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## Divine Presence, Divine Absence and the Plotinian Apophatic Dialectic: Reinterpreting "Creation and Emanation" in Isaac Israeli

### Introduction: Creation and Emanation in Israeli

In constructing the history of philosophy, there is a tendency to draw sharp divides between Plotinus' Neoplatonism on the one hand, and the "scripturally informed" Neoplatonisms of various Jewish, Christian and Muslim Neoplatonists (with their respective commitments to – or at least occasional conceptual recourse to – Torah, New Testament and Quran) on the other. This is perfectly understandable in a Christian context, where a given Christian Neoplatonist, informed by the New Testament (and the Christian theology to which it gives rise), moves Neoplatonism into overtly Christological and Trinitarian discourses. In such a case, it is understandable why scholars would speak of clear and dramatic departures from Plotinus. In the cases of Jewish and Muslim Neoplatonism, however, the issue becomes less clear. Take the case in particular of Plotinus' view of the emanation of all things from the One. In the Muslim case, since the Quran is understood differently enough by different mainstream Muslim theologians on the question of God's creative activity in the world, we can find Muslim Neoplatonists who, even as part of their "scripturally informed" endeavor, are fine to leave "creation" out of the story and speak only and overtly in Plotinian terms of God as emanating.

What do we do, then, with the case of Jewish Neoplatonists who, on the contrary, do overtly talk about God as creating and willing? Compared with Greek (and, as we have seen, Muslim, or other) Neoplatonists who don't talk of creation at all, this Jewish Neoplatonist talk of a creating and willing God seems to suggest a real (and Biblically informed) departure from Plotinus. And yet, might we not take this "creation talk" as consistent with the system of Neoplatonism we find in Plotinus? I have strongly argued "yes" in answer to this question in the past, and I will in this paper further my argument through a consideration of what I will go on to argue is a notion of "unmediated emanation" in Isaac Israeli. Before, though, moving on to the particulars of Israeli, and without rehearsing in detail the considerations I have offered elsewhere, I might simply point to one simple consideration in support of finding agreement between Jewish Neoplatonic talk of creation and Plotinus: The biblical "creation" is understood quite differently by different traditions of Jewish thinkers (including whole traditions

of Jewish mystics who read "creation" as "emanation").<sup>1</sup> Given the fluid field of "Jewish interpretations" of the Genesis "creation," there is really no *prima facie* ground for reading a Jewish Neoplatonic reference to "creation" as a departure from Plotinus. And yet, in spite of this, scholars too often conclude that Jewish Neoplatonic talk of a creating and willing God marks a genuine conceptual departure from Plotinus.

In this paper, I begin by briefly summarizing what I have elsewhere<sup>2</sup> laid out as three discrete positions on the extent of Israeli's emanationism, viz. the classic positions of Altmann and Wolfson, and my own more recent "third" alternative which, *pace* Altmann and Wolfson, finds the strongest affinity between Israeli and Plotinus. Advancing my argument from where I've left it in the past, I go on in the remainder of the paper to consider in detail Israeli's accounts of "shadow and light" and of two different cosmo-ontological relations which I exposit – *pace* Altmann and Wolfson – primarily in terms of "mediated and unmediated emanation." I then go on to show in particular how Israeli's discourse on "mediated and unmediated emanation" signals, to the careful reader, not an account of two discrete causal mechanisms *per se*, but an expressly Neoplatonic apophatic discourse on the simultaneous absence and presence of God. One outcome of my study is that it provides a way of understanding a Jewish Neoplatonic "creating and willing" God that is in fact consistent with – and even, reliant upon – a Plotinian conceptual space. Another outcome of my study is that it provides a robust analysis of why, and in what sense, Israeli combines talk of creation and emanation, and in this way sidesteps a popular, and mistaken, scholarly approach to Israeli (and other Jewish Neoplatonists) as either having no reason for combining creation with emanation, or as having a reason which is either muddled or somehow beyond our reach.

### Israeli's "Two Vertical Modes": Three Initial Readings

In his *Book of Substances* (*Kitâb al-Jawâhir*), Isaac Israeli (855-955/6) distinguishes what we may call two "vertical" modes of cosmo-ontological relation. On the one hand, he talks of a relation that proceeds

"by the power and by the will (*min al-qudra wa-l-irâda*)

by way of influence and action (*'alâ sabîl al-ta'tîr wa-l-fi'l*)"

On the other hand, he talks of a relation that is

"essential and substantial" (*dhâtî jawharî*).

<sup>1</sup> For an overview of some of the many different views of creation in this regard, see Pessin 2009.

<sup>2</sup> See Pessin 2003.

In his study of Israeli, Altmann<sup>3</sup> reads these two modes of relation as discrete causal mechanisms and on this basis argues for the presence of a non-Plotinian mode of creation at play in Israeli's brand of Jewish Neoplatonism. Altmann describes the two modes of dependency in the following causal terms:

(1) "Causality by Action": Altmann uses this terminology to categorize the mode of relation "by the power and by the will by way of influence and action". For Altmann, this is Israeli's way of demarcating the relationship between God and all lower realities in terms of a non-emanationist creation *ex nihilo* entirely absent in Greek (and other entirely emanationist) traditions of Neoplatonism.

(2) "Essential Causality": Altmann uses this terminology to categorize the "essential and substantial" relation that Israeli additionally describes as being "like the light and shining of the sun, which emanate from its essence and substantiality." Altmann sees this as indeed demarcating an ordinary Greek mechanism of emanation in Israeli for substances below God.

In contrast to Altmann, Wolfson<sup>4</sup> argues that we can read both of these two causal mechanisms in Israeli in terms of emanation. For Wolfson, Israeli's two cosmo-ontological modes denote two *varieties of emanation*, the first a "conscious" and the second an "unconscious" emanation.

