

MATTER, FORM, AND THE CORPOREAL WORLD

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I. INTRODUCTION

Following variously on Pythagorean, Platonic, and Aristotelian traditions, together with biblical, rabbinic, and mystical insights, Jewish philosophies have envisioned matter and form as the necessary play of opposites, at once comprising the very fabric of reality, and signifying a deep cosmic struggle between corporeality and spirit. In Jewish as in Greek philosophical sources, matter marks a kind of not-yet-being moment in the metaphysical analysis of things,¹ and in this sense, inspires three very different kinds of discourses.

In the first place, as mark of not-yet-being, matter emerges in various contexts in a decidedly negative light – as secondary and inferior to form (the mark of being), it is the mark of privation and failure and even the source of evil itself. We will address this kind of discourse with examples from Maimonides, Gersonides, and Philo.

In the second place, matter, as mark of not-yet-being, is addressed in a neutral light, without any negative (or positive) connotations, in various cosmogonic, metaphysical, and scientific contexts. Two good examples are discussions of creation on the one hand, and discussions of Aristotelian matter and prime matter, on the other. Seen by some Jewish theorists alternatively as the something first created by God or as the something (itself eternal and uncreated) out of which God creates all else, matter emerges in a neutral light when it signals the mysteries of [pre-]creation, standing as a cosmic building block in need of description. We find that matter emerges in neutral terms too in analyses of Aristotelian physics and metaphysics, and in particular, in discussions that are part of larger Greek-into-Islamic philosophical interpretations of Aristotle's notion of prime matter. We will sample these "neutral" matter discourses in the respective creation accounts of Nahmanides, Gersonides, and Abraham ibn Ezra, and in hylomorphic and prime matter analyses found in Maimonides and Crescas.

In the third place, matter is discussed in a range of positive lights within Jewish thought. We will address a range of positive treatments, including the notion of

celestial (vs. terrestrial) matter, Ibn Gabirol's identification and exaltation of a supernal grade of matter (with a decided sense of not-yet-being's superiority to being), Simha of Troyes' Stoic-inspired divinization of matter, and Spinoza's pantheistic vision of God-as-nature.

II. NEGATIVE MATTER DISCOURSES: THEMES OF FALLING, FAILING, AND DESICCATION IN MAIMONIDES, GERSONIDES, AND PHILO

[And God cast upon Adam a deep sleep, and he slept; and He took one of his ribs, and he enclosed it with flesh from below (Gen. 2:21)]. The essence and meaning of this remark is that *one of his ribs* tends towards matter. There are two aspects to the soul: an aspect that tends towards matter, and another that tends towards form. The aspect that tends towards matter is that of which it was said, *and He enclosed it with flesh from below*. That is to say, it acts only by means of the bodily devices. Understand this very well.

— *Midrash ha-Hefetz*²

The association of materiality with ontological, epistemological, and moral shortcoming is commonplace in the history of philosophy, and Jewish tradition is here no exception. We may root this negative idea about matter loosely in Plato, more loosely still in Aristotle, and rather firmly in Plotinus and the Neoplatonic tradition that he inspires. Turning to Plato's *Timaeus* we uncover a chaotic nothingness reigned in finally by the principles of reason. Although not talking of matter per se, the *Timaeus*' description of a recalcitrant, unreasonable chaos marks a not-yet-being that stands in decided contrast to the order of true being.³ In this way, the Timaeian chaos may be conceptually aligned with the Platonic transitory (because steeped in this not-yet-being) Realm of Becoming, a realm markedly opposed to the true Realm of Being — a Realm of Forms that is a reality more real than the sensory, corporeal world in which we live. For Plato, only the Forms — the Ideas or intelligible essences of things — are real, with things in this world emerging as mere shadows: where the formal stands in for the true, the bright, the original, and the real; the objects in our everyday world emerge as the mere shadow images of the real. On this picture, the only truly real substances are pure forms, the markers of intellect standing in contrast to the chaotic not-yet-being of the Timaeian receptacle-of-becoming.

Turning to Jewish philosophical sources, we find this sort of Platonic privileging of formal reality as early as Philo. Where Plato speaks of a Realm of Forms (or, as in the *Timaeus*, of an intelligible paradigm external to the Creator Demiurge), Philo substitutes a Divine Mind containing within itself the eternal and unchanging

intelligibles. Manifesting themselves from within God's mind in the form of divine speech (*Logos*), these intelligibles make their way into the world, enforming all of reality with divine order. So focused is Philo on the intelligible realm that he interprets the entire seven days of creation in Genesis as referring to the unfolding of the archetypal ideas within God's mind.⁴ Clearly the corporeal realm is, as for Plato, secondary. This devaluation of corporeality and sensory existence is further seen in Philo's epistemological focus on intellect as the human's crowning perfection (in fact, that in virtue of which humans mirror God's own *Logos*):⁵ Knowing intelligible truths is the hallmark of perfected human being, superior in every way to sensory and passion human endeavors.⁶ Although passions and sensation are necessary on our path toward knowledge, it is ultimately knowledge — an entry into the realm of forms — that defines our truest being.

Although Aristotle rejects the Platonic other-worldly privileging of forms over regular everyday substances, there remains in his metaphysics a privileging of form over matter. Officially introducing us to a principle of matter in contrast to a principle of form, Aristotle weaves a complex hylomorphic ontology (an account that describes all substances — except minds — as matter (*hyle*)+form (*morphe*) composites), treating form and matter as mutually necessary and interdependent philosophical principles. In this way, Aristotle is able in turn to treat the matter+form objects in this world as real (and, as in fact, the most real) substances. Even with this metaphysical turn, Aristotle's philosophical vocabulary still privileges — albeit with different implications than in Plato — form over matter. In addition to championing matter+form composites as examples of true substances, Aristotle speaks too in his *Metaphysics* of form (or essence) as the best candidate for substance. After speaking of each of matter, matter+form, and form alone as candidates for substance (see *Metaphysics* VII.3 and XII.3), Aristotle concludes that matter alone cannot be substance (*Metaphysics* VII.3, 1029a26–30), and that we ought to focus our attentions on form alone; as Aristotle notes,

[T]he substance, then, which consists of both — I mean of matter and form — may be dismissed, since it is posterior and obvious... We must consider the third type [i.e. form], for this is the most perplexing.⁷

To be sure, the precise meaning of the analysis in *Metaphysics* VII that follows this remark is extremely difficult to pin down; suffice it to say that, in spite of Aristotle's hylomorphic and non-Platonic sensitivities, one can certainly imagine later interpreters finding (rightly or wrongly) textual support for anti-matter sentiments in Aristotle's above claims, and in such additional seemingly form-centric reminders

as, "a particular thing is considered to be nothing other than its own substance, and the essence [*to ti ein einai*] is called the substance [*ousia*] of the thing."⁸

We have thus seen how both Platonic and Aristotelian theory – in spite of their important differences, in spite of Plato's not actually speaking of matter per se, and even in spite of Aristotle's hylomorphism – may be seen as encouraging anti-matter sentiments on the part of later interpreters. In thinking in this way of sources, we must not, of course, leave out the influence of Plotinus. At the heart of a trajectory of Neoplatonic ideas that influence many centuries of medieval Jewish thinkers, Plotinus treats matter as the source of evil in the cosmos.⁹ Reflecting on the not-yet-being of matter as the mark of privation, Plotinus denigrates matter – the ultimate receiver – as in itself a nothing that lacks all form, and that, as such, in itself lacks both being and goodness. Of the nature of this lack, we learn that,

That which has nothing because it is in want, or rather is want, must necessarily be evil. For this thing is not want of wealth but want of thought, want of virtue, of beauty, of strength, shape, form, quality. Must it not then be ugly? Must it not be utterly vile, utterly evil?¹⁰

Although this set of reflections on matter–evil is not part of the Arabic Plotinian materials that we know to have directly influenced medieval Islamic and Jewish thinkers,¹¹ we can certainly speak in general of a Neoplatonic influence on the Jewish philosophical denigration of matter. Looking to some of the actual Arabic Plotinian materials, we can, for example, see a theological alignment of God with principles of form and intellect, an at least indirect way of supporting (in line with Timaeon sentiments addressed previously) the further denigration of the material and corporeal.¹²

Rehearsing the sorts of Platonic, Aristotelian, and Neoplatonic impulses we have outlined previously, we can understand the decidedly negative outlook on matter and corporeality in such Jewish sources as the Yemenite quote from the *Midrash ha-Hefetz* with which we started this section and the Maimonidean tradition in which that quote is itself directly rooted. Reading the *Midrash ha-Hefetz* quote in conversation with Maimonides' own treatment of Genesis in his *Guide of the Perplexed*, what we are being asked to "understand well" is that the fall of Adam (itself a symbolic expression of the fall of all humankind) is rooted in the materiality of body, itself coded as the weakness of human flesh. As Maimonides makes clear at the very outset of the *Guide*, it is the gift of intellect that is our human proprium, marking our unique essence and that in virtue of which we are said (at Genesis 1:27) to have been created "in the image" of God.¹³ Intellect links us to God in an essential way, as God too is an intellect (albeit of a much purer grade). On this picture, the fall of human beings – allegorically captured in the Genesis account of

the fall of Adam – is found in neglecting this gift of intellect and instead turning toward "desires of the imagination and the pleasures of the corporeal senses."¹⁴

In his laments over the victory of desire, imagination, and corporeal sensuality over intellect, Maimonides identifies matter as the culprit. Ontologically inferior, matter exerts negative epistemological and moral impacts, contributing to human ignorance and, as such, to unfulfilled human lives. Maimonides sees the threat: Drawn into matter's web and pulled away from the paths of intellectual perfection, humans will on their own fail to perfect their souls and will, as such, need a great deal of help if they are to have even a shot at their own human potential for true human happiness. So filthy is the role of materiality in this picture of human struggle that Maimonides likens it to the sexual temptress about whom we are warned at Proverbs 6:25, "Do not lust after her beauty in your heart, and do not let her take you captive with her eyelids." It is in this spirit that we can appreciate Maimonides' description of matter as a married harlot:

She never ceases to seek for another man to substitute for her husband, and she deceives and draws him on in every way until he obtains from her what her husband used to obtain. This is the state of matter.¹⁵

