

CHAPTER FOUR

R. SOLOMON IBN GABIROL

In Bahya's thought, the confrontation between the new religious idealism and traditional halakhic, organized Judaism came to open expression. By contrast, in the original philosophic thought of R. Solomon Ibn Gabirol, it appears that there is no tension between them, or no interest in the conflict. Ibn Gabirol was enamored of the new religious ideal, and he presented and developed it without discussing the relation between it and the tradition, even though in his genius-level poetic output it appears that he identified unqualifiedly with the tradition, with its canonic sources and legal norms. The principle topic that I shall seek to consider in this chapter is the riddle pertaining to the consolidation of Saadia's rationalism in a generation that internalized Neo-Platonic philosophy as a central factor that concretized the religious ideal of faith and way of life.

Gabirol's Philosophical Thought

R. Solomon Ibn Gabirol lived during the years 1026–1070 and became famous among his people through his secular and religious poetry, many of which were incorporated into the Jewish prayer book. His philosophical thought had influence on some Jewish philosophers and kabbalists, though he is not mentioned by name. His principal philosophical influence was on medieval Christian philosophy.

His philosophical works were:

1. *The Fountain of Life (Fons Vitae)*. This is the most central and important work that has come down to us. It was written originally in Arabic, but it was preserved only in Latin, and the true identity of the author was only rediscovered in the 19th century.
2. *The Will*. By the testimony of the *Fountain of Life*, it appears that he wrote a treatise on the will, but it is not extant.
3. *Theory of the Soul*. It is known that Ibn Gabirol wrote a work on the theory of the soul, but it has not been preserved.

4. Commentary. Ibn Gabirol wrote an extensive allegorical commentary on the Bible. Some fragments have survived.
5. *Improvement of the Virtues of the Soul*. This book has come down to us, together with another book, *Choice Pearls*.
6. "The Royal Crown." This is a long poem that may be included among his philosophical works. It is his only surviving attempt to present his theological ideas in the framework of a Jewish prayer.

The Fountain of Life

The *Fountain of Life* has practically no influence in subsequent Jewish philosophy. On the other hand, in the 12th and 13th centuries there circulated among Christian scholars a Latin book, translated from the Arabic, with the title *Fons Vitae of Avicbron*, whose author was thought by the Christians to be a Christian or Moslem Arab, but not a Jew. The book was the subject of debate; it was enthusiastically defended by neo-Platonic thinkers (such as William of Auvergne and Duns Scotus), and was just as vehemently attacked by the Aristotelians (such as Thomas Aquinas), while it continued to influence the development of Christian theology.

And then in the 19th century the scholar Solomon Munk discovered a manuscript which was the translation of R. Shem Tov Ibn Falaquera of excerpts from a book titled *Meqor Hayyim of R. Solomon Ibn Gabirol*. He was able to prove from these excerpts that the book that had had such a brilliant career in the Christian Church was none other than a Latin translation of Ibn Gabirol's work. The most interesting feature of this episode was not the shock that registered among the Christian scholars (especially the anti-Semites among them), nor the special joy that this discovery afforded to Jews, who are always looking for Jewish influence on the rest of the world. It is most instructive that on the one hand, this book could be adopted into the Christian tradition without raising any dogmatic scruples, and on the other hand it disappeared for centuries from the map of Jewish thought. To be sure, the scholar David Kaufman tried to prove that it had an influence on Jewish philosophers and kabbalists. But his evidences are few and his proofs are weak. I am inclined to accept the verdict of Julius Guttman, who thought that the influence of this work in the Jewish world was negligible.

The simplest explanation for the scanty influence of this work on Jewish philosophers is that it dealt with general philosophical problems without relating to the problem of integrating them with canonical Jewish sources. This is a surprisingly free approach. In the succeeding generation, it was the project of integration that stood at the center of attention for Jewish thinkers. But this answer is insufficient, and the riddle continues to bother us.

