanates. In contrast to Plotinus, Jewish Neoplatonists are generally viewed as holding emanation to be true only of the level of Intellect and downward, with God Himself, on the contrary, relating to (all or part of) the universe by “creation.” This is what I mean to refer to when I speak of the “creation v. [Greek] emanation” dualism throughout this chapter. For an overview of Neoplatonism, see Pierre Hadot, *Plotinus, Or the Simplicity of Vision* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Kevin Corrigan, *Reading Plotinus: A Practical Introduction to Neoplatonism* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2004); A. H. Armstrong (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967). For some themes related to the Jewish Neoplatonic reception of Neoplatonism, see the many essays in Lenn E. Goodman (ed.), *Neoplatonism and Jewish Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), and the many essays in Parviz Morewedge (ed.), *Neoplatonism and Islamic Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992). For an overview of Plotinus's reception into Arabic, see Peter Adamson, *Arabic Plotinus: A Philosophical Study of the ‘Theology of Aristotle’* (London: Duckworth Publishers, 2003). For an overview of themes in Platonisms and Neoplatonisms across Greek, Muslim, Jewish, and Christian contexts, see Sarah Pessin, “A Platonic Universe,” in *The Blackwell History of Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, edited by John Inglis, Dan Frank, and Taneli Kukkonen (London: Blackwell, 2012).

While I cannot here address the full scope of Ibn Gabirol's Divine Will,<sup>5</sup> I here sketch some reasons for why—pace the received scholarly tradition—we should be open to the very real possibility that Ibn Gabirol's Divine Will operates in the world in a way that might well be consistent with Plotinian emanation. In opening ourselves to the mere *possibility* that Ibn Gabirol's own sense of Divine Will is Plotinian, we must immediately concern ourselves methodologically with why so many esteemed scholars of medieval philosophy have simply read Ibn Gabirol in stark opposition to Plotinus. And it is here that we must at least consider the weight of Augustinian and Thomistic intuitions within the Western thought-space, and the possibility that these intuitions are at play in the construction of Jewish philosophy. To emphasize the methodological issue about which we have been speaking, we might starkly pose the following worry: Absent a perspective influenced by a variety of Augustinian and Thomistic sensibilities about will and emanation, why would anyone reading Ibn Gabirol conclude that his Divine Will is anti-Plotinian?

To help motivate the concern, consider the contours of Ibn Gabirol's own thought-space. In his original Arabic text, the notion of what we have for centuries come to call "Divine Will" in Ibn Gabirol appears as the term "*al-irâda*." Translated into "*voluntas*" in the twelfth century Latin translation by the Christian Gundissalinus, "*al-irâda*," in its very translation into "*voluntas*," gives way to a notion of Divine Will devoid of any of its Jewish, Islamic, Neoplatonic, and Ps. Empedoclean resonances. In this way, "*al-irâda*" (now as "*voluntas*") becomes a blank canvas (which in this case is to say, a tacitly Christian canvas), open to Augustinian interpretation by devout Augustinian Franciscans (who,

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<sup>5</sup> In my manuscript on Ibn Gabirol (*Ibn Gabirol's Theology of Desire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming)), I develop "Divine Will" as "Divine Desire" in the context of what I describe as a throughgoing Theology of Desire in the *Fons Vitae*; for initial conversations about the senses of matter and desire at the core of Ibn Gabirol's theology, see too Sarah Pessin, "Loss, Presence, and Gabirol's Desire: Medieval Jewish Philosophy and the Possibility of a Feminist Ground," in *Women and Gender in Jewish Philosophy*, edited by Hava Tirosh-Samuelson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 27–50; "The Manifest Image: Revealing the Hidden in Halevi, Saadya and Gabirol," in *History of Platonism: Plato Redivivus*, edited by John Finamore and Robert Berchman (New Orleans: University Press of the South, 2005), 253–270; "Matter, Form and the Corporeal World," in *The Cambridge History of Jewish Philosophy: From Antiquity to the Seventeenth Century*, edited by T. M. Rudavsky and S. Nadler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 269–301; and my "Solomon Ibn Gabirol," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2010).

as we have already mentioned, thought “Avicbron” was a Christian). And yet, while modern scholars have known, since Munk’s discoveries in the nineteenth century, that the *Fons Vitae* was in fact authored by the Jewish Neoplatonist Solomon Ibn Gabirol, a subtle (but strong) echo of Augustine (or perhaps of competing Aquinas-inspired sensibilities) has, I would argue, remained in ongoing scholarly constructions of Ibn Gabirol’s Divine Will. In this regard, consider the erudite scholarship of Weisheipl, Gilson, and Husik, each of whom (along with many others) reads the doctrine of Divine Will in the *Fons Vitae* as signifying—*simpliciter* and *per se*—a *renunciation* on Ibn Gabirol’s part of Greek emanation. Gilson identifies the *Fons Vitae* notion of Will as that which *clearly* separates between Ibn Gabirol and Greek systems of thought;<sup>6</sup> Husik assumes that “but for the introduction of the Will in the *Fons Vitae* we should be forced to understand Ibn Gabirol [as a follower of the emanation taught by Plotinus]”;<sup>7</sup> and Weisheipl follows suit:

As for... the primacy of God’s creative Will (*Voluntas creatrix*), Avicbron clearly wishes to eliminate philosophical emanationism as proposed by Alfarabi, Alkindi, Avicenna, Algazel, and *Liber de causis*, by making the Divine Will the supreme cause in the production of the universe.<sup>8</sup>

Weisheipl, Husik, Gilson—and with them, many others—seem to sense in Ibn Gabirol’s notion of a Divine *Irâda* the necessary replacement and ruling out of Plotinian emanationism, marking in Ibn Gabirol a unique departure from the doctrines of Neoplatonic emanation championed by the rest of his Arabic Neoplatonic milieu. While one might think it flattering to give Ibn Gabirol so unique a place in the history of Arabic language Neoplatonism, I would urge readers to worry about Weisheipl’s, Gilson’s, and Husik’s thesis (mirrored in the works of many other scholars as well). For regardless of whether or not we choose to translate “*al-irâda*” as “Will,” there is, I would argue, really nothing to concretely or obviously suggest that Ibn Gabirol—in all his talk of a Divine *Irâda*—has non-emanationist impulses. As we see below, within a Neoplatonic context, “will” and “emanation”

<sup>6</sup> Etienne Gilson, *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (New York: Random House, 1955), 227.