Through the image of sexual exploits that defile the sacred bond of marriage, Maimonides highlights – and casts aspersions on – matter's ontological role as the taker-on of many and changing forms. As we will see later, this fact about matter (viz. that it is a taker-on of changing forms) is actually treated by Maimonides elsewhere in fairly neutral terms: After all, matter in this role enables the world to properly function – it is the principle that accounts for the natural course of generation and corruption in our sublunar world, including such basic natural processes as elemental change. In the philosophical trajectory with which we are currently concerned, though, Maimonides maligns matter's complicity in the flux of change to which this world is subject, seeing, as he does, the extent to which it is the fleeting nature of sensory reality that wreaks havoc on the human soul's capacity to attain true happiness. To fully appreciate the nature of Maimonides' concern with matter in this regard, we are well served to pause and consider Maimonides' decision to treat matter not simply as a harlot, but as a married harlot. The key to understanding Maimonides' concern with matter is found when we follow his lead and think of matter as a "marriage-breaker" in particular – namely, a force that stands in the way of the proper union between two sacredly joined partners.¹⁶ For the careful reader, this image of matter as the breaker of sacred union is alive with special resonance; for, within Maimonides' Neoplatonized Aristotelian epistemology – itself following on an Arabic philosophical tradition in al-Fārābī

and Avicenna – the goal of the human being is understood as the attainment of truths, a state described in particular in that tradition as the “conjunction” (*ittisal*) or “union” with the Active Intellect, a cosmic source of illumination with which the human intellect must join to reach ultimate perfection.¹⁷ Here, the image of a marriage-breaker is poignantly apt, pointing us to the real problem with matter: As the site of privation and change, matter threatens to block our access to that which does not change, namely, the eternal, unchanging truths – the forms that are housed in the Active Intellect. It is in this sense that matter threatens to stand in the way of the human intellect’s final nuptial, its union with its one true mate, namely, the Active Intellect (and in this sense, its union with forms). It is certainly in this very same regard that Maimonides likens matter to an epistemological veil:

Matter is a strong veil preventing the apprehension of that which is separate from matter as it truly is.¹⁸

This Maimonidean denigration of materiality – on the epistemological and moral grounds that it keeps the human soul from actualizing her truest nature and coming best to live “in the image” of God – is indeed the underpinning for the *midrash ha-Hefetz* remarks above, and can be seen at the root of many later texts in the history of Jewish thought.

It is precisely in this spirit that we may approach Gersonides’ allegorical rendering of the Song of Songs. Along with the idea of matter as an epistemological stumbling block, Gersonides’ philosophical commentary reflects on the shortcomings of the material intellect, that as-of-yet unenlightened, pre-knowledge stage of the human which is part of the Greek-into-Islamic tradition of Aristotelian psychology. Treating the Song of Songs as an allegory, Gersonides interprets this biblical poem between a lover and his beloved as, on the one hand, a dialogue between the parts of the human soul, and on the other, a dialogue in particular between the human material intellect and that cosmic principle of enlightenment that we have already seen at play in Maimonides, namely, the Active Intellect. Commenting on verse 2:2 of Song of Songs (“As a lily among thorns, so is my love among the daughters”), Gersonides turns to Genesis 8:21’s claim about the evil inclination of man’s heart and explains:

One who wishes to progress toward the intelligibles must subordinate all the faculties of his soul to the service of his intellect. This will happen when he discards and abandons his material desires and takes from them only what he needs for the maintenance of his body.¹⁹

Here Gersonides allegorically interprets the biblical Song of Songs narrative as subtly laying bare the truths of a Neoplatonized Aristotelian universe in which the

not-yet of materiality – here in the dynamics of the material intellect – is always a mark of failure, a mark of potency whose fruition is seen only and always in the attainment of knowledge – itself seen in the attainment of intelligible forms. Here, deeply subordinate to the fruits of formal being, the not-yet of materiality waits for the perfections of form.

In fact, describing formal being as a kind of fruition is a helpful image to bear in mind. In the contexts we have been examining, we may think of form as the moist, verdant, ripened life force – the waters of life that manifest in lush foliage and fruit, with matter, on the contrary, as the withered site of desiccation in desperate need of watering. On this score, consider Gersonides’ description of the joining of soul’s lower faculties with the material intellect, itself as the first step toward soul’s connecting to Active Intellect. Focusing on themes of foliage, Gersonides comments on Song of Songs 1:14 “My beloved is unto me as a cluster of henna in the vineyards of Ein-Gedi”:

The material intellect is similar to a cluster of henna, which is an imperfect existent, that is, it is the beginning stage of the making of the fruit.²⁰

Playing explicitly with a “desiccation versus moisture” theme, he goes on, in expositing the Song of Songs 1:16 verse “Behold, thou art fair, my beloved, yea, pleasant; also our couch is fresh”:

[The lower faculty of soul, such as imagination, which is like the matter to the material intellect] desires the intellect and yearns to unite with it and provide it with what it needs to progress toward perfection. She [i.e., imagination and/or any other lower faculty of soul] said that her beloved, along with being fair and handsome, is also good and pleasant and that the couch on which they will be joined together *is fresh* and their pleasure will be enhanced upon it. By saying *is fresh* he [i.e., the author of Song of Songs] also referred to the fact that their joining together is fruitful, because freshness and moistness are together the cause of the tree’s giving fruit, whereas dryness is the cause of its not giving fruit; this is true of both plants and animals. Thus, her [i.e., the lower part of the soul’s] desire for him [i.e. material intellect] grows because of his handsomeness and pleasantness and because of the good end achieved through her being joined together with him.²¹

Although to be sure, here it is the material intellect that marks the watery spring of life, there is here nonetheless a decided link between matter and desiccation; for, as Gersonides makes clear, imagination (or any other lower part of soul) is desiccated in relation to material intellect precisely in its being a “faculty of soul which stands in relation to it [i.e., material intellect] in the relation of matter.”²² Here, the lower part of soul is coded as “matter” in relation to the material intellect, and as such, the lower

part of soul is the mark of desiccation, the not-yet that waits for its fruition – here literally on the image of getting greater ontological–epistemological perfection as the process of growing a juicy fruit. Once again, matter is the dry hope (here, we may imagine a seed) that is perfected in the vibrant fruits of knowledge brought to pass through the moist and fresh waters of form.

In fact, Gersonides uses this ‘matter-as-desiccation versus form-as-water-of-life’ theme not only to explore the relation of the lower part of soul (as matter) to soul’s intellectual capacity (the home of form), but also to describe explicitly the ontologically desiccated status of prime matter in relation to the perfections of intellect (found, of course, in its intelligible forms). Commenting on Song of Songs 2:3 “As an apple-tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among the sons,” Gersonides, again focusing on foliage and fruit, notes that:

In truth, fruit is ascribed to the intellect alone . . . because it alone can achieve the condition of eternity in an individual. This is the entire fruit of these sublunary existents and the final perfection with respect to which the first matter exists in potential.²³

Once again, the metaphysical principle of matter-as-potency is seen as a not-yet state of desiccation that waits for fruition through the intelligibility of form.

Although in no way textually linked, this “desiccation versus verdant foliage” theme in Gersonides finds an interesting parallel in Philo’s own allegorical rendering of a tree-themed verse in Genesis. In his allegorical analysis of Genesis, commenting on what he takes to be the true meaning of the rivalry between Jacob and Laban, Philo speaks of “hiding from God,” and adverts to the Genesis 3:8 passage in which Adam and Eve – mindful of having inspired God’s wrath – hide “amidst the tree of the garden.” The word for tree here is the Hebrew *etz*, and this term appears in Philo as the Greek *ksulon*, a word that, like *hyle* (Aristotle’s term for matter), can mean “cut down wood, firewood, timber.” Philo takes note of Adam’s and Eve’s hiding “amidst the tree” of the garden – a hiding that, according to the rendering of the Hebrew *etz* (tree) with the Greek *ksulon* (timber), is arguably better translated as a hiding “amidst the desiccated, lifeless timberwood” of the garden (Whittaker and Colson translate “amidst the wood”). Reflecting on timber – and precisely struck, it would seem, by this image of timber as dead and dried, hollow, and lifeless – Philo allegorically correlates their hiding “amidst the desiccated, lifeless timberwood” with the human tendency to stray from God, taking refuge in one’s own mind devoid of God instead of taking refuge in the Mind of God:

“In the midst,” it says, “of the wood (*ksulon*) of the garden” (Gen. iii.8), that is in the centre of the mind, which in its turn is the centre of what we may call the garden of the whole soul: for he that runs away from God takes refuge in himself. There are two minds, that of

the universe, which is God, and the individual mind. He that flees from his own mind flees for refuge to the Mind of all things. For he that abandons his own mind acknowledges all that makes the human mind its standard to be naught, and he refers all things to God. On the other hand he that runs away from God declares Him to be the cause of nothing, and himself to be the cause of all things that come into being. But thou perceivest, O my soul, the difference of the two opinions; for the one turns its back on the particular being, created and mortal mind, and whole-heartedly puts itself under the patronage of the universal Mind, uncreated and immortal; the other opinion on the contrary, rejects God, and by a grievous error calls in to share its warfare the mind that is insufficient even to help itself.²⁴

Here, timber represents the empty shell of the human being when absent a connection to the life force of the Divine source. Interestingly paralleling the matter-versus-form discourse we have seen in Gersonides, Philo’s timber-themed distinction between the dried-out state of the godless mind versus the flowing, vibrant state of mind in its divine sojourn contrasts the image of a lifeless-desiccated-receiver, on the one hand, and a life-giving-flow-which-must-be-received, on the other. The resonance with matter-versus-form discourse is especially strong given the particular imagery of the receiver compared with the received, a common description of matter and form in a host of trajectories in the history of philosophy.

In closing, we might note that although Aristotle nowhere develops so poetic a rendering of the contrast between matter and form, he does choose to inaugurate the word “*hyle*,” the ordinary Greek word for “firewood” or “timber,” to serve as his new technical philosophical term for “matter.” In setting out to understand the negative implications of materiality in Jewish philosophical theory, it is worth pausing to think about the imagery of “*hyle-as-timber*” at play in this Aristotelian terminology. Although one can imagine the idea of “matter-as-timber” as emphasizing a kind of “stuff out of which things are made” (and so, just as wooden boards are used to make a ship, so too matter is that which makes up things), it is more useful for our purposes to focus on timber less in its relationship to things that it makes and more in its relationship to the thing of which it is made, namely, a living tree. What is important in Aristotle’s imagery of timber for our purposes is that it is dead wood; what was once filled with life is now dead and dry – completely drained of its living essence. It is this image that helps draw out the contrast between matter – as a kind of drained and lifeless stuff – and form – as a kind of living essence that must permeate the matter to yield a viable substance (a living tree branch, or any other substance). This imagery of matter as the hollowed out, “drained-of-life” stuff helps foster an image of form as the water of life that flows throughout all substance.