In my previous study,<sup>5</sup> I have argued instead for a 3<sup>rd</sup>, more radical, alternative: Unlike Altmann who asks us to read in Israeli a non-Plotinian creation, and unlike Wolfson who asks us to read in Israeli a non-Plotinian "conscious emanation," I simply ask us to read in Israeli nothing more than good old-fashioned Plotinian emanation. In my initial presentation of that thesis, I supported my suggestion by pointing, in various ways, to the conceptually thin line (if any) between Plotinus' emanation talk and discourses of creation and / or will. I might

<sup>3</sup> Altmann 1979. See too Altmann and Stern 1958.

<sup>4</sup> Wolfson 1973. Originally published in 1959 before the Altmann's essay that we are referencing in this study, Wolfson nonetheless does contrast his view with Altmann's, as Altmann lays out his view in his 1958 classic study of Isaac Israeli (see Altmann and Stern 1958).

<sup>5</sup> See Pessin 2003. In his new forward to the reprint of Altmann's and Stern's *Isaac Israeli*, Alfred Ivry mentions my position as a third alternative to Altmann's and Wolfson's which "inclines towards" but "goes beyond" Wolfson's view; see p. x, note 6 (reference to new edition – see end of bibliography entry for Altmann and Stern 1958). In his study, Wolfson surveys a number of scholars who have treated Israeli along emanationist lines, e.g. Jakob Guttman, Husik, Julius Guttmann and Vajda; I do not categorize my own emanationist reading alongside any of these scholars, though, inasmuch as the reasons for my view (and as such, my sense of the two modes of emanation in Israeli) are quite different from anything that they hold to. Turning to just two of the scholars (both of whom I will briefly address later in the paper): Julius Guttmann seems to offer no explanation for this seeming combination of creation and emanation, while Vajda suggests that there is no explanation within the contours of Israeli's own view for the combination of creation and emanation; as we will see, I offer a very detailed account of what Israeli is up to with this "combination" (see Wolfson 1973, pp. 227-8).

here first supplement that line of thought with the simple reminder that even though Plotinus speaks of emanation in singular terms across the board, Plotinus' own deep sensitivity to the utter difference between the One and all else can easily be treated by us as a deep sensitivity to "two vertical modes" of emanation: picking up on Plotinus' emphasis on the unique nature of the divine source, we may easily emphasize that for Plotinus, the "originary" emanating activity of the divine source is, at some critical level, completely different than any other emanating relationship between lower entities in the great chain of being, just as it is for Israeli. Charitable and careful readers can just as readily find the notion of freedom in Plotinus' concept of emanation<sup>6</sup> as they can hear resonances of "two vertical modes of emanation" in Plotinus' more univocal-sounding talk of emanation.

This initial consideration aside, I will in this paper advance my thesis of a "3<sup>rd</sup> alternative" even further by replacing Altmann's and Wolfson's thoroughly non-Plotinian reading of Israeli's two modes (in terms of "creation and emanation" and "conscious and unconscious emanation" respectively) with a new – and thoroughly Plotinian – reading of Israeli's two modes in terms of "unmediated" and "mediated" emanation.

### Ray, Shadow and Nesting Specificities: The "Essential and Substantial" Relation as Plotinian "Mediated Emanation" in a non-Plotinian Guise

In our effort to better understand and distinguish between Israeli's two modes of cosmo-ontological relation (and in way or our better appreciating how they are both consistent with a Plotinian conceptual space), I begin with the second mode, viz. the essential/substantial relation. To appreciate the contours of this second mode, we must turn to one especially complex passage from Israeli's *Book of Substances*, and with it, to his discourse of light and shadows. In this passage, Israeli lays out the great chain of being arising from the universal Intellect; he talks of *an-naw'yya* – the specific nature or "specificity" of each hypostasis as a product of the light and shadow of the hypostasis that precedes it:

#### Intellect's Ray and Shadow Passage [p. 84, fol 3r]

##### Text 1:

... it is evident that the ray (*ash-shu'ā'*) and shadow (*af-fai'*) of the intellect are the specificity (*an-naw'yya* – specific nature) of the rational soul, the ray and shadow of the rational soul are the specificity of the animal soul .... This being so, the intellect is the specificity of all substances, and it is their form – it is that which estab-

<sup>6</sup> I have made this point in greater depth in Pessin 2003.

lishes their essence, since the ray and light (*an-nūr*) which flow<sup>7</sup> from the shadow [of intellect]<sup>8</sup> are the fountain (*al-yanbū'*) of the substantiality [of all substances] and the root (*al-'aṣl*) of their form and specificity...<sup>9</sup>

We are confronted here with a number of claims, from which we may glean the following:

1. Intellect has (is made up of?) "ray and shadow"
2. Intellect, in this regard, is the specificity of all substances
3. Intellect, in this regard, is the form of all substances
4. As specificity and form for all substances, Intellect establishes the essence of all substances...
5. ... in the specific sense that Intellect contains a shadow plus "ray and light" which flow from this shadow...
6. ... with the further elaboration that the "ray and light" of Intellect (flowing from the shadow of Intellect) themselves are the "fountain of the substantiality" [of all substances] and the root of the form and specificity of all substances.

To summarize, we may say:

7. Intellect is the specificity, form, and (in this sense) the essence-granting source for all substances inasmuch as it emanates "ray and light" in and through its casting a shadow.

Regarding this last point, we might unpack two additional clarifications:

- 7a. Intellect's ray and light flow from Intellect's shadow (a point which in some sense gives a hierarchical priority to shadow in the unfolding of the great chain of being), and yet,
- 7b. Intellect's ray and light (not its shadow directly) are seen as the fountain and root of the substantiality and essence of substances

This entire passage gives us a good overview of Israeli's "essential and substantial" mode of relation, as it at once emphasizes (1) that it is indeed (as per the claim by Altmann and Wolfson) ordinary Plotinian emanation, (2) albeit expressed through terminologies – such as nesting specificities, rays, and shadows – that are not the "normal" terminologies of Plotinian emanation. (We might note that point 2 gives way to an important methodological principle that I be-

<sup>7</sup> From *naba'a*, to flow/emanate (related to following noun "fountain").