<sup>7</sup> Isaac Husik, *A History of Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1958 [1916], 70.

<sup>8</sup> James A. Weisheipl, “Albertus Magnus and Universal Hylomorphism: Avicbron,” *Southwestern Journal of Philosophy* 10 (1979): 249.

can easily be thought together. Furthermore, clearly writing in the context of emanation-friendly Arabic Neoplatonism (a tradition alive and well in Islamic and Jewish traditions for centuries before and after Ibn Gabirol), Ibn Gabirol—across his *Fons Vitae* text—overtly lays out a Neoplatonic cosmic scheme of a divine source, universal intellect(s), and universal soul(s)—a standard Arabic Neoplatonic trope in which emanation—and even an emanating God—seems the default sensibility.<sup>9</sup>

If we read Ibn Gabirol's cosmology as “non-emanationist” simply on the basis of his notion of a “divine *irâda*,” then we had better be confident that “*al-irâda*” (translated as “Will” or otherwise) is really inconsistent with emanation in Ibn Gabirol's—not Augustine's or Aquinas's—own context. But it is entirely unclear why we should assume any such incompatibility in Ibn Gabirol: either his notion of Divine *Irâda* is not best understood as Divine Will at all, and as such, we have no *prima facie* grounds for assuming a rejection of emanation; or, his notion of Divine *Irâda* is a kind of Divine Will, but, as we see below in the case of Plotinus himself (and even, as we also see below, in Wolfson's own treatment of Israeli), a Neoplatonic notion of Divine Will is not the kind of Divine Will that is incompatible with emanation. As we explore further below, neither a Jewish nor a Greek thought-space necessitates a conceptual incompatibility between divine creation and Greek emanation, or between Divine Will and Greek emanation.

Why one would read creation or *al-irâda* (translated as *voluntas*, or as Divine Will or otherwise) as inconsistent with Plotinian emanation seems very understandable within the context of various Augustinian or Thomistic conceptual dualisms of “creation v. [Greek] emanation.” But again—and this has been our worry throughout—is that dualism necessary or “obvious” within Ibn Gabirol's own context? Is it not

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<sup>9</sup> Recall, as addressed in note 4 above: While Jewish Neoplatonic philosophers clearly are said to hold emanation doctrines regarding the “level of Intellect and downward,” it is contended (and in this essay, I am suggesting that we question the idea) that Jewish medieval Neoplatonists, in their doctrines of “creation,” firmly reject the thesis that God Himself emanates. While scholars of medieval Jewish philosophy read Jewish Neoplatonists as holding “emanation” to be true of the level of Intellect and downward, these same scholars also often emphasize that “creation” is meant to denote some different mechanism for how God Himself relates to the world (or to the first emanating intellect beneath Him). As mentioned, this is what I refer to when I speak of the “creation v. [Greek] emanation” dualism at the heart of scholarly approaches to medieval Jewish philosophy.

possible that scholars of medieval philosophy have been subtly led to (or at least encouraged in) their non-emanationist readings of Ibn Gabirol by the strongly Augustinian or Thomistic resonances of the terms “*voluntas*” and “Will” within the Western thought-space? Are scholars being tacitly led by an Augustinian conceptual resonance of the term “Divine Will” (or by predominant Augustinian or Thomistic dualistic intuitions about “will versus [Greek] emanation” within the Western thought-space) to the conclusion (unjustified, I would argue, by Ibn Gabirol’s text *per se*) that because Ibn Gabirol upholds Divine Will, he therefore rejects emanation?

We might poignantly highlight the impact of the concern at hand by looking at Weisheipl’s own description of his scholarly project (essentially a study of Augustinian ideas in Christian medieval philosophy) as one in which “there is little point in calling Avicbron by his real Jewish name.”<sup>10</sup> Along similarly poignant lines, there is no small irony in the twelfth-century Latin translator’s completing the Latin text of Ibn Gabirol’s *Fons Vitae* with a call to Christ: translated into Latin in the twelfth century, and circulating no longer under Ibn Gabirol’s name *per se* but under various Latinized versions of his name, the *Fons Vitae* Latin translation itself ends with Gundissalinus, the Christian translator, declaring,

*libro perscripto sit laus et gloria Christo,  
per quem finitur quod ad eius nomen initur...*

With this book having been completed, may there be praise and glory to Christ

through whom is now finished that which in his name is begun...<sup>11</sup>

While Gundissalinus is referring to the completion of his own task of translation (he goes on to cite himself and John of Spain as the translators), the sentiment can, of course, be seen to spill over to cover “Avencebrol” as well—a poignant irony for a Jewish thinker whose own ideas of creation and Divine Will are arguably made (by such esteemed scholars as Gilson, Weisheipl, Husik, and, with them, many others) to languish within the confines of an Augustine- or Aquinas-inspired

<sup>10</sup> Weisheipl, “Albertus Magnus and Universal Hylomorphism: Avicbron,” 245.

<sup>11</sup> For the Latin, see *Avencebrolis (Ibn Gabirol) Fons Vitae, ex Arabico in Latinum Translatus ab Johanne Hispano et Dominico Gundissalino*, edited by Clemens Baeumker (Münster), in *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Philosophie des Mittelalters, Texte und Untersuchungen*, edited by Clemens Baeumker and Georg von Hertling (Münster, 1892), 339.



thought-space, where deeply dual intuitions about “creation/will versus emanation” seem obvious when, I would argue, they are not obvious at all. There is nothing in Ibn Gabirol, I would argue—outside a reading of his notion of Divine *Irâda* as a kind of Augustinian Divine Will (or in terms of a stark Augustinian or Thomistic “will versus [Greek] emanation” dualism)—to suggest that Ibn Gabirol was not—in his very belief in a Divine *Irâda*—a believer in divine (Greek) emanation.

Revealing the subtlest—and most worrisome—version of the problem of Christian influence, we must consider the possibility that the term “*voluntas*”—and also “Divine Will”—tacitly retain Augustinian (or perhaps Aquinas-revised) resonances in the ears of many modern scholars of medieval philosophy, leading to strained encounters with Ibn Gabirol’s Jewish text. Here, the problem is not the obvious (and easy to correct) error of wrongly believing the *Fons Vitae* to have been written by a Christian (which might well legitimate overtly setting out to read his “*voluntas*” in Augustinian—or Thomistic—terms), but the far subtler (and hence, far more worrisome because harder to pinpoint and correct) error of unknowingly hearing the term “Divine Will” (with the Latin “*voluntas*”) in an Augustinian (or Thomistic) key—and in this spirit, approaching the text unfairly with certain unspoken, tacit, and unexplored starting presumptions.