Regardless of Aristotle’s own metaphysical intentions (we have already stressed his own anti-Platonic hylomorphic vision of reality), thinking through this image of

a hollowed-out stick in contrast to the vital force that flows through it helps clarify the conceptual denigration of materiality at play in many Jewish philosophers. Although Philo himself is not a direct textual source for most later Jewish thinkers, and, as we have seen, his own account about godlessness versus mindfulness arises from his commentary on a different Greek word for timber (i.e., *ksulon*, not *hyle*), we might nonetheless return to Philo's conclusions about desiccation versus life to help us appreciate the treatment of matter and form in a host of Jewish philosophical texts. Reflecting on this image of matter as a dried-out hollow also helps emphasize why one might be tempted to conceptually correlate Aristotle's idea of matter with Plato's *Timaeus* idea of a Receptacle, a hollowed-out empty bowl that waits to be filled with the Demiurge's gifts of order – its downpourings of reason, as it were. This imagery of the dry hollow links well too with the Neoplatonic likening of form not only to light, but to water, a move that can be found in Ibn Gabirol's description of God's enforming relationship to the world as the "Fountain of Life" (an image rooted in Psalms 36:10). In this spirit, one might additionally speculate on the Hebrew term *geshem*; this technical Hebrew metaphysical term for "substance" is the Hebrew word for "rain," a terminological turn that itself conjures up images of the real as suffused with waters.

III. NEUTRAL MATTER DISCOURSES: CREATION CONTEXTS

In the first part of our study, we have seen matter emerge in negative ontological, epistemological, and moral lights. In addition to these decidedly negative trajectories, though, we also find a variety of neutral discussions of matter in Jewish sources as well, as for example in analyses of creation and in treatments of Aristotelian prime matter. We turn first to creation accounts.

Reflecting on *b'reishit*, the opening word of Genesis meaning "in the beginning," Jewish philosophical insights on the biblical Genesis have tended to fall into one of four groups of interpretation: (1) creation *ex nihilo* (lit. creation from nothing) – on this view, God creates reality out of a complete state of nothingness; (2) creation *ex aliquo* (lit. creation from something, a view that is associated with Plato's *Timaeus* account) – on this view, God creates reality out of some already existent bit of "stuff," usually identified as matter; (3) eternity (a view associated with Aristotle's cosmology) – on this view God is either denied the activity of creation, or, alternatively, God's "act of creation" is taken to refer to an ontologically eternal fact about God's being, namely, the fact that He has eternally sustained an eternally existing world; and (4) emanation (a view associated with the Neoplatonism

of Plotinus, and, in a somewhat different way, with Jewish *Kabbalah*) – on this view, God's "act of creation" is, as in the eternity scenario, an act of eternal sustenance, but one described in particular as an eternal overflowing of sorts.

The first thing to note after delineating these categories is that they are not necessarily discrete: A brief consideration of these ideas in various textual traditions reveals significant (sometimes overt, sometimes tacit) overlap between these categories of creation accounts. Consider the case of creation *ex aliquo*. Drawing upon the *Timaeus* image of a Craftsman God molding the universe by imposing order onto an already existing, chaotic Receptacle, Jewish readings of "in the beginning" through the creation *ex aliquo* lens speak of the Creator's ultimate creative act as His imposition of forms upon a primal first matter. First, it ought to be noted that this is not necessarily faithful to Plato's account; as we have tried to be sensitive to in our earlier treatment of the *Timaeus*, it is not obvious that it is best to understand Plato's Receptacle in the *Timaeus* as "matter." More importantly, the creation *ex aliquo* account in our sources is a multiply ambiguous doctrine, easily blending, for example, into a creation *ex nihilo* account: Although a creation *ex aliquo* view might posit a material substrate that is coeternal with God, it may claim instead that even this material substrate is itself created by God *ex nihilo*. Here we might add that even the explicit language of "creation *ex nihilo*" can be read on its surface as referring to "creation out of matter," in that the *nihil* ("nothing") of creation *ex nihilo* – referring as it does to "nothingness" – might easily be understood as referring to "matter" – itself commonly identified as the cosmological "nothingness." Although eternity and emanation might seem far removed from creation *ex nihilo*, it is certainly conceptually plausible to blend the notions by envisioning a divine creative act that is an eternal emanation of "something" from "nothing," where "nothing" is now taken either as referring to an eternal material substrate that overflows, or as referring – as it does, as for example in the *Kabbalah* and other mystical traditions – to God Himself as the creative outflowing cipher.²⁵

The possibilities of conceptual overlap in these discussions make it very difficult to know for certain what view a given thinker is putting forth. For example, just because thinker X talks about his belief in "creation," we still know nothing about which, if any, of the previous four views (or combinations thereof) he holds. Scholars move too quickly when, for example, they take (as they frequently have in the case of Ibn Gabirol)²⁶ the language of "divine will" and "creation" to rule out obviously and clearly ideas of eternity and emanation in a given doctrine. Pinning down a particular thinker's view on the topic of cosmogeny is tricky. With that in mind, we will consider as best we can a variety of Jewish voices on the Genesis event, with a particular focus on the role of matter in their cosmogenic theories.

Ex Nihilo Creation via Matter: Nahmanides

Commenting on the first three words of Genesis, *b'reishit bara elohim* ("In the beginning God created"), Nahmanides (1194–1270) notes:

God created (*bara*) all the creations from absolute void (*afisah muhletet*). There is no Hebrew term for "drawing out something from nothing" other than the term "created" (*bara*) [or: there is no meaning in Hebrew to "created" if not "drawing out something from nothing"]. Note that the things below or above the sun were not themselves created out of nothing (*ha-ayin*); rather, He drew out of the absolute complete nothing (*ha-efes ha-gamur ha-muhlat*) a foundation (*yesod*), very thin without any actuality to it (*ayn bo mamash*), but itself a generating potency (*koah mamtzi*) ready to receive form and to go from potency to act. And this is the Prime Matter (*ha-homer ha-rishon*) called "hyle" by the Greeks. And after the creation of "hyle," God did not create anything else [from nothing]; rather, He formed (*yatzar*) and made [things] from it. For from it, He brought forth everything, and dressed [it with?] the forms, and fixed them. And know that the heavens and all that is in them is one matter (*homer*), and the earth and all that is in it is another matter. God created these two [matters] from nothing; these are the only two "creations [from nothing]" – everything else is made up of them.²⁷

Here, creation *ex nihilo* yields only two products: a prime celestial matter and a prime terrestrial matter (undoubtedly Nahmanides' gloss on the dual-creation Genesis 1:1 claim that "In the beginning, God created *heaven and earth* . . ."). All else is then forged by God in and through these two initial creations. Interesting further in this regard is that Nahmanides does not identify matter with "nothingness." "Nothingness" is rather the primordial state before matter from which God creates the two matters (or "out from which" God pulls forth the first two creations):

In the beginning God created the heavens, in that He brought forth their matter from nothingness (*ayin*), and the earth, in that He brought forth its matter from nothingness (*ayin*).²⁸

Nahmanides, in this same commentary on Genesis 1:1, also expounds the Genesis 1:2 terms *tohu* and *bohu* (generally translated as "void and nothingness"), as follows: *Tohu*, he says, refers to the created matter in its pristine, preformed state, whereas *bohu* refers to the matter once it has been adorned with forms. This is reminiscent of what we see later to be the Simplicius-inspired medieval Arabic idea (found in Avicenna, Averroes, et al.) of an Aristotelian prime matter coupled with corporeal form to yield a "second matter," itself the seat for other forms.

Ex Aliquo Creation from Matter

In contrast to Nahmanides, Gersonides (1288–1344) and Abraham ibn Ezra (1089–1164) both envision God's creation as His molding of an eternally coexistent material substrate. Gersonides speaks of God's enforming an already existent substrate – a "[primordial] body from which the world was created,"²⁹ itself formless (and without definite shape), some of which goes into making the heavens, and some of which goes into making the earth – by way, that is, of God's formation of prime matter, which Gersonides understands as the primordial body once it has been bestowed with a God-given capacity to receive all forms.³⁰

In his Bible commentary, Abraham ibn Ezra, although not laying out his ideas in the philosophical style used by Gersonides, also supports the notion of substrates coexistent with God:

Most of the commentaries have said that "creation" entails bringing forth something from nothing (*ayin*) . . . But alas, they seem to have forgotten about the verse "And God created (*bara*) the *taninim* (sea creatures)" (1:21) and three [uses of the term *bara*] in one verse:³¹ "And God created (*bara*) man" (1:27; the verb occurs three times there in reference to creating human life) . . . There are two meanings to the verb "*bara*"; this is the first, and the second is [as it occurs in the verse] "he did not divide (*bara*) bread with them" [II Samuel 12:17]. In this second case, the word is spelled with the letter *heh* [as the final letter] instead of the letter *aleph* [as the final letter] . . . And its meaning is "to divide," "to put up a dividing boundary." The enlightened reader will understand.³²

Urging a retranslation of the Genesis 1:1 *bara* from "[God] created [from nothing]" to "[God] divided [already existing stuff]," Ibn Ezra has no problem making of God's primary act of creation a kind of demiurgic creation *ex aliquo*. Reading Ibn Ezra's Biblical commentaries alongside his *Foundation of Awe and the Secret of the Torah*,³³ we learn further of God's existing coeternally with the intellects, the eternal spheres, and the four elements. On this picture, God cuts up the world of generation and corruption out of the already existing elements and does so through the activity of the cosmic spheres moved by the cosmic intellects. Although not committing himself to a prime material substrate existing on its own, Ibn Ezra's vision of a divine act of division entails the coeternity with God not only of other intellects but also of various bits of enformed matter. We might suggest reading Ibn Ezra's notion of the "divine division" as God's imbuing elemental substances – bits of already enformed matters – with more and more limits, that is to say, with more and more forms, thus resulting in all the thises and thats of the world as we know it.

