

FROM THE PAGES OF TRADITION

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ISAAC ben SOLOMON ISRAELI

Philosophy as Self-Knowledge

INTRODUCTION

Isaac Israeli defines philosophy as a discipline concerned with the pursuit of self-knowledge. Man's unique position in the cosmos, combining both the spiritual and corporeal phases of life, projects human personality as the key to an understanding of ultimate reality. Forming an epitome of the universe, man, in knowing himself, knows everything. But a full knowledge of reality must involve us in a creative task instead of mere academic speculation. It should lead us to a knowledge of purposes and ultimate concerns in reality, especially to an understanding of the purpose of the union in man of body and soul. Whoever knows this purpose can realize what is truth and attain intellectual excellence and spiritual perfection.¹

To arrive at this definition of philosophy, — and it is this personalistic definition which marks him as the first Jewish dialectic philosopher — Isaac Israeli drew from both neo-Platonic and Aristotelian sources. The notion of the soul's union with the Creator and the doctrine of cosmic emanation in the supra-terrestrial world are of neo-Platonic origin. His view of the individuation of the soul and its process of actualization by effort, involvement, commitment, and activity in order to rise to the level of its cosmic counterpart as well as his physical, naturalistic explanation of the elements in the sublunar realm are indigenous to the Aristotelean tradition. It would appear thus that to Isaac Israeli terrestrial bodies are outside the process of emanation. And the reason for that is that Israeli was fundamentally concerned with the nature and destiny of man in the sublunar universe. Man possesses a divine spark, a rational soul which like the Intellect, the cosmic hypostasis, was created directly by God² and requires no intermediate graduations in this sphere. Essences descend one from another in a necessary sequence and none could exist without the one preceding it. Man's rational soul, however, is in a state of potentiality until activated by conscious efforts and intellectual excellence. When actualized, the soul ascends to the level of the world of Intelligence, of Splendor, of God. Manifestly, as regards the developmental process of man's rational

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faculty, the scheme of emanation with its successive radiations from the main source of light to the material and physical senses is not applicable³ either.

Isaac Israeli was a contemporary of Saadia. He was born in Egypt in 855, and was highly regarded as a physician. He later went to Kairuan where he served as court physician to several of the Fatimide Caliphs. He wrote at least five treatises on medicine which were translated into Latin and were studied by physicians in the European universities. In a small handbook, *Guide for the Physicians*, he stressed the moral aspects of medicine. A doctor, he maintained, must regard his work as auxiliary to the work of nature. "The physician does not bring about the cure, but he prepares the way for nature, nature is the actual healer." He also urged his fellow professionals to devote some time to heal the poor who could not afford to pay.

Because of the popularity of his medical works, his two treatises on philosophy, *The Book of Definitions* and *The Book of the Elements*, enjoyed a wide reputation among Christian scholastics and he was often referred to as the Jewish philosopher second only to Maimonides. *The Book of Definitions* defines the most significant philosophic notions which he compiled from various sources. *The Book of the Elements* is primarily concerned with the problems of physics and constitutes an exposition of the Aristotelean doctrine of the elements. He analyzes the number and character of the elements leading up to the composition of the human body. In the same work he refutes the atomic theory of Democritus and the Mutazila by proving that geometrical points which by definition have location but no size cannot be put together to form a line. By the same token discontinuous atoms cannot be the source of continuous substance.

The books were written in Arabic but the originals were lost and we owe our knowledge of them to Hebrew translations by Abraham b. Samuel Halevi ibn Chasdai which were published in 1896 and 1960 respectively.⁴ Although on the surface it does not appear from his works that he set out with the avowed purpose of serving Judaism, his definition of philosophy as primarily personalistic and his emphasis on man's participating role in orienting the self by transcendence and intellectual and moral self-realization places him in the forefront of Jewish philosophic tradition.

What follows is my translation of the first part of his work *The Book of Definition*. He begins by formulating the goal and the purposes of philosophic knowledge and concludes with his personalistic definition of philosophy.

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The formula for man to become like unto God as far as possible is derived from the aim of the philosophic enterprise. This ideal of *imitatio dei* conveys the notion of imitating God's activities which consist in knowing the realities of things with cognitive clarity and doing what the truth requires. To know the realities of things one must have a knowledge of nature's four causes and purposes which include the material, the formal, the efficient, and the final cause.

Now the material cause consists of spiritual and corporeal aspects.⁵ As an example of the spiritual phase of the material cause we may cite the respective genera which divide into several species bearing their shape and perfecting their quality. Consider, for instance, the genus animal, which embraces a variety of species such as man and horse and their respective kind. The former bears their form which is responsible for their existence. An instance of the corporeal aspect of the material cause is mineral silver which constitutes the material base for both a ring and a coin bearing their texture, or like the property of gold out of which earrings and emeralds are made.

The formal cause is also of a spiritual and material kind. The former consists of the essential form borne by the genera that bestows existence to the species such as the animal faculty of the soul, which is responsible for the endowment of life in every living being. The corporeal aspect refers to the shape of matter in the human body as well as in all bodies.

The efficient cause combines likewise both the intelligible and the physical. The intelligible cause is like the motion of the spheres which the Almighty imbedded in nature by reference to which measure all phenomena in the physical world such as generation and destruction, growth and diminution, health and sickness and similar natural phenomena are measured. As to the physical aspects of the efficient cause, this refers to the actual activity of, say, a goldsmith when he fashions a ring or an artist painting a picture or a builder constructing a house.