I might here note that it is very much in an express effort to push us outside of an Augustine- and/or Aquinas- inspired theological thought-space that I opt, in my longer work on Ibn Gabirol, to replace the term “Divine Will” in a study of the *Fons Vitae* with the term “Divine Desire.” It is precisely in light of the fact that “Divine Desire” is a theological term that does not resonate in any strong way within the Western thought-space that I find it can help us avoid falling back upon various (Christian) intuitions and ideas that might otherwise compromise our best efforts to read Ibn Gabirol; better to have readers start out curious about the term “Divine Desire” than have them unwittingly caught up, in their encounter with the term “Divine Will,” in a host of Augustinian, Thomistic, and other Christian theological intuitions that may well have no place (I would argue that have no place) in reading the *Fons Vitae*.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> See my forthcoming manuscript on Ibn Gabirol in which I unpack my use of this term as part of an overarching reenvisioning of Ibn Gabirol in terms of what I call his “Theology of Desire”; see more references in note 5.

*Creation versus Emanation?**Western Intuitions and the Construction of Isaac Israeli*

Following directly on these worries about overdetermined approaches to the notion of “will,” we ought consider too the possibility of certain dominant resonances at play in the use of the terms “creation” and “emanation” among scholars of medieval philosophy in the Western thought-space. To be sure, there are plenty of Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and other thinkers (philosophers, theologians, mystics, and poets) who elide (or argue for the unity of) the notions of “creation” and “emanation.”<sup>13</sup> However, in spite of a range of fluid conceptual identifications between creation and emanation across a range of religious traditions (including among many Christian theologians and philosophers), I would still suggest—in light of considerations about the Western thought-space raised earlier (and in particular, the considerations we have raised about the predominating influence of Augustine and Aquinas in the intellectual contexts of scholars of medieval philosophy)—that there may well be a tacit Christian influence at play in scholarly readings of creation in medieval Jewish philosophy.

Below, I emphasize the weight of this possibility in the particular case of A. Altmann’s and H. A. Wolfson’s respective treatments of creation in Isaac Israeli. In spite of the fact that Israeli’s own text is underdetermined on the issue of creation (as Altmann himself acknowledges), and in spite of the fact that creation might well be taken to denote emanation (as Wolfson himself acknowledges), nonetheless both Altmann and Wolfson opt to interpret Israeli’s view of creation in staunch opposition to Plotinian emanation. It is here that we must identify something of a red flag: Why do they opt to interpret creation in opposition to Plotinian emanation in Israeli if the text itself does not necessitate this? This raises a serious methodological problem with far-ranging (and canonical) implications for the way Israeli’s views have been received for decades. It is here, in response to this serious methodological issue, that I am led to consider the possibility (as in our case of Divine Will above) that Altmann and Wolfson might be tacitly led by certain intuitions about creation that subtly

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<sup>13</sup> For example, see Therese M. Bonin, *Creation as Emanation: The Origin of Diversity in Albert the Great’s On the Causes and the Procession of the Universe* (Publications in Medieval Studies) (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001).



swell up from predominating intellectual contexts at play in the study of medieval philosophy.

In what follows, I will explore this possibility in three moves:

1. I begin by exploring Altmann's and Wolfson's overdetermined readings of creation in Isaac Israeli. I show how both draw upon the vexing assumption of a "creation versus Plotinian emanation" dualism in their respective treatments of Israeli without rooting the idea in Israeli's texts *per se*.
2. Helping to highlight the oddness of Altmann's and Wolfson's pushing for (or presuming) a sense of creation that is not Plotinian emanation in Israeli, I consider the openness within a Jewish commentary tradition of the Genesis text and the sense in which that text does not itself support "creation versus [Greek] emanation." I also consider the openness of the Greek notion of emanation. I emphasize too how the very fact of myriad Jewish readings of Genesis 1:1 (and, *a fortiori*, we might add, the role of emanation *per se* in some of those readings) is at odds, methodologically, with any starting sense among scholarly readers of medieval Jewish philosophy that "creation is more likely to be x" or that "creation is more likely to be y" (or the dualistic sense that "creation is not [Plotinian] emanation") within a Jewish medieval context. I draw too on Aquinas's own philosophical defense of the theoretical consistency of creation with Greek eternality, and the actual pairing of these ideas in a range of Jewish, Muslim, and Christian thinkers.
3. I end by reflecting on the extent to which the "creation versus [Greek] emanation" intuition is entirely justified within various predominating Augustinian and Thomistic contexts, as well as within some other expressly Christian theological contexts (as we will see, on the basis of certain Christologically rooted conceptions of the notion of Divine Will). Thinking about the possible resonance of any of these Christian-rooted ideas within the intellectual context of Western scholars working on medieval philosophy, and also considering three "theological anxieties" at play in the Western thought-space, I ask us to consider the possibility that Altmann's and Wolfson's approaches to Israeli—together with Weisheipl's, Husik's, and Gilson's approaches to Ibn Gabirol—might indeed be subtly influenced by Christian intuitions about creation and Divine Will from within the Western thought-space (again, that intellectual

set of discourses and contexts in which the study of medieval philosophy has, historically speaking, taken place).

*Altmann and Wolfson Read Israeli:  
Why Rule Out Plotinian Emanation?*

Consider the classic debate between Altmann and Wolfson on the proper interpretation of creation in Isaac Israeli.<sup>14</sup> While the details of Israeli need not concern us here,<sup>15</sup> what need concern us is the fact that Altmann and Wolfson each seems to approach medieval Jewish philosophy with the “basic intuition” that in such texts, creation (hand

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<sup>14</sup> For a treatment of this debate, but not in the context of the methodological thesis of the current study, see Sarah Pessin, “Jewish Neoplatonism: Being above Being and Divine Emanation in Solomon Ibn Gabirol and Isaac Israeli,” in *Cambridge Companion to Medieval Jewish Philosophy*, edited by Daniel Frank and Oliver Leaman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 91–110. For relevant Altmann and Wolfson sources, see Alexander Altmann, “Creation and Emanation in Isaac Israeli: A Reappraisal,” in *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature*, edited by Isadore Twersky (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979); see too Harry A. Wolfson, “The meaning of ex nihilo in Isaac Israeli,” reprinted in *Studies in the History of Philosophy and Religion, Harry Austryn Wolfson*, Vol. 1, edited by Isadore Twersky and George H. Williams (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), 222–233 (a reprint of his 1959 essay).