IV. NEUTRAL MATTER DISCOURSES

Aristotelian hylomorphism

In addition to the neutral valence given to matter in various accounts of creation, we find that matter is treated in neutral terms too where thinkers are simply rehearsing the Aristotelian hylomorphic idea that substances (other than intellects) are made up of matter and form. So, we find in Maimonides' enumeration of twenty-five premises "needed for establishing the existence of the deity,"³⁴ the neutral treatment of matter in his hylomorphic reminder (in his twenty-second proposition) that,

Every body is necessarily composed of two things . . . The two things constituting it are its matter and its form.³⁵

Neutral matter discourses: Aristotelian prime matter and corporeal form

Another neutral set of matter claims can be found in discussions of Aristotelian prime matter. Following on a Greek commentary tradition – seen, for example, in Simplicius' commentary on Aristotle's *Physics*³⁶ – many medieval Islamic and Jewish Aristotelians read in Aristotle's science³⁷ a commitment not simply to matter, but to a "prime matter" – a material substrate underlying any particular material this or that. On this picture, prime matter is seen as itself coupled with a form called "corporeal form" (or "corporeity," and sometimes even "quantity") to yield "second matter," or "[absolute] body," and it is this body that is itself seen to serve as the common matter for the elements. Leaving aside whether Aristotle himself had this sort of "prime matter/second matter" idea in mind (the details of which were themselves subject to debate, as for example, between the schools of Avicenna and Averroes),³⁸ two underlying material substrates emerge for various interpreters of Aristotle: The second matter, or body, serves as the solution to the phenomenon of elemental change, accounting for how one element can change into another, and the prime matter serves as the solution to how matter can both be continuous and divided, as it is seen as the substrate for continuity, on the one hand, and for division, on the other. Even those committed to the reality of prime and second matter, though, are not necessarily committed to their per se existence, removed from any forms. For example, although neither Maimonides nor Crescas envision any sort of matter existing on its own without form (both see the four elements as the most basic ontological units of actually existing substance in the sublunar realm), Maimonides, here in accordance with both Avicenna and Averroes, theorizes a prime matter (and so an element is seen as a tripart constitution of prime matter+corporeal form+a specific elemental form), whereas Crescas argues against

the very notion of a prime matter. Referencing Averroes' argument against the existence of a "first matter" material substrate for celestial bodies, Crescas writes:

As the [eternal] celestial sphere does not come under the law of generation and corruption, there is no reason why we should conceive it to be composed of matter [*homer*] and form [*tzurah*].³⁹

Then, drawing on Averroes' conclusion about celestial bodies, Crescas concludes:

In view of Averroes' theory, however, would that I knew what prevents us from maintaining the same with regard to the elements that are subject to generation and corruption, namely, that their matter be corporeality, and their form be the proper form of every one of the elements.⁴⁰

For Crescas, there is no need to posit a prime material substrate for celestial or for terrestrial bodies.⁴¹

On the contrary, Maimonides' own commitment to a prime matter can be seen, for example, in his reflections on the Ezekiel 1:1–28 "Account of the Chariot," a challenging and central Jewish text that, generally read in quite mystical terms, is naturalistically treated by Maimonides as merely adverting to Aristotelian philosophical truths about the cosmos.

Ezekiel 1:4 And I looked, and, behold, a stormy wind came out of the north, a great cloud, with a fire flashing up, so that a brightness was round about it; and out of the midst thereof as the colour of electrum, out of the midst of the fire.

1:5 And out of the midst thereof came the likeness of four living creatures. And this was their appearance: they had the likeness of a man.

1:6 And every one had four faces, and every one of them had four wings.

1:26 And above the firmament that was over their heads was the likeness of a throne, as the appearance of a sapphire stone; and upon the likeness of the throne was a likeness as the appearance of a man upon it above.

1:28 This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. And when I saw it, I fell upon my face.⁴²

Fighting against esoteric readings of biblical texts – including various esoteric renderings of this Ezekiel text in particular, Maimonides stresses that the real teaching of the "Account of the Chariot" (in Hebrew referred to as the *Ma'aseh ha-Merkavah*) has to do not with mystical theosophies, but with truths of Aristotelian natural science, namely, that there is a prime matter underlying all corporeal forms. Expositing the Ezekiel Throne image alongside the Exodus 24:10 account of "the whiteness of sapphire stone" beneath God's feet, and including in his analysis consideration of

*The Chapters of Rabbi Eliezer*⁴³ (ca. seventh – ninth century C.E.), as well as Onqelos' Aramaic commentary translation of the Bible (second century C.E.), Maimonides equates the Throne with the heaven that divides sublunar from supralunar existence, and goes on to equate (a) the underside of the Throne, (b) the underside of God's feet, (c) references to snow and whiteness beneath the Throne, and (d) references to "the whiteness of sapphire stone" beneath God's feet, seeing in all of these images an allegorical reference to Aristotelian prime matter, "the true reality of first matter"⁴⁴ that is "the first among the things He has created that necessitates generation and corruption."⁴⁵

V. POSITIVE MATTER DISCOURSES

Having seen various shades of negative and neutral discourses on matter, we turn in our final section to four contexts in which matter emerges in a positive light: (1) celestial matter in Aristotelian tradition; (2) spiritual matter in Israeli, Ibn Gabirol, and the "Empedoclean" tradition; (3) God-as-matter in the Stoic-inspired writings of Rabbi Simha of Troyes; and (4) the very different God-as-matter sensibility in Spinoza.

Celestial matter in the Jewish Aristotelian tradition

In the tradition of Aristotelian metaphysics and cosmology, we have already seen the role of prime matter in accounts of physical generation and corruption, and elemental change. In these senses, Aristotelian prime matter emerges as the hallmark of sublunar, terrestrial being, together, of course, with myriad forms. In addition to terrestrial matter and outside of the four sublunar elements (earth, air, fire, and water), there is a celestial material substrate (conceived by Maimonides in an Avicennian tradition as itself further composed of a more primal matter together with a corresponding form but by Crescas in an Averroean fashion as devoid of any further material substrate)⁴⁶ that houses the separate intellects of the supralunar realms. Spoken of as a "quintessence" (literally, a fifth reality over and above the ordinary four elements of the terrestrial sphere), and theorized in various ways throughout the ages as a completely new element or as an exalted variety of fire,⁴⁷ the celestial matter is completely different from and superior to terrestrial matter. Theorized in contrast to the "rectilinear" motions of the terrestrial matter, the celestial quintessence is described in terms of pure circular motions, not subject to change. Compared to terrestrial matter, this grade of celestial matter is pure and exalted and is in this sense described in very positive terms.

Turning back to Maimonides' treatment of the Ezekiel account, addressed primarily at *Guide* III.1–8, as well as at *Guide* I.28 and II.26, Maimonides sees in the elaborate Ezekiel account of a celestial throne an allegory about the crucial ontological division between sublunar corporeality and the celestial realm of the separate intellects – intellects that are, in his al-Farābīan Aristotelian (that is to say, Neoplatonized Aristotelian) system, the intellectual realities that move each of the respective celestial spheres (with the lowest of these separate intellects the "Active Intellect," governing the motion of the sublunar realm in which we live, as well as playing a crucial role in such wide-ranging human phenomena as epistemology, prophecy, providence, and immortality). Naturalizing ultra-esoteric treatments of the Throne image in the Ezekiel account, Maimonides sees in the drama of a throne nothing more than an image designed to divide what is above from what is below, and this simply toward the end of teaching that "the matter of the heavens is other than that of the earth and that they are two altogether distinct matters."⁴⁸ Here, esoteric theosophical readings are replaced with Aristotelian insights about terrestrial matter being different from celestial matter (with the latter being the home, as it were, of the separate intellects). Yet, although Maimonides' Aristotelian rendering of the great Ezekiel Throne vision is certainly a naturalized reading, he views that rendering as introducing deep, and even mysterious themes:

The fact that there are two matters, a high and an inferior one, and that the matter of the universe is not one. This is a great mystery.⁴⁹

Leaving the nature of this mystery aside (although it seems the mystery might refer us to the [Avicennian] reality of a prime matter underlying both of these other material realities), it is clear that Maimonides speaks of celestial matter as the "high matter," a matter that clearly is not the subject of his negative tirades against the vicissitudes of ordinary (i.e., terrestrial) matter.

It is here, though, that we must guard against confusion: This positive grade of celestial materiality ought not be confused with another positive grade of matter in the so-called Empedoclean tradition (in Ibn Gabirol) to which we will turn later. In such thinkers as Ibn Gabirol, we find a spiritual matter that is higher and purer than celestial matter in any Aristotelian context, and it differs from other notions of matter and prime matter that we have seen before. One major point of difference, and a point that must be kept in mind, is that whereas Ibn Gabirol's spiritual matter is part and parcel of the angelic intellects, Aristotelian celestial matter (or the matter of which it is comprised in Maimonides' Avicennian context)⁵⁰ is, for the host of Jewish Aristotelians who speak of it, the celestial accompaniment to (or resting place of) the separate angelic intellects, not part and parcel of those intellects. For

Jewish Aristotelians including Maimonides, the cosmic separate intellects are pure forms that reside in celestial material spheres; for Ibn Gabirol, on the other hand, the cosmic separate intellects are form+[spiritual] matter composites that reside in (or over) the celestial material spheres. No such notion (of a matter composing even intellects) is implied by even the most exalted descriptions of celestial matter in Maimonides, or other Aristotelian Jewish thinkers.

We turn now to the very different positive descriptions of a pure spiritual matter in the Empedoclean tradition at play in Ibn Gabirol and some others.

*Positive Matter in the Empedoclean Tradition:
Solomon ibn Gabirol, Isaac Israeli, and Ibn Ḥasdai*

More positive than even the most exalted description of the celestial matter is the especially positive strain of matter metaphysics that emerges in Solomon ibn Gabirol's eleventh-century *Fons Vitae* (*The Fountain of Life*, *Yanbū al-Ḥayāt* in Arabic,⁵¹ translated as the *Meqor Ḥayyim* in Hebrew).⁵²

Envisioning the divine source through the imagery of Psalms 36:10 ("For with You is the fountain of life (*Meqor ḥayyim*)"), Solomon ibn Gabirol presents a deeply Neoplatonic vision of an unfolding cosmos with a few unexpected twists. With Plotinus and other Greek Neoplatonists, Ibn Gabirol speaks of a cosmic flow from Universal Intellect, down through World Soul and Nature. Unlike Plotinus, though, Ibn Gabirol envisions not one but three cosmic souls (corresponding to the Platonic tripart human soul), and more importantly, uses creation and divine Will language throughout his work, focusing too on various levels of forms and matters that make up reality.

ajzā' al-'ilm bil-kull jīm, wa-hiya: 'ilm al-'unsur wal-sūra, wal-'ilm bil-irāda, wal-'ilm bil-dhāt al-'ulā; wa-laysa fil-mawjūd ghayr hādhihi al-jīm. fal-'illa al-'ulā, al-dhāt; wal-ma'alūl, al-'unsur wal-sura; wal-irāda mutawassita bayna at-tarafayn...

In the All of existence,⁵³ there are three parts of knowledge: (1) the knowledge of matter (*al-'unsur*) and form (*al-sūra*), (2) the knowledge of Will (*al-irāda*),⁵⁴ and (3) the knowledge of the First Essence. In existence, there is nothing other than these three. Essence is the first cause; matter and form, effect; and Will is the intermediary between the two extremes.⁵⁵

In this, his tripart breakdown of existence, Ibn Gabirol reveals the groundwork for the three most central theses of his *Fons Vitae*: (1) the description of God's utter unity in terms of a divine Essence, (2) the further description of God in terms of a divine Will (*al-irāda*) (or, we might say instead, a Divine Desire),⁵⁶ and (3) the doctrine to which later Latin scholastics give the name "universal hylomorphism," namely, the view that all things, including intellects, are form+matter composites,

a doctrine that contrasts with Aristotelian hylomorphism according to which only corporeal substances – but not intellects themselves – are described as form+matter composites.