R. Solomon Ibn Gabirol was a great religious poet, and the character of his poetry is very different from that of his philosophical writings. His poetry is suffused with traditional allusions and bears the stamp of the period of Jewish history in which it was composed. It found its way into the prayer book and its subsequent influence is considerable. The difference between the character and fate of his poetry and his philosophical writings begs for an explanation.

Gabirol's Sources

The starting-point of Gabirol's thought is to be found in the neo-Platonic tradition. However, it also has a marked individual character. Scholars debate whether the individuating features are entirely original, or whether he was influenced from other sources that have not been discovered. Though his systematic consistency would argue for originality, one senses an intellectual affinity with several pseudepigraphic writings that circulated in the Middle Ages, especially the "Theology of Aristotle" (which is a reworking of portions of Plotinus's *Enneads*) or writings that were attributed to the ancient Greek philosopher Empedocles.

The Structure of the Book

The book is constructed as a dialogue between a student and a teacher, but it is not a genuine conversation but rather a lecture that is subdivided into sections by structural questions. The student raises a topic in a tone of exaggerated humility seeking enlightenment, and the teacher lectures to him, after which the student thanks him for his words and raises another question, and so on.

Nevertheless, it seems that the literary structure has importance: it reflects the attitude of authority underlying the author's presentation of his views. These are not private opinions offered for critical examination, but rather the authoritative presentation of truth that is to be accepted *ex cathedra*. One must admit that there are definite gaps between the

certain tone of the presentation and the less-than-persuasive force of the logical demonstrations. It seems that the author needed a liberal dose of authoritative manner appealing to revelation to cover up the weakness of his argument.

Nevertheless, one cannot ignore the importance of the religious atmosphere generated by this kind of presentation, that can permit itself this lofty vagueness. There is something dramatic in the impressive revelation of truth that the student, though intelligent and knowledgeable, could not arrive at by himself, that resembles the practice of the occultists, who claim a supra-human source of their doctrines. Perhaps this also explains the freedom that the teacher exercised in not relying on canonical sources. He expresses a divine truth that was revealed to him directly.

The General Truth: The Human Being as Microcosm

R. Solomon Ibn Gabirol opens his work with an idea common to all philosophers of the Middle Ages, whether of neo-Platonic or Aristotelian orientation: The human being is a rational animal, and his highest purpose is knowledge of universal truth, which is eternal, for through this knowledge he realizes himself. But Gabirol turns this idea in a direction that characterizes neo-Platonism in particular. He affirms that this knowledge of universal, eternal truth by the person is in fact *self-knowledge*. The human being is a “microcosm”—a miniature world—and he reflects in his own being the being of the whole universe, therefore knowledge of all being is human self-knowledge. It stands to reason that the substantive difference between the neo-Platonic tendency that leans toward a subjective, mystical approach and the Aristotelian tendency that leans toward objective science, is rooted in this assumption that Aristotle did not accept.

How does this assumption influence the content of metaphysical truth?

Universal Knowledge

The aspiration to arrive at knowledge of universal truth as the content of human self-knowledge does not tend toward a detailed knowledge of the sciences, each requiring its own discipline. It also does not drive one toward plumbing the inexhaustible diversity of reality surrounding us. This mode of thought lacks the curiosity that characterizes the Aristotelian approach, that presses to know all knowable details and only

afterwards offers a general explanation. We are also missing the drive to show how the details form a totality. A philosopher of this sort is not curious to know earthly existence in detail. His goal is to know the unifying principle—the general rule from which it is possible to derive all the details and thus to undercut our interest in the details. For it is understood that the human being, inasmuch as he is a representative being, encompasses the overall principle of being but not the details that fall underneath it. This is an aspiration to ascend from the details to the universal, to encompass being at a glance and see it as one—above and beyond the plurality of its parts. From a certain aspect this is the aspiration of an artist or a believer but not of a scientist.

It is a tragic paradox that precisely in his attempt to grasp the absolute unity of all being Gabirol becomes entangled in irreconcilable contradictions, because reality is filled with oppositions and polarities.