<sup>15</sup> In addition to my treatment in the essay mentioned in the previous note, I provide a further textual analysis of this issue in Israeli in my “Divine Presence, Divine Absence and the Plotinian Apophatic Dialectic: Reinterpreting ‘Creation and Emanation’ in Isaac Israeli,” in *Religion and Philosophy in the Platonic and Neoplatonic Traditions: From Antiquity to the Early Medieval Period*, edited by John Finamore (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, forthcoming). I am not here, in the context of this essay, providing any of this textual analysis (of Israeli on creation or of the Arabic terms, etc.) as this is structurally unnecessary in this context. Readers need not trust me, but Alexander Altmann in his own overtly noting that we cannot be sure what Israeli has in mind by “creation.” In similar fashion, readers need not trust me, but H. A. Wolfson, in his own estimation that we need not read Israeli on creation as suggesting a departure from emanation; structurally, I ask the reader to trust Wolfson—not just me—that the textual evidence in Israeli is in fact open to “creation as emanation”; I then ask the reader to wonder, with me, why Wolfson is not willing to go the extra step and simply read creation as Plotinian emanation; as Altmann himself notes, the text does not settle the matter—as such, I am not in the context of this chapter providing a textual treatment of the Arabic terms at play. In his opening essay to the 2009 re-release of the classic 1958 Altmann and Stern edition and commentary of Isaac Israeli, Alfred Ivry cites my reading (of creation as full-blown emanation in Israeli) as a third alternative to Altmann and H. A. Wolfson; see Alexander Altmann and S. M. Stern, *Isaac Israeli*, with foreword by Alfred Ivry (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), p. x, note 6.

in hand, we might say, with Divine Will) marks a decided conceptual departure from Greek emanation. In a nutshell, Altmann concludes that Israeli's creation is no kind of emanation at all, while Wolfson concludes instead that Israeli's creation is a kind of emanation, just not the Plotinian kind. The problem, though, is that neither of these readings of creation (in contrast to Greek emanation) seems necessitated by Israeli's own texts—a point that is itself actually acknowledged by Altmann and Wolfson.

Highlighting this methodological concern within the context of Altmann, consider (a) Altmann's evident sensitivity to the possibility of pairing creation (or a willing God) with emanation within a Neoplatonic context, and (b) Altmann's acknowledgment (in his classic study of Israeli with Stern) that Israeli's actual text is underdetermined in this very regard. In the first place, Altmann evidences his clear awareness that creation and emanation might readily be paired within a Neoplatonic context; this can be seen in his drawing overt attention to the pairing of emanation with "power and will" in Plotinus.<sup>16</sup> And yet, in his treatment of Israeli's own sense of "creation," Altmann (with Stern) inexplicably (in light of his eventual reading) goes on to note:

Most probably Israeli's voluntaristic concept of creation ignored the Plotinian tradition in this respect and interpreted the Will in a less paradoxical and less subtle way than Plotinus did. But in the absence of any clear testimony we can only guess as to his exact opinion.<sup>17</sup>

If we can only "guess" as to what Israeli has in mind, and if we are within a Neoplatonic context in which creation (which is to say, a willing God) can—as Altmann himself points out—go hand in hand with emanation (a point which we address further below), then why is Altmann definitively reading Israeli's creation as "not emanation"? If Israeli's text does not clearly demarcate creation from emanation, why opt to read it that way?

Emphasizing this methodological conundrum within the field of Jewish medieval philosophy further, Wolfson's own view even more fully highlights the possibility that we might reasonably identify Israeli's

<sup>16</sup> A. Altmann and S. M. Stern, *Isaac Israeli: A Neoplatonic Philosopher of the Early Tenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958), 154. This relates to the point we make in our brief treatment of Plotinus on "*boulêsis*" below.

<sup>17</sup> Altmann and Stern, *Isaac Israeli*, 155.

doctrine of creation with Greek emanation. This emphasis can be seen in the very contrast between Wolfson's reading of Israeli and Altmann's reading: Where Altmann reads Israeli's creation as utterly non-emanationist, Wolfson on the contrary reads Israeli's creation as indeed a *kind of emanation*. In this sense, Wolfson's own view (that creation should be read as a kind of emanation in Israeli) helps emphasize that we need not read creation within a Jewish Neoplatonic context in contrast to Greek philosophy. And yet, Wolfson nonetheless goes on to conclude—without compelling textual support from Israeli himself—that Israeli's creation should not be read as a *Plotinian kind of emanation*; he emphasizes that Israeli's creation-as-emanation cannot be conceptually identical to what Wolfson describes as Plotinus's own unconscious (in the sense of unwilled) variety of emanation. But on what basis does Wolfson so strongly arrive at this conclusion?

In considering Altmann's demarcation of Israeli's creation from emanation (without a compelling textual reason for doing so), and Wolfson's demarcation of Israeli's creation-as-emanation from Plotinian emanation (without a compelling textual reason for doing so), we have hit upon the methodological worry that we have set out in this chapter to explore. In trying to understand why Altmann and Wolfson so definitively rule out creation *as* Plotinian emanation in Israeli, we must at least consider the swell of the Western thought-space—and in particular the possibility that tacit intuitions in the intellectual background of medieval philosophy might be here exerting some kind of subtle influence. Is it not possible that both Altmann and Wolfson are importing into their starting space unexplored "basic intuitions" about creation in a medieval philosophical context when they both presume that creation for Israeli is best read as conceptually at odds with Plotinian emanation?

Drawing on the conceptual play of Athens and Jerusalem, we might put the matter this way: for both Altmann and Wolfson, there seems some basic intuition that, in the matter of medieval Jewish philosophy, Athens cannot extend into Jerusalem; while for Altmann, Israeli's "creation" cannot be Greek, it can be Greek for Wolfson—just not *too Greek*. If Israeli's text does not clearly demarcate creation from Plotinian emanation, why opt to read it that way?