<sup>8</sup> Literally: "since its [intellect's?] ray and light (*nūr*) flowing from its shadow..."

<sup>9</sup> Israeli, *Book of Substances*. My modified translation of Stern in Zimmerman 1983, p. 139; Arabic p. 143; I have changed "shade" to "shadow," and I have made some small structural changes.



lieve is critical for all interpretive endeavors in the history of philosophy, viz.: different terminologies do not always mean different overall conceptual spaces. Ironically, while both Altmann or Wolfson seem receptive to this methodological point in their willingness to treat the “essential and substantial” mode as ordinary emanation in spite of much non-Plotinian language in Israeli’s account, when it comes to Israeli’s mode of relation “by power and will by way of influence and action,” both Altmann and Wolfson seem moved, on the contrary, to conclude that the mode could not possibly be Plotinian in light of all the non-Plotinian terminology (e.g. Israeli’s use of terms like “will,” and even, as we will see, “creation *ex nihilo*” language). On the contrary, I read both Israeli’s talk of shadows, rays, and nesting specificities, as well as his talk of “power and will” (and any related language of “creation” and “creation *ex nihilo*”) in a single methodological spirit: they are all unique terminological approaches to an essentially Plotinian space. I might further note that while my reading of Israeli’s “by power and will by way of influence and action” indeed starts with this methodological insight, it proceeds – as we will see in what follows – by way of further argument).

On Altmann’s, Wolfson’s and my reading, Israeli’s “essential and substantial” mode of cosmo-ontological relation reveals a vertical emanating relationship (which, as we have seen, he also likens to the shining of the sun) which starts with Intellect and flows downward: with Plotinus (though remaining neutral for now – until we turn to our analysis of Israeli’s “by power and will” mode – on the question of God’s role in all of this), Israeli envisions a great chain of being flowing downward from Intellect through Soul and ultimately to Nature. And, by way of elaborating this vision, Israeli (drawing in part on what I will show below to be Pseudo-Empedoclean traditions) elaborates on this essentially Plotinian insight in ways that we don’t see in the pages of Plotinus: he speaks not only of lights (a common emanation image) but also of shadow (not part of the “ordinary” Neoplatonic discourse), as he also focuses on “nesting substantialities” – viz. the idea (Plotinian in content, though not in terminology) that substances are rooted for their very substantiality in the emanating layer above them – or, to put it more specifically: the idea that each lower emanated effect is rooted – in terms of its essence, specificity, and substantiality (see points 2, 3, 4 above in connection to Text 1) – in its emanating source.

We can now better understand not only the deeply Plotinian character of Israeli’s “essential and substantial” mode, but why – and in what sense – Israeli would call this emanating relation an “essential and substantial” relation.<sup>10</sup> We

<sup>10</sup> It might be noted that Ibn Gabirol shares this unique approach to Neoplatonism, including a sensitivity to lights and shadow, as well as an even more sustained elaboration on “nesting substantialities”. For an in-depth analysis of this “nesting” idea – including conceptual comparisons and contrasts with more well-known Aristotelian, Platonic and Neoplatonic systems – see Pessin 2010 and my forthcoming manuscript on Ibn Gabirol. While I offer my analysis of “nesting substantialities” as part of my study of the much more complex and sustained “metaphysics of matter” in Ibn Gabirol, my analysis applies to this aspect of Israeli as well.

may now also already have a sense of why I opt to categorize this “essential and substantial” mode of relation in Israeli as “mediated emanation”: the relation is mediated vis-à-vis the relationship of a given substance to God, just as we find is true of emanating hypostases below the level of Intellect in ordinary Plotinian emanation. For Israeli as for Plotinus, hypostases from the level of Intellect downward are “mediated” vis-à-vis their relationship to the divine source in that, in following Intellect, they are blocked from “direct contact,” as it were, with the divine source. And here, in Israeli, that Plotinian idea is only emphasized further by the sense that there is a shadow – rooted in and related to Intellect in ways that will become clearer below – that casts itself upon all lower realities. The shadow imagery in Israeli only emphasizes for us the Plotinian distance of all lower realities from – and in this sense, mediated relationship to – God.<sup>11</sup>

It is precisely in this sense, then, that Israeli speaks of the “ray and light flow[ing] from the shadow.” In way of even better understanding this idea – and in way of better appreciating Israeli’s “essential and substantial” mode as a uniquely Pseudo-Empedoclean approach to (and supplementing of) the ordinary Neoplatonic great chain of being – consider Israeli’s emphasis, in another text, on the two simple substances at the root of all things:

#### Text 2:

Aristotle the philosopher and master of the wisdom of the Greeks said: The beginning of all roots is two simple substances: one of them is first matter, which receives form and is known to the philosophers as the root of roots. It is the first substance which subsists in itself and is the substratum of diversity. The other is substantial form, which is ready to impregnate matter. It is perfect wisdom, pure radiance, and clear splendour, by the conjunction of which with first matter the nature and form of intellect came into being, because it [intellect] is composed of them [matter and form].<sup>12</sup>

Here, Israeli identifies an originary matter and form at the core of the great chain of being, an idea that marks him as part of the “Pseudo-Empedoclean” tradition. In looking at Israeli, Ibn Gabirol, Ibn Hasday, and others, scholars have identified as “Pseudo-Empedoclean” the elaboration on some kind of a first, pure, supernal matter – itself often coupled (as in this case) with a first, pure, supernal form. Often this pure form and matter are presented (as in this case) as parallel entities (though the question always remains as to whether these are

<sup>11</sup> We might note that this idea of shadow, while not a central theme in Plotinian discourse, can be itself rooted in Plotinus’ own occasional emphasis on “intelligible matter” as the “first moment,” as it were, of Intellect, marking the break from unity to duality, and, as such, marking the chasm between even Intellect and God. See Plotinus’ *Enneads* 2.4.1-5, 5.4.2 and 5.5.4, and Dillon 1992.