Introspection

The aspiration to know the truth as the content of self-knowledge is not only uninterested in the rich detail of surrounding reality, but it justifies inattentiveness to the reality external to humankind. In other words, it mandates introspection in order to reveal the perspectival nature of thought itself. The thinker strives to comprehend the substance of his thought, to know his cognitive process, and thus to plumb the depths of his own essence. He stands drunk with fear and wonder before the bottomless well of his own inwardness, depths upon depths, until he feels that he has grasped the root of his selfhood in what transcends it, i.e. in God.

This is first of all a religious position. But it is a religious position very remote from that envisioned in Saadia's thought. But since it is religious it easily ignores the difference between itself and the truth in the non-mystical canonical sources.

The Three Domains of Knowledge

Universal knowledge is humanity's purpose. In order to arrive at universal knowledge, it is necessary to start with the broadest possible perspective, i.e., to determine all the domains of inquiry. When we are dealing with a detail or a portion of the whole, we keep track of our place in the totality and do not lose sight of it.

Thus knowledge is divided into three domains:

1. **Form and matter**—all beings of the terrestrial world are composed of form and matter, according to Plato and Aristotle. As our first familiarity is with this earthly existence, we should consider these two principles that comprise it. We have already noted the total abstraction that frees the philosopher in one sweeping omission from all the burden of inquiry into the details of surrounding reality. Everything is immediately placed into these two categories: matter and form. These two categories reflect consideration of the nature of our knowledge of these entities, not how they are specifically constituted. The manner of thought that we are dealing with examines only the tools by which it grasps reality, and therefore it strives to know itself, not reality.
2. **Will**—The things that are composed of matter and form are not self-caused. The cause for their existence is the (divine) will that combines these two principles, and therefore the will is the second domain of knowledge.
3. **The First Substance**—The will belongs to the One who wills—the First Substance, or the infinite God. This is the third domain, and of it we have no knowledge. When thought exhausts what is given it to know, it discovers that it has a cause beyond it, to which it points. Ibn Gabirol indicates a propos of the three domains of knowledge that we should make a distinction between direct knowledge, inferential knowledge, and what is beyond human comprehension (i.e., what we know to be unknowable).

The Threefold Division Embraces All Knowledge

As we said, Ibn Gabirol assumes this encompassing framework as the originating point of his analysis. He devotes many pages to an abundance of proofs which seek to prove that this threefold classification encompasses all reality.

He was forced into this position by his belief that the number three is the prototype of completeness, of dynamic plurality that reverts back to union. Every effect has a cause, and the mediating force between cause and effect completes the triad. Likewise, in every alteration of quality and quantity, however slight, there is a transitional state between the prior and subsequent state. Three is the principle of identity amidst change. It is no surprise that the Christian philosophers assumed that

any thinker who presented the triad as the model of completion was himself a Christian, though logically there is no reason why a mystically-inclined Jewish thinker might not be drawn to the same idea.

The First Domain of Knowledge: Matter and Form

The *Fountain of Life* treats exhaustively of the first domain of knowledge: matter and form. It leaves the other domains to succeeding volumes.

We are able to distinguish the essence of each material object and its existence. The essence corresponds to the definition of the object, and the medievals spoke of the “quiddity” of a thing (from *quid* = “what”)—the answer to the question, “*what* is this thing?” But its existence in reality goes beyond our conceiving the idea of the object in thought; existence does not follow logically from the mere concept but is something in addition to it.

In Aristotle’s view, the form and matter do not exist separately, and the distinction between them is merely theoretical. Matter always takes on some form or other and is manifest through it; we know matter through the form. On the other hand, the form is expressed through matter; we know form through matter, by means of our senses. For example: the table (as form) exists by means of the wood (matter); wood may be thought of as the potential for a table to be actualized.

This Aristotelian theory raises many questions, such as what is the essence of matter, what is the essence of form, and what is the relation between the two of them. There is a richness of significance and a dearth of clarity that opened the door for many varied interpretations.