*In Defense of Creation as Greek Emanation,  
1: The Fluidity of Genesis, the Fluidity of Jewish Traditions of  
Interpreting Genesis, and the Fluidity of “Jewish Faith”*

To help emphasize the *prima facie* oddity of presuming (as Altmann and Wolfson do) a divide between creation and Greek emanation within a Jewish medieval philosophical context, consider the Genesis text itself—and in particular, its reception in a range of ancient and medieval Jewish traditions of interpretation. As these interpretations help emphasize, the opening Genesis talk of “*B’reishith*” (often translated as “In the beginning”) and “*bara*” (often translated as “created”) is pretty wide open in terms of meaning—there is really nothing in these Hebrew words that suggests what “creation” ought or ought not mean in a Jewish context—or, as is our main concern here, in a Jewish medieval context.<sup>18</sup>

Looking to the Torah itself, we find quite an impressive range of “basic Jewish readings” of Genesis 1:1, all of which attest to the deep textual openness of the words “*b’reishith bara*”—from the midrashic notion that God creates the world “*bishvil reishith*” (a reading of “*b’reishith*” not as “in the beginning” but as “for the sake of the first among the people,” viz. for the people Israel),<sup>19</sup> to the Zoharic sense that this passage describes how the most infinite aspect of God creates—itsself through a kind of intra-divine emanation—the fullness of God Himself.<sup>20</sup> We might add that what these—and many other—“basic” Jewish readings of Genesis have in common is that they have nothing

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<sup>18</sup> I am not here questioning the validity of comparative religious, archaeological, literary critical, or other methods of suggesting certain readings over others, nor am I purporting to make claims about the meaning of the text taken in the historical setting(s) in which it was originally conceived, written, or redacted; I am, rather, looking at the text of Genesis from the vantage point of scholars approaching the history of philosophy and medieval Jewish philosophy, and in that context am emphasizing that the Genesis 1:1 claim about “God’s creation of the world” does not entail one particular philosophical idea (of what God is “doing” when He “creates”) over another. In other words, I am reflecting on the conceptual unpacking of the Genesis notion of “creation” in which the medieval Jewish philosophers are themselves engaged, and in which scholars of medieval Jewish philosophy are, as such, engaged.

<sup>19</sup> See *Genesis Rabbah* on Genesis 1:1.

<sup>20</sup> For a translation of and commentary on this Zoharic reading of Genesis 1:1, see Zohar 1:15a; see *The Zohar* (Pritzker Edition), Vol. 1, edited and translated by Daniel C. Matt (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 107–109; or see *Zohar, Annotated and Explained*, edited and translated by Daniel C. Matt (Woodstock, VT: Sky-Light Paths, 2002), 10–13.

to do with the more deeply rooted (more deeply rooted, that is, within the Western thought-space) sense of “In the beginning, God created [not emanated] the heaven and the earth.” The myriad traditions of Jewish readings of creation are, of course, just as conceptually “basic” as any reading that flows from within the Western thought-space (just as Soloveitchik’s rendering of holiness-as-immanence is just as “basic” as the very different sense of “holiness-as-transcendence” that flows from within the Western thought-space). Destined within the context of the Western thought-space to come across as “Jewish interpretations” (as opposed to “basic readings”) of the Genesis text (and, we might add, to come across—as such—as “quaint” or perhaps as “spectacular” interpretations at that), Jewish readings of “*b’reishith bara*”—and as such, Jewish interpretations of creation itself—are, of course, no less “basic” or “obvious” than the better known (because tied to other ideas in the Western thought-space) readings of Genesis 1:1 as opposing emanation and other Greek ideas. There is, though, nothing in the text—or in a range of Jewish readings of the text—that implicate any one particular notion of will into the opening words of Genesis, as there is nothing in the text or in a range of Jewish readings of the text that suggest a dualistic conception of creation being “versus emanation.” (It might be noted that the Zoharic reading mentioned above overtly provides a Jewish case in point of the conceptual alignment of creation and emanation—albeit creation and an intra-divine, sephirotic emanation; nonetheless, this certainly underscores, in at least one medieval Jewish context, the plausibility of creation and emanation being theorized together.)

It might also be noted in this context that Judaism has no religious canons per se, and—as such—no clear sense of what a person of “faith” (itself not the most obvious concept within a Jewish context) must believe. For this reason, Jewish “faith”—in contrast, we might add, to various traditions of faith within a Christian context—is fairly wide open in terms of possible creation views.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> One might here note too the importance of distinguishing, for example, Maimonides’ “thirteen principles of faith” (arguably the closest thing Judaism has to a list of canonical “faith principles”) from any set of faith-principles in a Christian context. For a conversation of how Maimonides’ “faith principles” are not analogous to “faith principles” in a Christian context (as well as the issue of whether these principles are even literally true according to Maimonides’ own philosophy), see Sarah Pessin, “Maimonides’ Thirteen Principles of Faith,” in *Cambridge History of Medieval*

*In Defense of Creation as Greek Emanation,  
2: The Fluidity of Plotinus*

Turning to Greek texts—and for the purposes of our current point, Neoplatonism—we can make a similar point: Neoplatonic concepts (just as is true for Jewish readings of the Genesis concept “creation”) suffer from being square pegs in the round-holed expanse of the Western thought-space. And so, just as the Western thought-space (again, here understood most minimally as the Augustinian- and Thomistic-influenced intellectual contexts of scholars of medieval philosophy) encourages us to think of “creation” as being “opposed to [Greek] emanation,” it also (and in an obviously related conceptual move) asks us to think of Plotinian emanation (the root example of “Greek emanation”)<sup>22</sup> as being “opposed to [Biblical] creation.” As I have emphasized in the case of creation above, so too here for the case of Greek emanation: there is nothing, save the swelling pressure of certain predominant intuitions within the Western thought-space, to suggest that Plotinian emanation cannot be described as a “willed” act of God. Within a Neoplatonic context, Plotinus himself opens the conceptual space for pairing a notion of a willing God with a full-blown doctrine of emanation. At *Enneads*, 6.8 (see sections 12, 13, 21 et al.), using the language of *boulêsis*, Plotinus describes the One—fount of all emanation—as having willed itself freely. And so, for example, at *Enneads* 6.8.12:

...ou gar aboulôn energei...