<sup>12</sup> Isaac Israeli, *Mantua Text*, § I; cited in Stern 1983, p. 66.

theorized as separate entities, or simply as the constitutive “parts” of Intellect). The details of this tradition are complex and murky (we have no firm sense of how, if at all, the many related-yet-different Jewish and Muslim “Empedoclean” traditions relate to each other or to Empedocles’ actual writings – though the dual “matter plus form” emphasis in the texts in question does seem to resonate with Empedocles’ own dual “love and strife” formulation). In light of all these uncertainties, we will not try to iron out all the conceptual wrinkles, and will simply note here that often in this tradition (as can be seen even more emphatically in Ibn Gabirol), it is the pure matter in particular which is described as a reality “between” God and Intellect in the regular Neoplatonic depiction of the great chain of being.<sup>13</sup> In such contexts, pure matter emerges both as higher than and as the emanating source for form.

While Israeli’s emphasis in Text 2 seems, rather, to be on a “parallel” relationship between first form and first matter (as “horizontal partners,” as it were), it seems clear that even Israeli is informed by the idea of pure matter’s elevation over form, as can be seen in his claim in Text 1 that ray and light flow from shadow. For, taking cues from the text as well as cues from other Ps. Empedoclean texts,<sup>14</sup> if we correlate Israeli’s shadow with matter, and if we correlate Israeli’s rays/light with form, we find in Text 1’s claim of ray and light flowing from the shadow the precisely Ps. Empedoclean idea of forms emanating from matter (or at least from a shadow cast by matter).

Notice how this sensitivity to pure matter’s emanative elevation over form not only helps us better contextualize (and as such, better understand) Israeli’s claim (in Text 1) that ray and light flow from shadow, but also helps us reconcile Israeli’s view across texts. For consider the following apparent conflict between Text 1 and 2: While Text 1 identifies the “root” of things in the “ray and light” (corresponding to form alone), Text 2 identifies the “root” of things in form and matter (corresponding to ray and light on the one hand and shadow on the other). One solution to this apparent conflict would be to remind ourselves that Neoplatonists follow a method (one to which will turn in much more detail in the next section) which admits of multiple voicings and even often embraces paradox; perhaps we might root this in the reminder in Plato’s *Timaeus* that in matters of cosmology we are ultimately at best in the limited linguistic and conceptual terrain of “likely accounts”; and so, we might suggest that *Timaeus*, Plotinus, and Israeli all operate with metaphorical languages which merely beckon to the

<sup>13</sup> Though in some texts, the emphasis shifts to a duality even “within” this first matter.

<sup>14</sup> Correlating “light” and form is a common Neoplatonic move; for further textual support in particular for the correlation between matter and shadow, see my studies of Ibn Gabirol – and in particular, Ibn Gabirol’s Ps. Empedoclean emendation of the Neoplatonic Return to enmattered-Intellect as entering an “illuminating shadow”; see section 3 of Pessin 2010, and my forthcoming manuscript on Ibn Gabirol.

truths, and that, in such a context, we should expect a fluidity of images (including the possibility of contradictory descriptions).

Upon closer look, though, and after reminding ourselves of Israeli’s Ps. Empedoclean sense of pure matter’s emanative elevation over form (as evidenced in his claim that ray and light emanate from shadow), there is another solution to our apparent textual conflict: viz. the realization that there is no conflict at all. For, once properly read in light of the Ps. Empedoclean sense of pure matter’s elevation over form, both texts can easily be seen as describing the root of all things in form and matter, and ultimately, the root of all things in matter: While Text 2 talks of the root of all things in form and matter, our Ps. Empedoclean context (seen in Israeli’s own sense of ray and light flowing from shadow) reminds us that actually, all things are rooted in form which is itself rooted in the pure matter (or at least, in its shadow). And, while Text 1 says that all things are rooted in the “ray and light” of Intellect, it goes on to say that said “ray and light” (form) are themselves rooted in Intellect’s shadow (the pure matter at the core of Intellect itself). The Ps. Empedoclean context of both texts allows us to see a single worldview emerging in Israeli, in spite of different emphases across his texts.

The Ps. Empedoclean context also allows us to grasp the full sense in which we have opted to speak of Israeli’s “essential and substantial” mode of relation as “mediated emanation”: As we’ve seen above, as in regular Plotinian contexts, the emanating relationship between hypostases is mediated vis-à-vis their relationship to God in that they all unfold beneath the level of Intellect, and, as such, through the mediation of Intellect; and, as we’ve seen above too, the Ps. Empedoclean emphasis on a pure matter “casting its shadow” down into and below Intellect adds rhetorical emphasis on the extent of the mediation (indicating too, we might add, that even Intellect itself – and not just those hypostases and realities below Intellect – is “mediated,” in the sense now of “blocked-by-the-shadow-of-pure-matter” from God).<sup>15</sup> All emanations are in this sense highlighted in their mediated distance from God, as taking place within the shadow of the Ps. Empedoclean supernal matter – a “veil” of sorts which casts its shadow into Intellect and from Intellect onto the great chain of being, emphasizing the extent to which all things are at a remove from God’s direct “influence and action” (the other mode of relation to which we will turn below).