The Difference between Gabirol and Aristotle

At the start of his discussion Gabirol emphasizes the primary sense of the concept of matter: that which exhibits form. Matter is what gives existence to the form (or concept). By contrast, form identifies and delimits a portion of reality, and defines it as a separate entity. With this point, we have not yet emphasized the fundamental difference between Gabirol and Aristotle, but it becomes readily apparent when Gabirol develops his thesis. Gabirol is not interested in the variety of different forms and the variety of different materials. He is interested in the principles of “Form” as such and “Matter” as such. “Form” is the principle of existence in the broadest possible sense. It designates all-encompassing possibility, the possibility of plurality, though it is itself

one. Of course, since it is the principle of all existence, it is "prior" to each existing thing. On the other hand, "Form" is the principle of individuation and limitation. Each form is a separate entity complete in itself and distinct from its surroundings. In this way it is the cause of plurality beyond itself. Therefore, Gabirol argues, Form is active: it defines, distinguishes, and separates things, whereas Matter is passive: it bears and receives Form.

In such a way is generated a new ambiguity that causes problems in Gabirol's thought: in one respect it is possible to say that matter is the cause of plurality, for it is infinitely divisible, and without it there could not be multiple forms. Form is the cause of unity, because each form denotes a unified entity. But it is also possible to argue the opposite—that the form is the cause of plurality, because it effects a division in matter, and that matter is the cause of unity, for without it there would be no defined object. The same applies to the identity of things. It is possible to argue that matter individuates each entity, because without it there would be only one generalized form to speak of. On the other hand, it is form that delimits it, therefore it is the source of the identity of all objects. Similarly, it is possible to argue that matter is the prime element of all reality, for without it there would be no sense to the notion of the real. But form is also fundamental, because without it there would be no definite real thing subsisting. It follows that all these assertions have an equal measure of truth, yet they argue in opposite directions!

We come here to a second central respect in which Gabirol differs from Aristotle. In Aristotle's view the domain in which we can speak of a distinction of matter and form is the domain of material entities—bodies in the proper sense. These bodies are necessarily comprised of matter that can be perceived by the senses and from form that can be apprehended by reason. Therefore intellect is not corporeal, and therefore we can deduce that apart from material bodies there are also purely intellectual entities without matter. Intellect—including human intellect—is a unitary, spiritual, incorporeal entity, and all the more so God and the angels that are intermediate between God and humanity.

This assertion is undeniably problematic. In Aristotle's view, it is hard to understand in what sense intellect exists if it has no material substrate. But it is possible to explain on the basis of this assumption why Aristotle arrived at the unequivocal conclusion that form is prior to matter, and that the actual existence of form is prior to the potential

readiness in matter to receive form. In Aristotle's view, true reality is the reality of intellectual form.

By contrast, in Gabirol's view the distinction between matter and form applies to all entities. With astonishing daring but complete consistency he argues that it applies even to God! Why? Because for Gabirol matter is the universal principle of existence; it is the universal substrate of all forms, and there is no form without matter. Thus Gabirol fundamentally revised the conception of the relationship between matter and form, and thus he changed the conception of the notion between potentiality and actuality. In Aristotle's view, potentiality is possibility, a condition between full being and total non-being, whereas actuality is real being. In the neo-Platonic conception to which Gabirol subscribed, potentiality is the condition in which all forms are united in the Infinite but not manifest to finite thought.

The actualization of forms separates them out from one another. But this is not a condition of perfection but one of alienation. All the forms that have become separated yearn to reunite with their Source, because only there did they achieve truest realization. It follows that potentiality is the highest perfection of being, and not actuality!

Gabirol's neo-Platonic method seeks however to overcome the duality of the Aristotelian conception—the duality of matter and form; the duality of knower and known; the duality of actual and potential—it strives to understand reality as a dynamic unity which from the terrestrial standpoint of human existence manifests unity and plurality, but which from God's standpoint is completely unitary. If so, the physical world and the metaphysical world constitute a dynamic unity.