...for he does not act unwillingly...

As I have explained elsewhere,<sup>23</sup> in a Neoplatonic conceptual register, it is perfectly reasonable to describe the flow of emanation (what from within the Western thought space one might describe as “necessitated”) as God’s willed activity—activity elsewhere described too as the source of all freedom. Because God is pure good, he must share that goodness forward. But because this sharing is the source of all, it

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*Philosophy*, vol. 2, edited by Robert Pasnau (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 790–792.

<sup>22</sup> For overview of Plotinus, Neoplatonism, and emanation, see note 4.

<sup>23</sup> See my “Jewish Neoplatonism: Being above Being and Divine Emanation in Solomon Ibn Gabirol and Isaac Israeli”; in that essay, I reconcile emanation and divine freedom in other ways as well.



is the fount of all freedom and will, and in this sense is Freedom and Will par excellence. Here, freedom, necessity (though Plotinus would not think of it as necessity), will, and emanation all go hand-in-hand. Especially within a Neoplatonic context, there is nothing to rule out “will talk” and “emanation talk” as two sides of one theological coin—which of course renders much more plausible our ability to conceptually align (and, as such, speak at one and the same time of) creation and Greek emanation.

To be sure, Plotinus’s notion of will here (as is arguably the case for the Zoharic notion of creation described above) does not satisfy the expectations of “free choice” that certain thinkers (e.g., Augustine, al-Ghazali, et al.) have in mind when they speak of Divine Will.<sup>24</sup> My goal is simply to note—as in the case of Ibn Gabirol above—that within a full-blown Neoplatonic context, it would not be inconsistent to use the term “Will” to refer to emanation. Just as Plotinus can speak of “will” and mean by it “full blown Plotinian emanation,” so too, I would argue, can Ibn Gabirol speak of “Divine Will” in a Jewish medieval context (and certainly in a Jewish Neoplatonic context) and mean by it “full-blown Plotinian emanation”; and so too, I would argue, can Isaac Israeli speak of “creation” in a Jewish medieval context (and certainly in a Jewish Neoplatonic context) and mean by it “full-blown Plotinian emanation.” (In all of this, I mean in no way to suggest that Plotinus’s—or, for that matter, Ibn Gabirol’s or Israeli’s—“will” is conceptually identical to the notion of will at play in thinkers such as Augustine or Aquinas who denounce Greek emanation;<sup>25</sup> my point here is not to “elevate” Plotinus’s “Divine Will” to the status of the Creator God in Augustine or Aquinas, but to release Ibn Gabirol’s Divine Will and Israeli’s creation from the model of the Creator God in Augustine and Aquinas; my goal is also, of course, to problematize the verb “elevate” in any conceptual attempt to describe Augustine’s or Aquinas’s relationship to Greek or Jewish ideas.)

<sup>24</sup> Emphasizing that there is a freedom of choice that demarcates an emanating God from a Creator God, one might consider Augustine’s *De Libero Arbitrio* (On Free Choice) and al-Ghazali’s particular emphasis on the notion of *al-ikhtiyâr* (choice, free will). In the context of a “free will” that is free to choose between competing options (a “*proairesis*” versus a “*boulesis*”), Plotinus’s “willing” God would only qualify as “willing” in an equivocal sense—i.e., Plotinus’s God is not at all “willing” in the sense meant by Augustine or al-Ghazali.

<sup>25</sup> See previous note.



That Plotinus's sense of "will" and emanation going together might not "make sense"—or simply might seem "less basic" than some other intuition about will—to a given reader, or that a given reader might come to the table with a sense that a "freely choosing" Creator God is "more pious" a conception in some sense than a "[so-called] willing" Plotinian God (see my discussion of "theological anxiety" below), is, I would submit, part of the very worry that frames this entire essay: The feeling that (1) "will" is inherently conceptually at odds with emanation, or that (2) "Divine Will" in the sense of "a freely choosing God" is more basic (and/or more pious) than the Plotinian sense of Divine Will is a feeling that is arguably an outgrowth of certain predominant intuitions within the Western thought-space—intuitions that are precisely not oriented by Neoplatonic Greek insights, and that (as we have seen above) are also not oriented by insights from a range of Jewish interpretations of Genesis. Neither a Jewish nor a Neoplatonic thought-space seems troubled by the description of emanation in terms of "creation" or by the valorization of and embrace of a Creator God who does not freely choose. Why not read medieval Jewish texts of Neoplatonism in this light?

*In Defense of Creation as Greek Emanation,  
3: Philosophical Cases in Point*

The sense of creation (and/or will) and emanation going hand in hand, then, is a fairly straightforward option within both Jewish and Greek contexts. It is, of course, also an option in various Islamic and Christian philosophical contexts. The tradition of Islamic Neoplatonism (including Avicenna, al-Farabi, et al.) is perfectly content to read Quranic "creation" in terms of Greek emanation. And the same impulse can be found in a range of Christian theologians and philosophers, including Eriugena, Ps. Dionysius, and Albertus Magnus.<sup>26</sup> In fact, we might point to Aquinas himself who, in spite of his own Christian faith-based belief in a non-Greek sense of creation, provides a clear justification for why there is neither anything conceptually nor religiously untoward about thinking of creation in Greek philosophical terms.

In *On the Eternity of the World* 3.5.2, Aquinas provides a number of clear arguments for why it is not only logically possible, but religiously

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<sup>26</sup> See Bonin, *Creation as Emanation*.

non-heretical, to conceptualize Aristotelian eternity (that something other than God—in Aristotle's case, the world—has always existed) together with creation (that God is the willing Creator of all things). Aquinas explains that it is perfectly logical—and perfectly pious—to read God's creation in terms of an ontological ordering perfectly consistent with Greek views of the world's eternity: God, we may say, is a true creator of a world which, though eternal, has always depended (and will always depend) on Him for its existence (or at least for its being ordered in the way that it is ordered). On this register, we may even—as Aquinas points out—speak of Aristotelian eternity in terms of creation *ex nihilo*—not in the temporal sense of “First there was nothing, and then God created the world out of nothing,” but in the ontologically ordering sense of “Were it not for God, the world would not exist” (or at least would not exist as it is). Here “out of nothing” loses the mysterious temporal sense of “God constructs from scratch something from nothing,” and gains instead the firm (and pious) sense that “things so rely on God for their being (or at least for their being such-and-so) that they can be said to be nothing without Him.” In this latter sense, God is said to “create all things from nothing” in the sense that, ontologically speaking, His existence (and His existence alone) enables things to be something rather than to not be (or at least enables things to be what they are rather than not be what they are). This, of course, is perfectly consistent with a Greek worldview of a God side-by-side eternally with the world: as long as the eternal world is properly theorized with respect to God, there is no reason that it can't be theorized as “created” (even “created *ex nihilo*”) by God, in the sense of its being utterly ontologically dependent upon God.