To see this “mediated” emanation in action, consider Israeli’s description of Sphere (*al-falak*). The last of the intelligibles, and associated with Nature inas-

<sup>15</sup> This point is key too Ibn Gabirol; see Pessin 2010 and my forthcoming manuscript on Ibn Gabirol. We may speak of the shadow cast by First Matter, in this context, as at once a shadow “cast below” Intellect (and so “Intellect’s shadow” in the sense of the shadow below Intellect), as well as in the sense of a shadow “in” the internal reality of Intellect itself (and so “Intellect’s shadow” too in the sense of the shadow which is part of Intellect’s own being).

much as it is the final divide between the spiritual and natural worlds, Sphere is described as fallen and far from the supernal light; it is in this regard related to God – and even from the other spiritual substances – in a “mediated” way:

... since it derives its light through the mediation of shade and shadow of intellect, [it] is coarse, affected by ignorance ...<sup>16</sup>

As in ordinary Plotinian emanation, so too for Israeli's mode of “essential and substantial” relation as “mediated emanation”: Sphere emanates ultimately from the divine source, but only through “the mediation of Intellect,” itself further understood in this Ps. Empedoclean context in terms of “the mediation of shades and shadow.”

Emphasizing further the idea of “mediated emanation,” we learn additionally of Sphere – even with its “perfect” circular motions and quintessential nature – that:

... since it is at a great distance from the true light and unmixed brilliance, on account of the numerous intermediaries between them, [it] has heavy shadow and darkness, assumes bodily shape and is delimited, and executes the perfect, viz. circular, movement ...<sup>17</sup>

Clearly, for Israeli – as for Plotinus – the dynamic of emanation is in part the dynamic of ever-descending realities marking ever-increasing distances from – and mediation vis-à-vis their relation to – the divine source.

### “Creation Talk” as Apophatic “Emphasis”? The Relation “by Power and Will” as Plotinian “Unmediated Emanation” in a non-Plotinian Guise

We must now turn to the question of God's direct role in this emanating schema: does God simply emanate (as in Plotinus), or does Israeli envision a more “scripturally informed” image of God's direct relation to the cosmos? This is the disputed mode of cosmo-ontological relation which Israeli describes as coming about “by power and will by way of influence and action” and which Altmann and Wolfson have respectively identified as different non-Plotinian mechanisms (viz. creation *ex nihilo* in a non-emanative sense and “conscious emanation” respectively).

Before moving on, it is worth clarifying (without going into too much detail) what exactly the debate is between Altmann's, Wolfson's and my readings. We all three agree that Israeli uses the terminology of “creation,” but what should be noted further is that we also all three agree that Israeli is committed to a concept of “creation *ex nihilo*”; for, in his *Book of Definitions* (here following al-Kindi

<sup>16</sup> Israeli, *The Book of Substances*, Fragment 4, fol. 10r, as translated in Altmann and Stern 1958, p. 89.

<sup>17</sup> Israeli, *The Book of Substances*, Fragment 4, fol. 10v; see Altmann and Stern, 1958, p. 90.

and other traditions), Israeli defines the Arabic “*al-ibdā' wa'l-ikhtirā'*” (often translated into English as “innovation and making anew”) as “*ta'ayīs al-aysāt min lays*”<sup>18</sup> – the bringing to being of existences from “nothing” (*lays*) – or, we may gloss: creation *ex nihilo*.<sup>19</sup> Altmann, Wolfson and I all three agree that there is in Israeli the concept of “creation *ex nihilo*”, as we additionally all three agree that this concept is tied to his mode of relation “by power and will by way of influence and action.” The debate then (which I summarily addressed at the outset in less detail) is more accurately a debate about what is *meant* in Israeli by this concept of creation *ex nihilo* (and its related notion of the mode of relation “by power and will by way of influence and action”). Put in these terms, the debate is as follows:

Altmann understands Israeli's concept of “creation *ex nihilo*” (and the related notion of the mode of relation “by power and will by way of influence and action”) as a non-emanative relation between God and the world,

Wolfson understands Israeli's concept of “creation *ex nihilo*” (and the related notion of the mode of relation “by power and will by way of influence and action”) as an emanative relation that is a kind of “conscious and volitional emanation” between God and the world,

I understand Israeli's concept of “creation *ex nihilo*” (and the related notion of the mode of relation “by power and will by way of influence and action”) as good old-fashioned non-conscious Plotinian emanation between God and the world.

With this better understanding of the precise terms of the debate, let us address some particular claims in Israeli about this unique mode of relation. Emphasizing this supernal grade of cosmo-ontological relation, Israeli speaks of an originary light emanated “from power and will” which is different from the light that issues from shadows in the normal downward dance of the great chain of being (which is to say, the light issuing forth from “power and will” indicates for us something separate from the “mediated emanation” of the “essential and substantial” mode). This light, we learn, directly issues from the “Creator and Maker”, and as such indicates a mode of cosmo-ontological relation more sub-

<sup>18</sup> For discussion of this, see Altmann and Stern, 1958, pp. 68-74.

<sup>19</sup> For Arabic, see Hirschfeld 1902 (a collection of Judeo-Arabic fragments of Israeli's *Book of Definitions*); for this particular claim about “creation *ex nihilo*”, see p. 693, line 5. For English, see Altmann and Stern, p. 66 (and for Altmann and Stern commentary on the notion of “creation *ex nihilo*” in al-Kindi and other key sources- pp. 68-74). This is expressly discussed throughout Wolfson 1973.