From this latter thesis there arises a decidedly positive notion of matter in the *Fons Vitae*. In his somewhat nonstandard Neoplatonic (and, as we will see, Empedoclean-inspired) comology, Ibn Gabirol envisions a series of levels of matters and forms making up reality, starting with a first material principle that sits above even the Neoplatonic Universal Intellect. Whereas Plotinus-inspired Neoplatonism generally focuses on Intellect as the first reality outside of the divine One, Ibn Gabirol's cosmology inserts a level of exalted, spiritual matter prior even to Intellect, an idea that we may diagram as follows:

- (1) God
- (2) Pure Matter, or First Matter
(or, as I prefer to call it – in stricter accordance with the original Arabic notion of *al-unsur al-awwal* – "Grounding Element")
- (3) Intellect

Although somewhat unexpected in light of the more standard Neoplatonic idea of Intellect as the first reality outside God, and although somewhat unexpected too in light of the more standard Neoplatonic idea of matter as that most lowly cosmic privation, we may chart the occurrence of a cosmic pure materiality above Intellect in various guises in the Islamic mystical tradition of Ibn Masarra, in various Arabic Neoplatonic documents (including the longer version of the *Theology of Aristotle*, and works by Shahrastani, Sharazuri, al-Qifti, and Ps. Ammonius), in the writings of Isaac Israeli, Ibn Ḥasdai, and in some kabbalistic works.⁵⁷ In fact, we can even find this sort of pre-Intellect materiality in Plotinus' own limited concern with the existence of an "intelligible matter," although we have no evidence of this part of Plotinus' work having been known to Ibn Gabirol (see Plotinus' *Enneads* II.4.1–5, V.4.2, and V.5.4 – that highlight the first "moment" out of the Godhead in terms of an exalted, intelligible materiality).⁵⁸

In trying to uncover a historical trajectory for this idea in various Arabic and Hebrew traditions, scholars speak of a possible Empedoclean – labeled by scholars as pseudo-Empedoclean – strain of matter+form discourses at play in the late ancient world that in some way (and, actually, in different ways across the relevant Islamic and Jewish texts) seem to follow upon – and sometimes expressly refer to – Empedoclean notions of love and strife. The precise nature of this tradition (or traditions) remains unclear, but deals in various ways with either a pure material

reality – or a matter+form coupling – at the very root of the cosmos. In this vein, Shahrastani speaks of the Empedoclean idea of God's creation of

The First Matter (*al-'unsur al-'awwal*, literally "First Element" – which I elsewhere translate as "Grounding Element"), which is a simple thing (*al-shay al-basī*) and the principle of the intelligible simple (*hūwa 'awwal al-basī al-ma'aqūl*) and the first single simple kind (*naw'*) from which the Creator compounds (*kaththana*) extended things (*al-ashyā' al-mabsūta*).⁵⁹

In Isaac Israeli, this theme of a First Matter may be seen in the *Mantua Text* account of the root of all in two simple substances:

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].⁶⁰

We find this very same strain too in Ibn Ḥasdai's *The Prince and the Ascetic*, in which we read:

The first of created things were two simple substances: the first matter which is the substratum for everything, i.e., the first hylic matter which is the substratum for all forms, and is called by the philosophers the genus of genera; and the form which precedes that which is found with it, i.e., the perfect wisdom, by the conjunction of which with matter the nature of the intellect came into being, so that the intellect, being composed of it and matter, is a species of it.⁶¹

Differences between various pseudo-Empedoclean materials aside, what is clearly highlighted is the idea of a first pure grade of matter (sometimes coupled with form) at the root of the great chain of being and present in all things – a sublime matter that Ibn Gabirol himself likens to the Divine Throne.⁶² For Ibn Gabirol, the pure grade of first matter is indeed coupled with a first form, but in a variety of seemingly contradictory ways throughout his work.⁶³ As in the Arabic tradition of Ps. Empedocles, Ibn Gabirol's pure material pre-being is called *al-unsur al-'awwal*, literally "the first element," a phrase that gets translated into the Latin as "*materia prima*" ("prime matter") but which is not to be confused with Aristotelian prime matter. In my own efforts to ward off any undue Aristotelian resonances, I prefer to translate "First Matter," and even "Grounding Element," avoiding the terminology of "prime matter" altogether so as to highlight the non-Aristotelian, pseudo-Empedoclean space of Ibn Gabirol's cosmology.

One especially unique feature of Ibn Gabirol's work is the way in which the presence of a cosmic first matter comes along with a way of privileging materiality over form (a move that is not clearly at play in the Israeli and Ibn Ḥasdai materials). To be sure, there are plenty of passages in Ibn Gabirol in which form is privileged over matter,⁶⁴ but there are some key passages that, on the contrary, highlight the priority of pure matter. First, as we have already touched on, Ibn Gabirol at one point likens pure matter to the Divine Throne:

Matter is as if the throne [*cathedra*] of unity, and Will, the giver of form sits in it and reposes above it.⁶⁵

Here, the pureness of first universal matter is the seat on which the divine Glory rests. This clearly seems to give materiality – at least the precorporeal materiality just beyond the divine – an exalted role. Further emphasizing the idea of matter as an exalted principle, we may additionally note Ibn Gabirol's claim about the origin of this grounding matter:

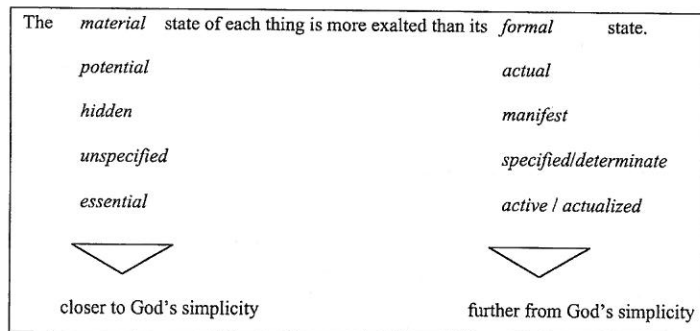
*Materia est creata ab essentia, et forma est a proprietate essentiae, id est sapientia et unitate.*⁶⁶

Matter is created from Essence, and form is from the property of Essence, that is to say, from Wisdom and unity.

Where God's unity is expressed in "two moments," one essential and one active, it is to the more essential "moment" of the divine that matter is here linked. Although in no way suggesting that God is matter or that God is composed of matter, and in spite of many competing claims in his overall oeuvre, there is – in his comparison of matter to a divine throne, in his linking of matter to the divine Essence, and in a host of related descriptions of both matter and God's innermost Essence both in terms of hiddenness⁶⁷ – a perhaps unexpected ontological privileging of the material over the formal. Of course, the supremacy of a material principle becomes less unexpected when we recall our Ps. Empedoclean context – a context in which a material reality serves as the point of God's creative entry into the cosmos. As I have argued elsewhere, this spiritual matter can even be seen as demarcating the presence of Love in Ibn Gabirol's Empedoclean universe.⁶⁸

To further understand the primacy of the pure material over the formal in Ibn Gabirol, it helps to stress his association of form with manifest limit and pure matter, on the other hand, with a kind of hidden, not-yet-manifest, limitlessness – all of which are decidedly positive traits that typify not only the pureness of matter, but the pureness of God's own infinitely unspecified essence as well.

We can summarize this set of matter-over-form intuitions with the following diagram:



Following on pseudo-Empedoclean sensibilities, Ibn Gabirol's vision of a grade of pure materiality allows him to embark on various positive matter discourses: Pure matter is linked to the Divine Essence, pure matter is the highest reality outside of God, pure matter is like God's own throne, pure matter is hidden and infinite (as is true too of God), and pure matter comprises all things, including intellects (this latter point being the hallmark of "universal hylomorphism"). These sorts of positive descriptions of a pure grade of matter are unheard of in any thinker who, like Maimonides, lacks a notion of this sort of matter, and for whom, on the contrary, the "purest" grade of matter is never anything more than either (a) a celestial grade of matter that is secondary to the intellectual principles (themselves not comprised of matter) that occupy Maimonides' Neoplatonized Aristotelian heavens, or (b) Aristotelian prime matter, itself a part of the mundane corporeal realm and very clearly ontologically secondary to form as well as secondary to intellect that is itself, on ordinary Aristotelian hylomorphic criteria, not composed of matter.

Although pure, first, universal matter certainly has a positive set of associations in Ibn Gabirol, there are plenty of passages in which it is form – as we would expect in standard Platonic, Aristotelian, and Neoplatonic traditions alike – that emerges as the source of unity and light. In the final account, it is best to see Ibn Gabirol as uniquely sensitive to the equal importance of both matter and form, their intimate interdependence one on the other, and, essentially, their unity as a single whole – a dynamic arguably mirroring his vision of God's own reality in terms of essential and active "moments" that are ultimately one inseparable unity.

In way of further appreciating the subtleties of Ibn Gabirol's thought, it is worth additionally taking note of two especially poetic ways in which he describes matter

and form. First, in his famous Hebrew poem, the *Keter Malkhut* (variously translated as *The Kingly Crown*, *The Royal Crown*, *Kingdom's Crown*, et al.),⁶⁹ Ibn Gabirol uses the suggestive – and poetically resonant – language of *ha-sod ve-ha-yesod* ("the Secret (sod) and the Foundation (yesod)") to reference "form and matter." It might also be noted that in his description of God's act of enforming the material with manifest form, Ibn Gabirol sometimes uses the Hebrew term *nqēm* (the emphatic form of the Hebrew verb *raqam*) with the meanings of "to form," "to shape," "to create," but also "to embroider."⁷⁰ In its Hebrew root (RQM), the very idea of formation is brought into immediate play with the notion of embroidery (*riqmah*). In his vision of the thundering opening of divine creativity, Ibn Gabirol is helped through the contours of Hebrew morphology to an act of divine embroidering.