In this way, even though the view in question is not his own final view, Aquinas can be seen as showing that there is nothing philosophically strained—and even that there is nothing theoretically heretical—about conceptualizing together biblical creation and Greek eternity. And while Aquinas does not specifically theorize creation and emanation together, his account arguably helps support that possibility as well—a possibility that can be seen, for example, in al-Farabi's own embrace of emanation (as can be seen, for example, throughout his cosmological account in his *On the Perfect State*)<sup>27</sup> along with language (which he attributes to the *Theology of Aristotle*) of “creation

<sup>27</sup> See al-Farabi, *On the Perfect State*, edited and translated by Richard Walzer (Great Books of the Islamic World) (Chicago: KAZI Publications, 1998 [1985]), 56–105.

*ex nihilo*.”<sup>28</sup> While al-Farabi does not overtly address how emanation and “creation *ex nihilo*” can be theorized together, (a) he does talk of both without any sense that there is a problem with doing so, and (b) his account of “creation *ex nihilo*” (in much the same spirit, I would argue, as what we have identified in Aquinas above) describes something of a radical ontological dependence relationship (of ordering/providence/governance) that conceptually fits perfectly well with a full-blown doctrine of (Greek) emanation.

*Augustine, Aquinas, and Christological Reasons to Demarcate  
Creation from Emanation: Theological Anxieties and the Possibility of  
Christian Intuitions in the Western Thought-Space?*

In the last three sections, we have worked to emphasize—from three different perspectives—why, methodologically speaking, it would be strained to approach any text of Jewish medieval philosophy (and *a fortiori*, any text of Jewish medieval Neoplatonism) with the expectation (or even with the subtle sense) that creation will mean something discrete from Greek emanation.

Here, though, we must emphasize the complementary point: within the Western thought-space (again, most minimally, the intellectual contexts of Western scholars of medieval philosophy), it would be just as strained to *not* expect creation to be discrete from Greek emanation. In other words, from within a host of Christian philosophical and theological contexts, creation is most definitely not Plotinian emanation—and, as such, ought not be read as even vaguely aligned with Greek philosophy. Starting with Augustinian and Thomistic contexts, it is clear that—in spite of their many differences—both abide by a strong “creation versus Plotinian emanation” dualism: in his own conversion experience, Augustine trades in much of his Neoplatonic theology for Christianity. As for Aquinas, in spite of his philosophi-

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<sup>28</sup> See al-Farabi, “The Harmonization of the Two Opinions of the Two Sages: Plato the Divine and Aristotle” in *Al-Farabi: The Political Writings*, edited and translated by Charles E. Butterworth (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 153–165, especially 155, section 56. Marwan Rashed has recently argued that this work is not by al-Farabi; I am thankful to Richard Taylor for drawing this to my attention.

cal defense of creation's compatibility with Greek views, he opts for a Christian faith-based view of creation in time.<sup>29</sup>

Following on our line of inquiry throughout this study, we must at least consider the possibility that various Augustinian and Aquinas-based traditions have exerted tacit influences upon scholars of medieval philosophy, and the way they read texts. In this regard, we might reflect on the limiting influence of the dualist sensibility that creation is discrete from Plotinian emanation in particular relation to three additionally limiting "theological anxieties" that can further tacitly influence the way scholars read texts: "The Anxiety of Pantheism," "The Anxiety of an Unfree God," and (relatedly) "The Anxiety of an Impersonal God." Seen from non-Neoplatonic vantage points (such as the vantage points of Augustinians and students of Aquinas), Plotinian emanation might very well "feel impious" for its pantheistic image of God flowing into all reality, for its sense that God's flow is necessitated and automatic, and for the sense that (in all of this) God is not a personal God. But, of course, none of this holds sway from within a Neoplatonic perspective. From within a Neoplatonic perspective, the Neoplatonic descriptions of God are not "felt" as "impious"; they are felt, rather, as what we might do well to call a pious love for—and engagement with—God. We have already briefly touched on this above in reminding ourselves of how Plotinus identifies the emanation of God (what opponents would describe as "necessitated" and "automatic" and "unfree") as Willing and Freedom par excellence. For our current purposes, it is sufficient to simply remind ourselves that the Neoplatonic conception of God—in all of His flowing glory—results in none of the above three anxieties for Neoplatonists, including Christian Neoplatonists like Eriugena, Muslim Neoplatonists like Avicenna, and—I would argue—Jewish Neoplatonists like Ibn Gabirol and Isaac Israeli.

And while the above "anxieties" are (a) perfectly reasonable within Augustinian and Thomistic contexts, and (b) perfectly reasonable reasons within those contexts for embracing a strongly dualistic sense that creation is discrete from Greek emanation, there is no obvious reason to tacitly carry any of these three anxieties into an encounter

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<sup>29</sup> See *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 46, a. 2; I am thankful to Richard Taylor and William Carroll for discussing this point with me.

with Jewish Neoplatonic texts—or into our sense of how to read “creation” or “will” in said texts.

In addition to Aquinas’s and Augustine’s ultimate Christian faith-based embrace of non-Greek pieties (i.e., non-Greek senses—albeit differently inflected ones—of God as willing Creator with the strongly dualist sense of creation standing in opposition to emanation), we may point more broadly in this regard to two other Christian contexts in the history of Western thought that might also have subtly made their way into scholarly intuitions about will, and that as such might also have tacitly given rise to a “basic” philosophical-theological intuition that creation and Divine Will stand in opposition to (Greek) emanation. The two Christological undertones I have in mind are (1) the Johannine notion (more predominant even still in various Franciscan and Orthodox Christian contexts) of the emanation relation between the three persons of the trinity (in contrast to the relation between God and world), and (2) the Franciscan Trinitarian emphasis on a certain relation of “will” as particularly demarcating the Holy Spirit’s relationship within/to the Trinity.