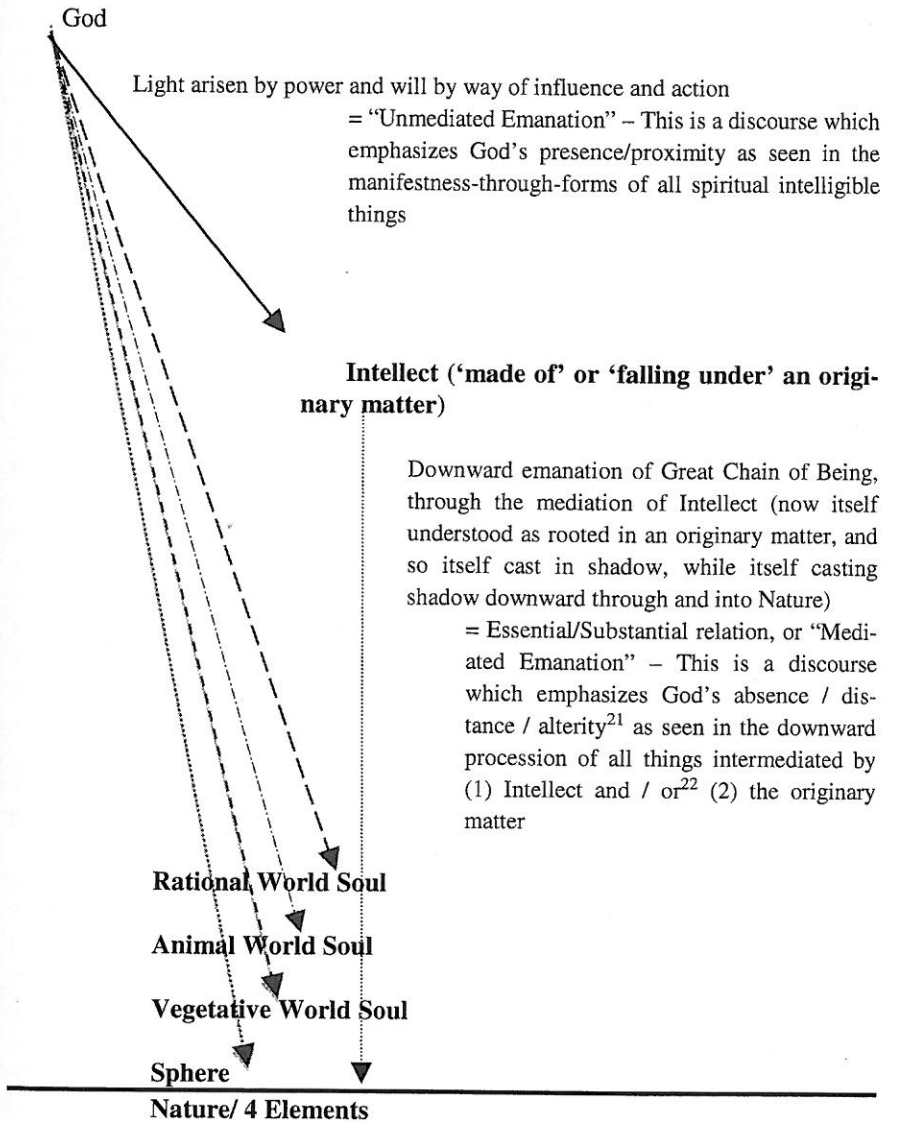


lime than the “essential and substantial” emanative mode. (This light, we are told, does, though, share one thing in common with the descending emanating light of the “essential and substantial” relation: while each light has a separate cosmic origin, they both indeed “diminish” as they get further from their respective sources).

Following on Israeli’s overt description of the “essential and substantial” mode in terms of mediation, we find repeated emphasis on the relation “by power and will” being unmediated, marking, as it were, God’s direct relation to the substance in question. This mode is used, in particular, to describe not only the relation between God and Intellect, but between God and all the “spiritual substances” which are said to be directly made by (*makawwana min*) the *power and will* “without the mediation of any agent except the Creator, may He be exalted.”<sup>20</sup>

We have already seen that the mediated relation is uncontestedly understood as Plotinian emanation. Here, I suggest the further sense in which the “unmediated relation” too must be understood as Plotinian emanation – not so much as a different kind of Plotinian emanation, but as Plotinian emanation with a different emphasis. The idea of “emphasis” is key here, and actually helps us reinterpret “emanation talk” across the board, including the “mediated emanation” of our previous section, as well as the “unmediated emanation” of the current section: Within a Neoplatonic framework (and revealing a particular set of Neoplatonic methodological outlooks), we may speak of emanation – itself already always a metaphorical way of addressing something beyond conception in a Neoplatonic context – as taking on two distinct “emphases” as part of what we might describe as an expressly apophatic exploration of God’s two compresent realities: On the one hand, the Neoplatonist is struck by God in his transcendence, and in this spirit sets out – through a discourse of “mediated emanation” – to emphasize God’s distance from (or absence from) the world. This is the emphasis of “mediated emanation” (or the mode of “essential and substantial” relation). On the other hand, the Neoplatonist is struck by God in his immanence, and in this spirit sets out – through a discourse of “unmediated emanation” – to emphasize God’s proximity to (or presence in) the world. This is the emphasis of “unmediated emanation” (or the relation “by power and will”, or, as we have seen, “creation *ex nihilo*”). In this regard, consider the following diagram:

<sup>20</sup> Israeli, *The Book of Substances*, Fragment 5, Altmann and Stern 1958, p. 91; Arabic in Stern 1983b (essay X in Zimmerman 1983), p. 27, 12v, 6-7 lines in.



<sup>21</sup> Connecting this up expressly with themes that I develop in Ibn Gabirol’s metaphysics of matter, I would note that this emphasis on God’s distance/absence can alternatively be expressed as an emphasis on God’s Presence-qua-Hidden-ness. I explore the implications of this in my forthcoming manuscript on Ibn Gabirol.

<sup>22</sup> I say “and / or” so as to include even Intellect in this category: while Intellect is not distant from God due to the intermediation of Intellect, it can be said, nonetheless, to be distant from God due to the intermediation of pure matter.