Positive Matter in the Stoic Theology of Rabbi Simha of Troyes

Where Ibn Gabirol envisions a pure material reality at the root of the cosmos and first-removed from God (a spiritual grade of materiality that is not to be confused with any already enformed matter that is part of the material world), we can find an even more robust championing of the material – here arguably of ordinary worldly matter – in the Stoic theology of Rabbi Simha of Troyes for whom God is literally present to the world in the material reality of air. In his work on Rabbi Simha of Troyes, Gad Freudenthal gives us a detailed analysis of strains of Stoic thought in various talmudic and *midrashic* sources, as well as in Saadia Gaon, Shabetai Donnolo and the Hasidei Ashkanaz, and focuses in particular on how the work of the thirteenth-century Rabbi Simha reveals an especially deep connection with Stoic cosmo-theology, revealing an immanentist theology in which God is equated with the air, as well as the light, of the cosmos.⁷¹ In Simha's cosmology, God, the foundational principle, is identified with the uncreated, eternal, and blessed cosmic air that fills the upper and lower realms, an all-pervasive air that is one and completely unified, and that is, furthermore, the source of all creation. This air is seen as an illuminating light, vestiges of which pass into our lower world through the radiance of the sun – a window between the upper and lower world, and the aperture through which a small portion of the cosmic air reaches earth:

The entirety of upper air is somewhat like the lesser air which comes by way of that window, the sun, just that it is larger as the entire heavens are larger and wider than that window; but it is of a single core.⁷²

Commenting on the first two days of creation in the Genesis account, Simha envisions God as a cosmic air (the "spirit of God" hovering over the face of the waters described at Genesis 1:2) coupled with an eternal cosmic water and fire from which He creates the rest of the universe⁷³ (elsewhere suggesting that the divine air

is a fire).⁷⁴ This divine cosmic illuminating air, itself the Divine Glory (*Kavod*) and Indwelling (*Shekhinah*),⁷⁵ is the source of the heavens and the earth on the second day of creation,⁷⁶ and is the source of – but also identical at its core with – all the air and light in our sensory realm.

As it relates to matter, it might be noted that Simha also describes this air as a tenth cosmic shell within which the Throne of Glory and the other cosmic spheres reside; in this role, the divine air is a “single endless, infinite foundation (*yesod*)”⁷⁷ upon which all things are grounded. Whereas Freudenthal has drawn a connection between Simha and Ibn Gabirol’s own account of ten cosmic layers (including a divine throne residing in the tenth sphere, the sphere of Intellect) in his *Keter Malkhut*, I would add an additional point of note. We have already seen Ibn Gabirol’s own notion of a material Grounding Element (or, First Matter) at the core of reality, at the heart of all things – even intellects – likened to the Divine Throne, and itself called “Foundation.” I have argued elsewhere that Ibn Gabirol’s material Grounding Element is conceptually akin to Saadia’s own notion of a cosmic air (a notion that Freudenthal here clearly identifies as a source of influence on Rabbi Simha’s thought). Here, it seems clear that Simha’s own analysis of divine air rests in part on his own familiarity with Ibn Gabirol’s *Keter Malkhut* (as Freudenthal himself notes);⁷⁸ if we can additionally posit a familiarity on Simha’s part with Ibn Gabirol’s *Fons Vitae*, then we can suggest further support for a link between Ibn Gabirol’s material Grounding Element and Jewish philosophical notions – borrowed in part from Saadia – of a cosmic air. The upshot would be not simply an identification between air and light in the context of this cosmology, but a further identification of this air/light with the primal matter, or Grounding Element, from the pages of Ibn Gabirol’s pseudo-Empedoclean thought. Of course, unlike Saadia’s cosmic air and Ibn Gabirol’s Grounding Element that are one step removed from God, the air/light[primal matter?] of Simha’s system is, in more clearly Stoic style, identified with God.⁷⁹

In his magisterial study, Freudenthal has presented us with wide-ranging in-depth treatments of Stoic strains of thought in a host of Jewish sources, offering us in particular an especially thorough-going example of Stoicism in the pages of a frequently overlooked work of thirteenth-century Jewish philosophy. Yet, even in Rabbi Simha’s Stoic-inspired identification of God and air, there seems to remain a hint of God’s utter transcendence above the cosmos. Even in his claim that “the concealed, manifest, hidden air . . . it is the creator . . . it is in all things and all things are in it,” Rabbi Simha goes on to add that “it is the foundation of all, and above all.”⁸⁰ Even this particular quote aside, there seems to be a touch of transcendent

theology in Simha’s immanentism, as seen in the uncomfortable balance between his claims that God is air on the one hand, and, on the other hand, his claims that – at least in the world as we currently live in it – the air and light is but a small and diminished vestige of the fullness of the divine light/air.

It is perhaps only in the secular theology of Spinoza that God is completely and unabashedly grounded. Although Spinoza’s immanent God may be said to have a transcendence of a sort too, as it is more than the sum of the parts of the known universe,⁸¹ there is, however, no sense, as in Simha, of this world being a weakened vestige of God; whereas for Spinoza, God has an infinite number of attributes that are not known to us, this world, for Spinoza, is God in his full and complete (and not weakened) manifestation through his attributes of extension and thought.

Positive Matter in Spinoza

The virtue and power of Nature is the very virtue and power of God.⁸²

The obvious later figure in Jewish history to make identifications between God and matter, of course, is Spinoza. Moving away entirely from anything like a commentary approach (where, for example, Rabbi Simha sets out in his divine immanentist direction in light of his reading of certain biblical and rabbinic claims about God’s presence in the air and light), Spinoza launches his philosophical thesis from what he takes to be firmly reasoned starting principles about the nature of substance. Arguing against various popular accounts of creation, God, eternity, and substance in the history of philosophy, Spinoza – although greatly influenced by the thought of such predecessors as Maimonides – replaces a medieval metaphysics with a new worldview. For Spinoza, a “substance monist,” the only substance is God; everything else that we know and *think of as* substances in their own right – from tables and chairs, to animals and humans, to the perfect triangle and everything in between – is simply some manifestation of God – or, in Spinoza’s lexicon, is simply some mode of God. From humans to pebbles to mathematical truths, we are all modes (the *natura naturata*, or “nature created”) of the one infinite substance, God (the *natura naturans*, or “nature creating”).

On this view, God and Nature are one.⁸³ For, although God is possessed of an infinite number of attributes, our limited human minds can only conceive Him through two of those attributes, namely, thought and extension. The implication of this is that anything we know is simply a [finite] manifestation of [the infinite] God through one of these two attributes. When we encounter ideas, we are seeing God finitely, under his aspect of thought. When we encounter physical bodies, we are seeing God finitely, under his aspect of extension. Because what we are ultimately

encountering in both cases [albeit finitely] is the single substance, God, it follows that "the order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things."⁸⁴ It also follows from this picture that the entirety of the extended physical universe is simply the reality of God manifest to us through one of His attributes.

[S]ince nothing can be or be conceived without God, it is clear that everything in Nature involves and expresses the conception of God in proportion to its essence and perfection; and therefore we acquire a greater and more perfect knowledge of God as we gain more knowledge of natural phenomena. To put it another way, since the knowledge of an effect through its cause is nothing other than the knowledge of a property of that cause, the greater our knowledge of natural phenomena, the more perfect is our knowledge of God's essence, which is the cause of all things. So the whole of our knowledge, that is, our supreme good, not merely depends on the knowledge of God but consists entirely therein.⁸⁵

From the Aristotelian idea that there are many substances, and that those substances are composed of matter and form, we here enter a new world in which the only substance is God, and every table and chair and human being and mind and idea that Aristotle would have pointed to as a substance in its own right is understood now rather as a finite mode of God – either (as is the case for our apprehension of what we think of as "physical entities") a mode of God under his attribute of extension, or (as is the case for our apprehension of what we think of as "mental entities") a mode of God under his attribute of thought. Again, because the reality of God, the single substance, singly underlies all of these modes, it follows that every mode of extension is identical with a corresponding mode of thought. The material reality of things? This is the one God manifest to us in an extended way. The formal reality of things? This is that same God manifest to us in a thought way.

As it relates to minds and bodies, it follows, for Spinoza – from the fact that God is the single substance inherent in everything – that the human mind is identical with the human body;⁸⁶ the mind is simply the idea of the body,⁸⁷ and the two are simply different modes of a single substance in perfect one-to-one correspondence – two different ways that we conceive a single reality:

Thinking substance and extended substance are one and the same substance, comprehended now under this attribute, now under that. So, too, a mode of Extension and the idea of that mode are one and the same thing expressed in two ways.⁸⁸

With these features in place, it is clear that the anti-matter and/or anti-body rhetoric of past philosophical systems can no longer hold sway in Spinoza's court. Here, it is God who is manifest in material, corporeal stuff. Marking a decided departure from the history of philosophy, Spinoza's system is uniquely sensitive to the significance not only of the pristine human mind (as is the case for most ancient, medieval, and

modern thinkers – with Descartes as a hallmark – before him), but of the human body in all of its messy physical and emotional fullness. For both the mind and the body are God manifest. Here, a balanced focus on the human emotional and cognitive landscape emerges: It is only through human emotions (the messy domain of fear and pleasure) that the human being can meet her most essential human goal, namely, the fulfillment of her desire and drive (*conatus*) for self-preservation⁸⁹ – not by being a slave to passions, but by coming to understand and rationally "acquiesce" to the true way that things are and to act accordingly. This is true freedom, a state of well-directed (i.e., cognitive) desire, resulting ultimately in *amor Dei intellectualis* (the intellectual love of God) – a love that

Is an action, not a passion: the action of a rational finite being whose essence is a *conatus* to persevere in being, and who adequately cognizes that, since God is the substance of which he is a finite mode, his own existence would be unthinkable unless God were exactly as he is . . . To love God intellectually is to be intellectually at peace (*quies*) with how things are: ourselves, and the absolutely infinite substance of which we are finite modes. The highest blessedness (*beatitudo*) is true acquiescence of spirit (*vera animi acquiescentia*).⁹⁰

Spinoza's immanentist valuation of materiality ought to be firmly separated from the immanentist and positive sensibilities about matter in Ibn Gabirol or even Rabbi Simha of Troyes. As we have said, although Simha does equate God with the air and light of the world (and does see all of creation as rooted in that air/light), there remains a sense of God's true essence as removed and hidden from us in this world in a way that it will one day not be removed and hidden from us. In *Sefer ha-Maskil*, he says "God will open up the heavens in the future to come and we will no longer need the light of the sun."⁹¹

Simha goes on in this regard to speak of this future as a return to the prelapsarian state of Adam, a state in which – surrounded now fully by the fullness of divine air/light – the human is able to see from one end of the world to the other.⁹² Although we may speak of a sense in which Spinoza's immanent God is transcendent,⁹³ here, in Simha's theology, the sense of transcendence is quite different: Whereas Spinoza's God is only finitely manifest to us in Nature in the sense that He is manifest too in infinite other ways that we do not apprehend, this "transcendence" for Spinoza is an eternal and necessary feature of what it means for God to be immanent in modes able to be apprehended by humans. For Simha, the transcendence of the immanent God is only temporary, suggesting that the current nature of God's immanence is not all that it could be: God could be more present than He currently is. For Spinoza, God's immanence now – and always – is all that it could be: God is present

now as He was then as He will be always in the single and unchanging sense that God is all that there is. This seems to suggest a much more robust sense of divine transcendence in Simha's theology than in Spinoza's.