Gabirol attempted to express this outlook in a coherent philosophical way, but he did not succeed in overcoming its contradictions. But his philosophical failure points to a believer's consciousness of a certain truth, a truth that is in principle beyond the power of conception of human reason, but for which reason nevertheless yearns.

Levels of the Hierarchy

What we have said so far lays the basis for a conception that describes all reality as a pyramid-like hierarchy of beings deriving from the divine unity and striving to become reunited with it: from the one to the many, from the spiritual to the material, from the inconceivable to the conceivable. The next step will be an attempt to outline the principal

stages of the hiearchical scheme of existence and the transitions from one level to the next within it.

The simplest way for us to distinguish between matter and form is through their manifestation in an artificial product. We take wood—the matter—and fashion it into a particular shape—a table. The table is now the form of the wood. The form delimited and individuated a particular configuration from the myriad possibilities in the matter that bears it. But the result is a form that cannot reproduce itself: a table does not beget other tables in its image and likeness. This is thus the end of the process of generation—the final station.

We now consider the matter of the table—the wood. When we consider it we discern another conceptual form—the defined essence “wood.” It thus turns out that what was viewed as matter in relation to the table is a more primitive matter that has received the form of “wood.” This is a natural form that grows, dies, and reproduces. What, however, is it that bears the form “wood”? In Aristotle’s view, it is a composite of the elements earth, water, air and fire, and when we ask what bears these forms, the answer is: the pure potentiality of matter-as-such, what the philosophers call “primal matter” or “hylic matter.” But in Gabirol’s view it follows from this that there must be a prior source both for form and for matter. If there is a hierarchy of different forms, then there must be a parallel hierarchy of different matters that derive from the same source—from God who creates the universe. He deduced from this that there must be two types of matter that emanate hierarchically from God, each of which carries the potential for matter and form: (1) the matter that supports the heavenly spheres, which produce the primary elements (earth, water, air and fire). These elements are then given the form of corporeality, and thus is generated (2) the corporeal matter that supports the forms of corporeal bodies. Thus Gabirol succeeded in bridging the gap between spiritual matter and corporeal matter, even though it is clear that the question—“What is spiritual matter? How does it differ from form, and what distinguishes spiritual form from corporeal form?”—does not receive a logical solution but only a technical solution by a carefully-delineated progression of stages mediating between corporeal and spiritual levels: the soul is the “matter” (or substrate) that bears the form of corporeality (the body). Above the soul—whose spiritual matter bears an intellectual form—is a chain of ten Intelligences that mediate between God and the soul, and the principle of materiality (which in this respect is purely

spiritual) is found in God Himself. Gabirol makes a distinction between “universal matter” and “universal form.” Is it possible to understand these fine distinctions conceptually, or is this perhaps only a verbal scheme from which only the metaphysical imagination of a poet can derive any reality?

In any case, in Gabirol’s view the combination of universal form and universal matter generates the first Intelligence, which provides the matter for the form of the second Intelligence, and so on. Thus we can reconstruct the chain of being from the upper to the lower levels. The farther down we come, the more detail of composition we get, until we arrive at the lowest, grossest level of material being—the artificial.

The Relation of Matter and Form

To understand this picture, we should add something else of the relationship of matter and form. Matter is a static, passive principle, whereas form is dynamic and active. Form is impressed on matter, and it repeats this act of impression again and again, each time on matter which has previously received the impression of other forms. Each matter that already bears a form now becomes matter bearing a more composite form, more corporeal, for otherwise it is hard to understand how spiritual matter that has received a spiritual form becomes corporeal. At any rate, all of being is conceived as a complex interweaving of two basic elements—universal matter and universal form—until all the forms that were potentially to be found in universal form, and all the matters in universal matter, have been brought forth.