My description of Israeli's two modes as mediated and unmediated emanation – and in particular, my description of the mode “by power and will” as “unmediated emanation” – is my way of highlighting (*pace* Altmann's and Wolfson's invocation of completely non-Plotinian concepts) that we are in an entirely Plotinian space. In particular, we are in a Plotinian apophatic space in which God is addressed through two competing modes of discourse – one (the mediation-focused discourse of “essential and substantial relation”) aimed at emphasizing God's alterity (God-qua-transcendence), the other (the discourse of “by power and will” with its emphasis on lack of mediation) aimed at emphasizing God's proximity (God-qua-immanence). In this sense, we may say the talk of “two modes of relation” is less about denoting two causal mechanisms *per se*, and is more about engaging the reader with two perspectives (by way of two emphases) on the ineffable relationship of God to the world. On the one hand, “mediated emanation” (the “essential and substantial” relation) relates the reader to God's transcendence (absence/distance/alterity) by imagistically drawing her attention to the en-shadowed descent from Intellect downward (a process which emphasizes the “mediation” between an emanating effect and God both through the intermediating of Intellect, and, in Israeli's Ps. Empedocleanized version of Plotinus, through the further intermediating of the supernal “first matter”). On the other hand, “unmediated emanation” (the relation “by power and will by way of influence and action”, as well as “creation *ex nihilo*”) relates the reader to God's immanence (presence/proximity) by imagistically drawing her attention to the fullness and immediacy of God's wisdom and light qua forms in the manifest-ness of spiritual realities. On this reading, there is, in Israeli's talk of two modes, no non-Plotinian creation *ex nihilo* and no non-Plotinian “conscious emanation.” There is only a deeply Plotinian insight about God's simultaneous presence and absence.<sup>23</sup>

Sensitive to the Neoplatonic apophatic context, we are now invited to treat creation *ex nihilo* no longer, *pace* Altmann, as a reference to a non-Plotinian non-emanationist mechanism, and no longer, *pace* Wolfson, as a reference to a non-Plotinian “conscious and deliberative” mechanism; we are now, on the contrary, invited to treat “creation *ex nihilo*” as part of a discourse aimed at emphasizing (in way of bringing the reader to an appreciation for – and possibly even an experience of) God-qua-presence – the pure “nothing” of God in its raw unmediated relation to the world. This is what I mean by speaking, in my treatment of Israeli, of “creation *ex nihilo*” as “unmediated emanation.” Taken in this way, the talk of “creation *ex nihilo*” (or the talk of a relation “by power and will”) is

<sup>23</sup> We might similarly emphasize that the Neoplatonic cycle of “Remaining, Procession and Reversion” does not refer to “three mechanisms” as much as *engage the reader in a tripart way of analyzing* (or, way of thinking about – or even, relating to) any single reality; on this point, see the very last section of my forthcoming essay “A Platonic Universe,” in *The Blackwell History of Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, edited by John Inglis, Dan Frank, and Taneli Kukkonen (Blackwell).

an apophatic reflection on God-qua-presence – a reflection, of course, which can be understood as purely Plotinian in emphasis (even if Plotinus himself does not use the language of “creation *ex nihilo*,” “power,” or “will” *per se*).

In characterizing the relation “by power and will” in terms of “unmediated emanation” understood in the above sense, I am at once able to provide a Plotinian alternative to Altmann and Wolfson,<sup>24</sup> as I am also – in offering a purely Plotinian way of reading Israeli's two modes – able to provide an alternative to Altmann and Wolfson which takes more seriously the methodological insight addressed above, viz.: different terminologies do not always mean different overall conceptual spaces; in other words, just because Israeli uses the languages of “creation *ex nihilo*,” will, and power does not mean that he is not doing something deeply Plotinian – in this case, giving voice to the sense of God's presence in and proximity (in this sense, his unmediated relation) to all things.

My reading also improves upon what we might call “throw the towel in” interpretations of Israeli – such as can be found in Guttman and Vajda<sup>25</sup> – which conclude, in rather mysterious fashion, that Israeli inexplicably holds a combination of “creation” and “emanation,” without any real sense of what that would amount to. My reading, on the contrary, takes seriously the possibility of understanding why Israeli combines both concepts, and the sense in which he does so. My reading urges us to consider the importance of approaching Israeli with a deep enough sensitivity to his Neoplatonic context – his fascination with God's paradoxical presence and absence, and his resulting Neoplatonic apophatic dialectic-of-oppositions. Talk of “creation” (which is to say, talk of “by power and will”) and talk of “emanation” (which is to say, talk of an “essential and substantial” relation) are precisely cases in point of two dialectical poles of an apophatic reflection on the paradox of God. I might here add that while one can certainly find appreciation for apophasis as well as for “dialectics of opposition” in a number of scholarly treatments of various thinkers, it is less common for us to read “creation” and “emanation” (especially in non-mystical figures such as Israeli and Ibn Gabirol) as a strategy for engaging readers in two poles of an apophatic dialectic (itself a way of engaging readers with the ineffable God), and more common for us to read talk of “creation” and “emanation” (again, espe-

<sup>24</sup> It is interesting to note that while both Altmann and Wolfson address the dynamic of “mediated” and “unmediated” in their working through of Israeli's two modes, they both opt to sidestep that dynamic in favor of pinpointing the key to the distinction between Israeli's two modes elsewhere (creation *ex nihilo* on the one hand, and will – as “conscious, volitional emanation” – on the other). Altmann goes so far as to relay Avicenna's use of al-Kindi's own treatment of *ibdā'* as having two meanings, the first “creation *ex nihilo*”, and the second the coming to be of something not through intermediation; Altmann glosses: “The addition: ‘and not through the intermediary of something,’ as well as the whole of the second meaning, does not concern us” (Altmann and Stern 1958, p. 73).