As for Ibn Gabirol, yes, he does indeed have an exalted kind of matter in his system, and as such, some decidedly positive conceptions of materiality in his text. In fact, it is the nature of matter – more so than that of form – that, in his system, has more in common with (and is more intimately linked to) the Divine Essence. This in no way suggests an affinity between Ibn Gabirol and Spinoza. For Ibn Gabirol, God is still completely transcendent in the style of good, old-fashioned Neoplatonism. Ibn Gabirol's God is not at all identified with the pure materiality of the Grounding Element (or, First Matter), and is certainly not identified with the enformed materiality of corporeal bodies in nature that are many levels removed from that pure Grounding Element. Even if Ibn Gabirol were to identify God and the pure material Grounding Element (that, to stress again, he does not!), his God would still not be in any way identical with the materiality of the corporeal world, because the corporeal world is itself matter beset upon by layers and layers of dividing and differentiating forms. To suggest hints of – or even a groundwork for – Spinozism in Ibn Gabirol seems at best confusing, and at worst confused.

NOTES

- 1 For a series of studies on the history of matter in Greek and medieval contexts, see McMullin 1965. For an overview of seven different Arabic philosophical terms for "matter" at play in early Jewish medieval philosophy and mysticism contexts, see Vajda 1980, pp. 31–5. On the use and background of the Greek-into-Arabic *hayūlā*, see entry for this term in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, second edition.
- 2 See Langermann 1996, p. 70.
- 3 For an elaboration on Plato's Receptacle see Cornford 1935–1997, pp. 177–88, and for a cautionary reminder that Plato nowhere calls the Receptacle "matter," see Cornford 1935–1997, p. 181. Nonetheless, one can imagine how the chaos of the receptacle in contrast to the order of the reasoning principle might have played itself out in later negative discourses on matter versus form.
- 4 "He first fully formed the intelligible world, in order that He might have the use of a pattern wholly God-like and incorporeal in producing the material world, as a later creation..." (Philo 1960a, p. 15). For step-by-step detail of how Philo reads this into the Genesis account of seven days worth of creation, see Philo 1960a, p. 23 ff.
- 5 For Philo, the entire universe is made in God's image, with intellect illustrating a special divine kinship in particular (Philo 1960a, p. 21). At the very start of his *De Opificio Mundi* (X), Philo sets out by stressing the importance of mind and its subordination to a higher source: "We shall fetch nothing from our own store, but, with a great array of points before us, we shall mention only a few, such as we may believe to be within reach of the human mind when possessed by love and longing for wisdom. The minutest seal takes in under the engraver's hand the contours of colossal figures" (Philo 1960a, p. 9), and goes on to stress that the human mind is "life principle of the life principle itself," the

- mark of God's crowning creation (see Philo 1960a, p. 51). Philo speaks of "that invisible light perceptible only by mind [which] has come into being as an image of the Divine Word Who brought it within our ken" (Philo 1960a, p. 25), and describes the human as "partaker of kinship with [God] Himself in mind and reason best of all gifts" (Philo 1960a, p. 61) – at once the mark of God's immortal Mind in human being, and that through which man renders himself immortal (Philo 1960a, pp. 61, 63, 107).
- 6 See, for example, Philo's *De Opificio Mundi* (LIX) in which he warns against reason's capacity to become ensnared in the pleasures of corporeal reality through the senses. Philo 1960a, p. 131.
 - 7 *Metaphysics* VII.3, 1029a30–34.
 - 8 *Metaphysics* VII.6, 1031a15–18.
 - 9 For some of Plotinus' views on matter, see *Ennead* 2 "On Matter," volume 441 in Loeb Classical Library (Plotinus 1966). For an extensive treatment of Plotinus' views on this topic across the *Enneads* and within a broader historical trajectory, see Corrigan 1996.
 - 10 Plotinus, *Enneads* 2.4.16 (Plotinus 1966, pp. 148–9).
 - 11 One main Plotinian influence is found in the so-called *Theology of Aristotle*, a text that circulated in Arabic under the name of Aristotle but that turns out to have been an edited version of books 4–6 of Plotinus' *Enneads*. The selection I have quoted from previously is from Plotinus' second *Ennead*, and as such a part of Plotinus that is not in the *Theology of Aristotle* and that, as such, we cannot be sure exerted any influence (or at least any direct influence) on later Jewish thinkers. For a detailed overview of the Arabic Plotinian materials that impacted on medieval Jewish and Islamic thought – including *The Theology of Aristotle* and other texts – see Adamson 2002.
 - 12 On the tendency to describe God in terms of form and intellect in the *The Theology of Aristotle* (an editorial departure from Plotinus' more staunchly apophatic philosophy in the actual *Enneads*), see Adamson 2002, chap. 5 (cf. p. 116).
 - 13 "It was because of... the divine intellect conjoined with man, that it is said of the latter that he is in the image of God and in His likeness..." (*Guide* I.1); Maimonides 1963, p. 23.
 - 14 *Guide* I.2, Maimonides 1963, p. 25.
 - 15 *Guide* III.8, Maimonides 1963, p. 431.
 - 16 See also Pessin 2002; there, I also go on to treat Maimonides' further – and competing – description of matter as the Proverbs 31:10 "woman of valor." For a treatment of this metaphor, see also Diamond 2002.
 - 17 For a treatment of the Active Intellect principle as it is understood in this period (as a cosmic principle separate from the human or divine intellect), H. Davidson 1972a, 1972b, 1987. For an overview treatment of this principle at play in Maimonides and his Islamic sources, see my Pessin 2005b.
 - 18 *Guide* III.9, Maimonides 1963, p. 436.
 - 19 Gersonides, *Commentary on Song of Songs*, Part Two, 2:2; see Gersonides 1998, p. 39.
 - 20 Gersonides, *Commentary on Song of Songs*, Part Two, 1:14; see Gersonides 1998, p. 36.
 - 21 Gersonides, *Commentary on Song of Songs*, Part Two, 1:16; see Gersonides 1998, p. 37.
 - 22 Gersonides, *Commentary on Song of Songs*, Part Two, 1:12; see Gersonides 1998, p. 34.
 - 23 Gersonides, *Commentary on Song of Songs*, Part Two, 2:3; Gersonides 1998, p. 39.
 - 24 Philo, *Allegorical Interpretations* III.28–31; see Philo 1960a, p. 321.
 - 25 In kabbalistic contexts, the God-as-Nothing theme can be seen in the divine sefirotic aspect of Keter, or, even more fully, in the presefirotic supereality of *eyn sof* (the unlimited aspect of God). In this regard, one might consider the zoharic reading of