Gabirol offers in this context a parable that was later incorporated in kabbalah. Let us picture in our imagination a ray of light that passes through glass of many colors. The ray of light is one form, but it is broken up into different colors. The glass vessels are the matter by means of which the forms impressed on it change their colors. This is a wonderful image, which reminds us of the convoluted drawings of the modern artist Escher, and which demonstrates how imagination can surpass conceptual reason in its richness.

Artistic Beauty—Philosophical Weakness

It is hard not to be moved by the artistic landscape of this view of the world, combining multiplicity in unity. But philosophically it is very problematic. At times form is offered as the source of unity, at times

matter. At times form precedes matter, and at times the reverse. But the most difficult problem is how to reconcile the extreme dualism that ensues from a method that strives for absolute monism? How can these two elements be forced to relate to each other? And how can we identify them as proceeding from a single source?

In order to overcome this difficulty, Gabirol would have had to assume that even though matter and form are separate principles, they have a primary relationship. Matter is drawn to form, because it actualizes it. Form is drawn to matter, because it gives it existence. It is clear that this conception introduces an irreparable internal contradiction into the body of his method. The active becomes passive and the passive becomes active, and the basic distinction between matter and form is disturbed. And this still offers no answer to the question of their common source.

Theory of the Will

At this point we come to Gabirol's second original theory—his theory of the will. It is the will that bridges the gap between matter and form. It causes the force or the principle of action that passes through a chain of entities until it completes its impulse in the last one. Thus it acts on the matter through the form.

But what is this will? The book *Fountain of Life* was intended to deal only with the relation of matter and form. Gabirol devoted a separate book to the theory of will, but it was lost. In *Fountain of Life* there are only a few fragmentary references to his theory of the will. Nevertheless, we can learn something of Gabirol's ideas from them.

The will does not exist separately or act independently. Gabirol talks of it as if it were a separate entity, but he also describes it as an aspect of God's essence: it embodies God's turning from Himself to another being outside Him. In a human being too, the will is the soul's turning to another. Gabirol assumes a simple parallel between a human will and the divine will: the will is an externalizing agent, revealing the inner self.

In God, this is emanation. But what is revealed outside is less than the essence that is expressed. There is a contraction and a diminution. Very likely Gabirol tried in this manner to explain the graduated transition from the spiritual to the corporeal: the will that flows from the infinite divine essence and proceeds outward in a reduced form becomes more and more constricted and more and more corporeal,

it becomes transfigured into tokens that express it, and thus it embodied in the same manner as a thought is embodied in speech.

But it seems impossible not to see that in this way the same dualism is projected beyond the domain of universal matter and universal form. It is ascribed to the Godhead itself. Will becomes a further extension of the principle of form—Form above Form; the supernal Substance (God) becomes a further extension of the principle of matter—materiality above materiality. This idea lends itself to visual imagery or poetic expression, but not to logical solution.

Religious Significance of the Will

Gabirol's theory of the will seems to have had considerable influence on the Jewish kabbalah and Christian neo-Platonism. This manifested a basic inner need of medieval religious philosophy, to renew the immediate connection between humanity and God. Neo-Platonic theology makes reference to an infinite divine principle that is so remote that from the human standpoint it is experienced not as a presence but as an absence. One knows intellectually that the divine Nothingness is the absolute opposite of ordinary nothingness, such as the absence of a physical object. It is an absolute reality, but only God Himself knows it. How, then, can one establish a personal connection to the *deus absconditus*? How can one pray? How can one feel that one's prayer is heard?

The divine will, conceived as the hidden God's turning to one outside Himself, seeks to restore to the neo-Platonic outlook the personal dimension of traditional religion. God may indeed be hidden in His essence, but He reveals Himself through the divine will as a personal presence with intentionality and relationship, expressing benevolence. It reveals that the divinity is not egocentric but essentially beneficent. We may not grasp it conceptually, but the divine benevolence is expressed in the very existence of the world in which we find ourselves. This is indeed the connection between the theology of *Fountain of Life* and the personal God to whom Gabirol turns in his liturgical poetry.