<sup>25</sup> See above, note 5.



cially in non-mystical figures) simply as a way of literally denoting two competing causal mechanisms. Here, I am suggesting that Israeli is best understood as talking of "creation" and "emanation" not in an attempt to "inform" us about this or that causal structure, but, rather, as part of a Neoplatonic attempt to engage readers with the compresent paradox of their divine source.<sup>26</sup>

I might additionally note that, in its sensitivity to Israeli's Neoplatonic context, my reading is not only the only real way to make sense of Israeli's general tendency to talk in one breath of creation and emanation, but the only real way to make sense of cases where Israeli overtly describes one and the same existent in terms of *both* "essential and substantial" relation *and* the relation "by power and will." In fact, we need only look as far as Israeli's description of Sphere to help us see why neither Altmann's nor Wolfson's reading of Israeli's two modes is correct (or at least why neither of their readings allows us to charitably piece together Israeli's view as a meaningful, consistent whole). For, as we have seen, on the one hand, Israeli describes Sphere (along with Intellect and Soul) as one of God's intelligibles (*ma'aqûlât*), one of the "spiritual substances" directly made by the Power and Will "without the mediation of any agent except the Creator, may He be exalted."<sup>27</sup> This is a description of Sphere's coming about by "power and will."

However, on the other hand, Israeli, as we have also seen, describes Sphere – very *unlike* Intellect and Soul – in degraded terms, and, as such, in mediated terms. Of Sphere we have also learned that

... since it derives its light through the mediation of shade and shadow of intellect, [it] is coarse, affected by ignorance ...<sup>28</sup>

and that,

... since it is at a great distance from the true light and unmixed brilliance, on account of the numerous intermediaries between them, [it] has heavy shadow and darkness, assumes bodily shape and is delimited, and executes the perfect, viz. circular, movement ...<sup>29</sup>

This is a description of Sphere's coming about by the "essential and substantial mode."

Notice how both Altmann's and Wolfson's treatments of the two modes in Israeli break down when faced with the "double description" of Sphere inasmuch

as both Altmann and Wolfson treat Israeli's two modes as mutually exclusive mechanisms: On Altmann's view of Israeli's two modes, either something is "created *ex nihilo*" (in the sense of a non-emanative relation), or it comes about by emanation; given the nature of these two relations for Altmann, it is clear that they are mutually exclusive mechanisms, and, as such, it is not at all clear what it would mean for Israeli to suggest that one and the same thing (in this case, Sphere) both is and is not "created *ex nihilo*" – how can we say that Sphere is at once emanated but not emanated? On Wolfson's view of Israeli's two modes, either something issues by "conscious and volitional" emanation from God (i.e. Wolfson's sense of "creation *ex nihilo*"), or it comes about by unconscious emanation; given the nature of these two relations for Wolfson, it is clear that they are mutually exclusive mechanisms, and, as such, it is not at all clear what it would mean for Israeli to suggest that one and the same thing (in this case, Sphere) both is and is not "consciously emanated" – how can we say that Sphere is at once consciously willed to pour forth and not consciously willed to pour forth?

Understood, on the contrary, in terms of my thesis, there is no longer any problem with Israeli describing Sphere at one and same time in terms of both modes of relation – in fact, we should expect nothing less.<sup>30</sup> While one might or might not have a personal taste for philosophy which gives way to this kind of apophatic dialectic, one must at least charitably (and imaginatively<sup>31</sup>) see how Israeli's dual talk of creation and emanation – as well as his "double description" of Sphere in terms of both modes of relation – makes perfect sense within his Neoplatonic (and fully Plotinian) context.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>30</sup> We might here add a word about the significance of Israeli opting to provide this "double description" of Sphere in particular: since Sphere is a liminal being on the threshold between spirit and nature, there is a special point of emphasizing its dual reality in terms of both modes – even though, in light of the theory I have developed throughout this study, all the intelligibles – especially all the intelligibles below Intellect, but even Intellect as itself following in the shadow of the primal matter – can equally be said to come about "by way of power and will" and by the "essential and substantial" relation.

<sup>31</sup> While the subject of another study, one might here reflect on Dewey's (and others') philosophical call to ethics through imagination: Just as Dewey asks us to engage our neighbors imaginatively (i.e. putting ourselves "in their shoes" in a true sustained effort to empathize with them and engage with them civically, ethically, and as such we might add, charitably), so too I am in general intent on emphasizing – especially in the case of Neoplatonic cosmo-ontology which many scholars and readers find archaic/arcane – the importance of engaging the texts imaginatively in the spirit of reading them charitably.

<sup>32</sup> I would like to express my gratitude to Kevin Corrigan and to the late Stephen Strange for organizing the conference at which I presented an earlier first draft of this paper, as I would also like to thank the conference participants for their insightful comments, conversations, and generally spirited comradery around "issues Neoplatonic."

<sup>26</sup> For an overview of apophysis in general, and of the dialectical play of opposites (though not as a reading, as I am suggesting, of a "dual discourse of creation and emanation"), see Sells 1994. For a sustained exploration of the related conceptual dynamics of God's revelation through concealment, and concealment through revelation in especially Jewish mystical texts and contexts, see Elliot Wolfson's important and extensive studies of Jewish mystical dialectics, including Wolfson 1994 and 2009.

<sup>27</sup> Israeli, *The Book of Substances*, Fragment 5, Altmann and Stern 1958, p. 91; Arabic in Stern 1983b (essay X in Zimmerman 1983), p. 27, 12v, 6-7 lines in.

<sup>28</sup> Israeli, *The Book of Substances*, Fragment 4, fol. 10r, Altmann and Stern 1958, p. 89.

<sup>29</sup> Israeli, *The Book of Substances*, Fragment 4, fol. 10v; Altmann and Stern 1958, p. 90.

Kevin Corrigan · John D. Turner · Peter Wakefield (eds.)

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