- Genesis 1:1 in terms of God's nothingness giving way to yield the divine pleroma itself (and with it, the rest of being); cf. see Matt 2002, especially the text with his notes to the zoharic reading of Genesis 1:1 on pp. 10–13.
- 26 In my forthcoming *Embroidering the Hidden*, I criticize Weisheipl for reading Ibn Gabirol's "Will" as inconsistent with emanationism (see his Weisheipl 1979), and see Pessin 2003 for Wolfson's critique of Altmann on this theme.
- 27 Nahmanides commentary on Genesis 1:1, *Miqraot Gedolot*, my translation. *Miqraot Gedolot*, p. 6, column 1, lines 19–30, my translation. See too Nahmanides 1971–1976, volume 1, page 23.
- 28 *Miqraot Gedolot*, p. 6, column 2, lines 4–6, my translation. Ibid., p. 23.
- 29 Gersonides, *Wars of the Lord*, VI.17; Gersonides 1984, p. 330.
- 30 Gersonides, *Wars of the Lord*, VI.17; Gersonides 1984, pp. 330–1. For more on this primordial body and the first moments of creation, see V.2 (Gersonides 1984, pp. 36–8) and VI.18 (Gersonides 1984, pp. 332–44).
- 31 In this translation, I differ from Sirat who translates "and a third verse"; see Sirat 1985, p. 105.
- 32 *Miqraot Gedolot*, p. 2, lines 10–4; p. 4, lines 3–4. Ibn Ezra 1988–2004, volume 1, pp. 22–4.
- 33 See Ibn Ezra 1995.
- 34 See Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, Introduction to Second Part; Maimonides 1963, p. 235.
- 35 Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, Introduction to Second Part; Maimonides 1963, p. 238.
- 36 Simplicius 1882, pp. 229ff.
- 37 See Aristotle's discussions at *De Caelo* III.3, III.4, III.6, as well as *De Gen. et Corr.* II.2–4.
- 38 For detailed discussion of the Greek and Arabic commentary traditions and debates surrounding Aristotle's prime matter notion, see H. Wolfson 1929a, p. 99ff. pp. 579–90, as well as Hyman 1977.
- 39 Crescas' *Or Adonai*, Proposition X, Part II; see H. Wolfson 1929a, p. 261.
- 40 Ibid.
- 41 See also Crescas' *Or Adonai*, Prop. X, Part 1 (H. Wolfson 1929a, pp. 257–9), and Wolfson's comments at H. Wolfson 1929a, pp. 99–113 (cf. p. 102 for the particular relationship between prime matter and corporeal form), as well as Wolfson's notes to Crescas' Proposition X at H. Wolfson 1929a, pp. 569–602 (see n. 16 on page 577ff. for analysis of relevant philosophical terms in Crescas and Maimonides). For an account of Crescas' critique of prime matter, see H. Wolfson 1929a, p. 104, and Crescas' Prop. X, Part II, at H. Wolfson 1929a, pp. 260–3.
- 42 This translation is from the *Jewish Publication Society Bible*; for full text online, see <http://www.sacred-texts.com/bib/jps/eze001>.
- 43 Although Maimonides talks as if this text agrees with his philosophical point of view, *The Chapters of Rabbi Eliezer* is generally seen as a highly esoteric Jewish text, and in no obvious way in line with Maimonides on the issue of the divine Throne or otherwise. The text can be found as *Sefer Pirkei Rabbi Eliezer* (Warsaw 1852). For a translation with notes, bibliographies, and historical context, see Friedlander 1970.
- 44 *Guide* I.28, Maimonides 1963, p. 61.
- 45 Ibid.
- 46 For further discussion of this point, see H. Wolfson 1929a, pp. 103–4.
- 47 See discussion of the uppermost element in Freudenthal 1999.
- 48 *Guide* II.26; Maimonides 1963, p. 331.
- 49 *Guide* II.26; Maimonides 1963, p. 331.
- 50 See H. Wolfson 1929a, p. 103.
- 51 An extant Arabic fragment for the Latin text (Ibn Gabirol 1895) at 5.43, p. 338, lines 21–5 reveals this Arabic phrase (translated in the Latin, although, not as *fons vitae* but as *origo vitae*). For Arabic, see Pines 1977, p. 59.
- 52 Originally written in Arabic, this text, composed in the form of a dialogue between a student and teacher, survives in a twelfth-century Latin translation (by the translation team, John of Spain and Gundissalinus), as well as in a thirteenth-century Hebrew summary (by Shem Tov ibn Falaquera).
- 53 I choose to translate *bil-kull* dramatically as "in the All" (as opposed to "among existing things") to draw attention to "the All," a term for the Universe as a whole in Jewish Neoplatonic-inspired traditions. In this regard, consider E. Wolfson 1990b; Schlanger 1965.
- 54 In my longer study of Ibn Gabirol, I prefer to translate "Divine Desire" for Will. For a fuller discussion of this, my forthcoming manuscript, *Embroidering the Hidden*. For a related treatment, see the Ibn Gabirol sections of Pessin 2004 and Pessin 2005a, as well as my forthcoming piece on Ibn Gabirol for the online *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.
- 55 Arabic text as cited in Moses ibn Ezra's *al-Hadiqa fi Ma'na al-Majaz wal-Haqiqa* (or, *Arugat ha-Bosem*); cf. Pines 1977, p. 71 (translation is my own); see corresponding Latin text at *Fons Vitae* I.7, p. 9, line 25 – p. 10, line 4 (Ibn Gabirol 1895). For a French translation, see Schlanger 1968; for a partial French translation and commentary, see Ibn Gabirol 1950. For a partial English translation, see Wedeck 1962. For a complete English translation, see Ibn Gabirol 1987. For a contemporary Hebrew translation of the Latin text, as well as the Hebrew text of Falaquera's thirteenth-century abridged translation from the Arabic, see Ibn Gabirol 1964 or Munk 1859 for Falaquera's Hebrew text with Munk's French translation and commentary. For the Arabic fragments of the original text as found in Moses ibn Ezra, see Pines 1977; see also Fenton 1976.
- 56 See note 54.
- 57 For more information on the trajectory of this idea in some Arabic and Jewish sources, see "Anbaduklis" entry in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, and "Empedocles" entry in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, and regarding the Israeli and Ibn Hasday materials, see Altmann/Stern 1958, and Stern 1983. On this theme in Ibn Masarra, see Asín-Palacios 1978. On the vestige of these ideas in kabbalistic texts, see Kaufmann 1899, and on the arguably related notion of a "first created being" in *Kabbalah* with resonances in Ismā'ili sources, see Heller Wilensky 1994. On other uses of the relevant Arabic notion of *al-unsur* in Jewish texts, see Vajda 1980. On this Ps. Empedoclean idea, see also my forthcoming *Embroidering the Hidden*, and Pessin 2004.
- 58 For fuller discussion, see Dillon 1992.
- 59 Al-Shahrastānī 1923, pp. 260ff.
- 60 Isaac Israeli, *Mantua Text*, § I; cited in Stern 1983, p. 66.
- 61 Ibn Ḥasdai, *The Prince and the Ascetic*, chap. XXXIII, lines 9–15; Stern 1983, p. 104. For fuller text, see Ibn Ḥasdai 1950. It might be noted that it is the occurrence of this sort of thematic in Ibn Ḥasdai that leads S.M. Stern to use the name "Ibn Ḥasdai's Neoplatonist" to demarcate what he posited to be an unknown common source on this cosmic matter theme for Israeli, Ibn Ḥasdai, and the longer version of the *Theology of Aristotle*.
- 62 On the notion of pure matter in Ibn Gabirol as a "Divine Throne," see *Fons Vitae* V.42, p. 335, lines 23–4 (Ibn Gabirol 1895), and the useful diagram by Loewe; Loewe 1989, p. 114.

- 63 On the confusing nature of Ibn Gabirol's treatment of matter's relationship to form, see Rudavsky 1978. For a longer treatment of Ibn Gabirol, see Schlanger 1968, and my forthcoming *Embroidering the Hidden*.
- 64 See Rudavsky 1978.
- 65 *Fons Vitae* V.42, p. 335, lines 23–4 (Ibn Gabirol 1895).
- 66 *Fons Vitae* V.42, p. 333, lines 4–5 (Ibn Gabirol 1895).
- 67 In Pessin 2004, I argue for how this thematic of “hiddenness” – linked to a discourse of “receptivity” – can be seen as opening a feminist voice in the work of Ibn Gabirol's metaphysics.
- 68 See my forthcoming *Embroidering the Hidden*, and Pessin 2004.
- 69 For translations and useful commentaries, see Cole 2001 and the fuller length treatment in Gluck 2003.
- 70 For example, he uses the language of *nqēm* to describe God's relation to the human countenance (Schirrmann 1954, p. 236, poem 96). Scheindlin translates *nqēm* there as “weaves,” and discusses the RQM root in rabbinic sources at Yoma 72b and *Mishna Hulin* 9:6, citing too Maimonides' own reference to Psalms 139:15. See Scheindlin 1991, p. 263, note 8 (in his commentary to poem 27 from pp. 208–9). We might here additionally note the occurrence of this verbal root RQM in the Qumran description of the *roqemet ruah qodesh qedashim* – the variegated – or “embroidered” – spirit of the Holy of Holies. I am thankful to Elliot Wolfson for drawing this to my attention (and see his own discussion of this in E. Wolfson 2004b, p. 204, fn. 93).
- 71 In this section, I am indebted to and am drawing expressly upon Gad Freudenthal's illuminating study (in Hebrew); see Freudenthal 1994–1995. See also Freudenthal 1996b.
- 72 *Sefer ha-Maskil*, Section 7, p. 15a, lines 23–5; as cited in Freudenthal 1994, p. 190; my translation. As Freudenthal's work is in Hebrew, all English citations from *Sefer ha-Maskil* in this paper are my own translations.
- 73 See *Sefer ha-Maskil*, section 59, p. 44a, lines 6–7; as cited in Freudenthal 1994, p. 189, fn. 5.
- 74 See *Sefer ha-Maskil*, section 6, p. 13b, line 32; as cited in Freudenthal 1994, p. 190.
- 75 For this association, I am drawing on *Sefer ha-Maskil*, section 4, p. 10a, lines 42–4; as cited in Freudenthal 1994, p. 191.
- 76 See *Sefer ha-Maskil*, section 76, p. 59a, lines 46–8; as cited in Freudenthal 1994, p. 189.
- 77 *Sefer ha-Maskil*, Section 59, p. 43a, lines 43–4; as cited in Freudenthal 1994, p. 190.
- 78 Freudenthal 1994, p. 205.
- 79 Leaving the details for a separate study, it ought be noted here that in drawing a link between Simha's air and Ibn Gabirol's Grounding Element, we must also be mindful of the former phenomenon being described as the cosmic sphere that holds the Divine Throne, whereas Ibn Gabirol likens the Grounding Element to the Divine Throne (with the Sphere of Intellect, rather, being described as that which holds the Divine Throne). In addition to the possibility that Simha was in no way familiar with the details of Ibn Gabirol's *Fons Vitae* account, this point (in addition, of course, to what we have already pointed to, viz. that Simha's air IS God, whereas Ibn Gabirol's primal matter is not) might suggest a dissimilarity between Simha's principle of air and Ibn Gabirol's principle of a material Grounding Element. More study is needed on unpacking the precise relation (which I have begun to explore elsewhere) between Saadia's notion of air and Ibn Gabirol's notion of the material root of all; here, the similarity seems strong, suggesting to me the possibility of a Stoic undertone to Ibn Gabirol's own talk of the Grounding Element. Even though he does not call it air, it seems plausible that he might have – in light of

- his own reading of Saadia's analysis of a cosmic air, coupled with the many similarities between the two accounts – understood it to be a kind of cosmic air.
- 80 *Sefer ha-Maskil*, section 6, p. 13b, lines 19–21; as cited in Freudenthal 1994, p. 190.
- 81 See H. Wolfson 1934, pp. 74–5: “the immanence of Spinoza's substance is a transcendent immanence. Spinoza's substance is thus a whole transcending the universe, the latter being the sum of the modes, and the relation of substance to the universe is conceived by him after the manner of the relation of the whole to the part.” See also Lloyd's reminder that Spinoza is not a pantheist: “Spinoza [does not think] that God and the world are identical. To claim that would be to leave out account the infinity of other attributes under which God is expressed. It would also be to overlook that even God-under-the-attribute-of-extension cannot be identified strictly with the material world. That world is of course ‘divisible’; it has parts. But Spinoza insists that ‘no attribute of a substance can be truly conceived from which it follows that the substance can be divided’, and that a substance that is absolutely infinite is indivisible (IP12 and P13). It would seem then that his God cannot be identified with the world” (Lloyd 1996, p. 38, referring to *Ethics* IP12–13; see Spinoza 2002, pp. 223–4).
- 82 Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, VI.9; Spinoza 2002, p. 446.
- 83 See note 81.
- 84 Spinoza, *Ethics* IIP7; Spinoza 2002, p. 247.
- 85 *Theological-Political Treatise*, IV.11; Spinoza 2002, p. 428.
- 86 See Garrett 1996, p. 4.
- 87 As Donagan puts it, “Each human being is both a human body, a finite mode of God constituted by the attribute Extension, and a human mind, the finite mode of God as thinking that is primarily constituted by an idea of that body *and of nothing else*”; Donagan 1996, p. 354.
- 88 Spinoza, *Ethics* IIP7s; see Spinoza 2002, p. 247.
- 89 As Lloyd puts it, in his conception of this drive to self-preservation, Spinoza “develops the notion of *conatus* into a radically new ethical concept” – as she puts it, “[a] thing's endeavor to persist in being becomes its very essence,” and “[t]he continuation of existence, rather than being a formal prerequisite for virtue, becomes what we desire in desiring virtue – the good itself.” See G. Lloyd 1996, p. 9.
- 90 *Ethics* VP42s. For this point, see Donagan 1996, p. 377, and the notion of “true spiritual contentment.” See Spinoza 2002, p. 382.
- 91 *Sefer ha-Maskil*, Section 6, p. 14b, lines 12ff; as cited in Freudenthal 1994, p. 191; my translation.
- 92 *Sefer ha-Maskil*, Section 7; see Freudenthal 1994, p. 191.
- 93 See n. 81.

The Cambridge History of Jewish Philosophy

From Antiquity through the
Seventeenth Century

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