The final cause also operates on two levels — the mental and the material. On the material side the final cause alludes to the ultimate shape of a thing, such as a perfect shape of a house that makes it possible for its inhabitants to live there without fear,

or the shape of a seal perfectly engraved like the engravings of a signet. The mental dimension of the final cause is like the purpose of the union in man of soul and body. This is in order that man may apprehend clearly the truth of the various disciplines of knowledge and thereby distinguish between good and evil, the desirable and objectionable. Such knowledge will lead one to act meritoriously in keeping with that which is true, just and upright, to sanctify and worship the Creator and recognize His sovereignty, and desist from impure deeds of the animal nature. One who does this will receive his reward from the Creator. Cleaving to the upper soul, his soul attains the light of knowledge and the beauty of wisdom and splendor. When a man reaches this degree, he elevates himself to the level of spirit by uniting with the created light which comes directly from God and he will forever praise the Creator. This is his paradise, his reward, his spiritually edifying resting place, his perfection and excellence.

Accordingly Plato said that philosophy is the activity, the strengthening and the "help of death." What this philosopher of consummate wisdom and ethical conduct meant by the phrase "the help of death" was to indicate that philosophy helps to deaden all animal desires and pleasures. For by being thus delivered from them, a man will reach excellence and the higher splendor and will enter the realm of truth. But if he indulges his animal pleasures and desires and they become strengthened, he will ultimately be exposed to powers that will lead him astray from the duties to God, and from pure fear of Him, and from prayer at the prescribed time.

This leads to another notion of which the philosopher speaks, namely that intelligence stimulates righteousness. For the Almighty has endowed his chosen creatures, i.e., his prophetic messengers and men of wisdom, justice, and truth, with rational principles to lead their people toward equity, justice, lawful means, the pursuit of the good, the charitable, and the gentle, and lead them away from evil, corruption, robbery, and unlawful means. One who does not, however, embrace the disciplines of knowledge that the Almighty vouchsafed unto his select creatures, his priests, and philosophers, but persists in his corruption, sins, arrogance and unworthy deeds will discover that those very con-

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temptible deeds will defile him so with their contamination and lower him down so abysmally by their heavy weight of evil that he will not be able to rise to the world of truth and apprehend the light of knowledge and the splendor of wisdom. He will remain in distress beneath the heavenly sphere, doomed to everlasting suffering, perpetually roaming in the fiery sphere of intense fire and flame. This will be his *Gehenna* and his fiery foundation which the Almighty reserved for the wicked who reject the disciplines of science.⁶

Now, the definition of philosophy derived from the Greek etymological connotation of knowledge, is essentially self-knowledge and keeping far from evil. When a man knows himself truly, both his spiritual as well as his physical elements, he knows everything. For in man are combined both substance and accident. Substance consists of two aspects, spiritual and corporeal. The spiritual is the soul and the reason;⁷ the corporeal is the body with its dimensions of length, breadth and depth.⁸ Likewise the accidents are similarly divided into the spiritual and the corporeal. The spiritual qualities are like humility, wisdom and other similar qualities borne by the soul. The corporeal accidents are like the colors black, white, yellow, red, green, and similar physical qualities borne by the body.

Inasmuch as man combines both elements, it becomes clear that when man knows himself in his spiritual as well as corporeal aspects he knows everything. Such knowledge of oneself leads to an apprehension of the spiritual and corporeal substances as well as the primary substance, the intellect, which was created directly by God and sustains the terrestrial changing universe.

Self-knowledge makes us further aware of the first accidental qualities of the categories such as quantity, quality, and relation, as well as the other categories — six of which are composite bodies consisting of a combination of substance and accident while three of them are simple bodies. A man who knows all this knows everything and is worthy of being called a philosopher.

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NOTES

1. Knowledge of the truth, understood as theoretical knowledge leading to right action as its by-product, will precipitate the process of self-transcendence in man's soul-development receiving from the Creator ultimately the reward of union with the upper soul.

2. See *Book of Definition*, p. 136.

3. A basic discrepancy appears in Israeli's philosophy. In the *Book of Definition* the doctrine of emanation is developed with great clarity concerning the supra-terrestrial sphere. God created the Intellect, the Splendor. From it a spark of light emanated and it became the rational soul. In due course various divisions of the soul emerged. The sphere of the heavens proceeded from the vegetative soul and as it thickened it became visible. Here suddenly the scheme of emanation comes to a close and we shift to a physical explanation of the universe. Since the nature of the sphere is to be a mover, the outermost sphere moves its neighbor and fire results. Air is derived from fire; water from air; earth from water. The combination of the elements in various proportions produces the vegetable, mineral, animal realms of experience. Thus in his *Book of Elements* no reference is made to the doctrine of emanation.

4. *Book of Definitions* published by Hirschfeld in *Festschrift zum achtzigsten Geburtstag, Moritz Steinschneider*, Leipzig 1896, pp. 131-141. S. Fried, *Das Buch über die Elemente, "Sefer Ha-Yesodot"*, 1900.

5. Reason which is the first link in the chain of emanation is compounded of two elements — form and matter.

6. The study of science embraces a knowledge of reality. According to Israeli, the greatest reality is an understanding of the purpose of the union of body and soul.

7. Isaac Israeli, *Book of Definition*, p. 138.

8. See Guttman, J., *Die Philosophischen Lehren des Isaak ben Solomon Israeli*, Munster in W., 1911, p. 25 and note.