It is well beyond the scope of this chapter to explore each of these ideas in any depth;<sup>30</sup> we here wish simply to note the sense in which each of these Christian contexts grounds various “creation vs. emanation” intuitions. Let us briefly examine each in turn.

In Johannine contexts, the three persons of the trinity emanate. The details aside, this certainly conceptually demands that “emanation” is one thing (an expression of God’s own internal reality) and “creation” is another (an expression of God’s relation to the world). While, to be sure, this Christian context introduces a decidedly non-Greek conception of emanation, it results, for our purposes, in a “basic intuition” that emanation and creation are definitely discrete. Is it possible, though, that this conceptual move trickles into the thought-space of medieval philosophical scholarship, tacitly encouraging intuitions about “creation v. emanation” (even in contexts such as Ibn Gabirol and Israeli where no such dualism is clear)?

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<sup>30</sup> For an overview and analysis of some of the relevant ideas, see Russell L. Friedman, *Medieval Trinitarian Thought from Aquinas to Ockham* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), and Stephen Gersh, *From Iamblichus to Eriugena: An Investigation of the Prehistory and Evolution of the Pseudo-Dionysian Tradition* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1997).

In a somewhat different manner, we might note various Christian explorations of God's will. Various Christian approaches to the emanating reality of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit highlight a sense of "will" that describes the unique emanation relation between Father and Holy Spirit (in contrast to the relationship between Father and Son in terms of "intellect"). While on the one hand this does introduce a theological context in which will and emanation are conceptually aligned—as is the case as well for (1) the Johannine Trinitarian teaching above and (2) the Zoharic reading of Genesis 1:1 mentioned earlier—on the other hand, since this idea of "will" is clearly part of an analysis of the Trinity, and since "emanation" is clearly used by this tradition (as we have seen too in our discussion of Johannine traditions above) to demarcate an intra-Trinitarian reality, we find here justification for three dualisms: first, the dualism of "emanation (here as intra-divine) versus creation (as extra-divine)," second, the dualism of "Christological emanation (as intra-divine) versus Greek emanation (as extra-divine)," and third, the dualism of "will (here as intra-divine emanation) versus Greek emanation." In a Christological context, there is nothing unclear about a "Divine Will v. Greek emanation" dichotomy: the dualism of Divine Will and Greek emanation is conceptually justified. Is it possible, though, that this conceptual move trickles into the thought-space of medieval philosophical scholarship, tacitly encouraging intuitions about "creation v. emanation" (even in contexts such as Ibn Gabirol and Israeli where no such dualism is clear)?

Returning most broadly to Christian faith in any number of Augustinian or Thomistic theological or philosophical contexts, there are strong reasons to demarcate Divine Will and creation from any kind of Greek emanation. In such contexts, there is nothing unclear about a "Divine Will v. Greek emanation" dichotomy: the dualism of Divine Will and emanation is conceptually justified. Is it possible, though, that this conceptual move trickles into the thought-space of medieval philosophical scholarship, tacitly encouraging intuitions about "creation v. emanation" (even in contexts such as Ibn Gabirol and Israeli where no such dualism is clear)?

To be sure, there are also many non-Christian philosophies and theologies in which the Creator God and emanation are strongly at odds (e.g., al-Ghazali's freely choosing God, or Yehuda Halevi's *amr ilâhî* in the context of an "historical theology" [featuring the God of Exodus acting in history with the People Israel]). As mentioned at the start of

the chapter, though, the reason for focusing only on Christian cases is related to our consideration of the Western thought-space (and in particular the background training of Western scholars of medieval philosophy). For simple and non-controversial historical reasons, it seems more plausible (in the spirit of our starting example of Pauline influence on such terms as “holiness”) to suggest that some Christian ideas (and not Islamic or Jewish ones) might tacitly have influenced (and might tacitly continue to influence) the basic use of terms and some of the starting intuitions of Western scholars of medieval philosophy, including Western scholars of medieval Jewish philosophy.

### *Conclusion*

I have suggested that neither Weisheipl, Gilson, nor Husik provide a compelling textual reason for demarcating Ibn Gabirol’s Divine Will from Plotinian emanation. And I have suggested in like fashion that neither Altmann nor Wolfson provides a compelling textual reason for demarcating Israeli’s creation from Plotinian emanation. It is precisely the methodological perplexity arising from cases like these that leads me to the questions raised in this chapter. Since it is not the texts themselves that unambiguously support these readings, does it not seem fair (and even necessary) to inquire whether there are some tacit intuitions about Divine Will and creation that are quietly encouraging dualistic divides between will and emanation (in all three of Weisheipl, Gilson, and Husik), between creation and emanation (in the case of Altmann), and between Jewish creation-as-emanation and Plotinian emanation (in the case of Wolfson)? And, furthermore, is it not possible to suggest too that it is the strength of certain predominating Augustinian, Thomistic, and other pervasive Christian ideas that tacitly encourage these kinds of dualistic intuitions within the Western-thought space in whose context scholars of medieval philosophy think and read?

Connecting back up to our earlier reflection on Jerusalem and Athens, we might ask: Is Athens (here, Plotinus’s emanation) really at odds with the medieval Jewish philosopher’s Jerusalem (Ibn Gabirol’s Divine Will, or Israeli’s idea of creation), or is Athens’ incompatibility simply with some predominating senses of Jerusalem within the Western thought-space? In other words, is the real incompatibility actually between Plotinus and medieval Jewish Neoplatonic conceptions

of “creation” and “will,” or is the real incompatibility only between Plotinus and the notions of “creation” and “will” as interpreted from within various wide-ranging and influential Christian philosophical and theological contexts subtly at play within the background training of Western scholars of medieval philosophy? The possibility that Athens and Jerusalem might live comfortably side by side within at least some texts of medieval Jewish philosophy ought make us step back and reconsider our methodological approaches to interpretation within the history of ideas. At the very least, it ought make us worry about the possibility of a subtly Christian construction of medieval Jewish philosophy.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> My thanks to Aaron Hughes and Jim Diamond for their thoughtful work in editing this collection and for their helpful comments on my chapter. I am also thankful to Aaron for having invited me to participate in the conference that led up to this volume, and to the conference participants for offering engaging comments and suggestions on the paper (an earlier version of this chapter) that I presented; any inadequacies in this study of course remain my own.