

# Spinoza and Jewish Philosophy

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**P**HILOSOPHERS IN A RANGE OF TRADITIONS have had a fraught relationship with the religious and political orders they lived under. The Jewish philosophical tradition is no exception—indeed its leading representatives have been doubted at their core.

For instance: in addition to extensive controversy sparked already around the lifetime of Moses ben Maimon or Maimonides (1138-1204), as late as the eighteenth century even the authorial unity of his writings was doubted. Could this central Jewish philosopher’s canonical works—the *Guide of the Perplexed* influenced by ancient Greek and medieval Islamic philosophy, thrown to the fire on numerous occasions, and the *Mishneh Torah* that provided a key comprehensive legal code finding rationality in so much of the ritualistic dimension of Judaism—actually have been written by two distinct figures?<sup>1</sup> Or to jump ahead “from Moses to Moses,” following a lineage that *some* modern Jewish figures claimed to stretch from Maimonides or indeed the prophet Moses onwards to Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786),<sup>2</sup> *others* have directed anger at Mendelssohn for his Enlightenment variety of Judaism. He has then been blamed for a dilution of Jewish religious practice and labeled the “evil Moses of Dessau,” referencing his birthplace in what is today Germany.<sup>3</sup> Indeed up until at least 2019, the books of this Moses have been condemned, and likewise burned, to the end of rejecting the *haskala* or Jewish Enlightenment.<sup>4</sup>

Baruch or eventually Benedictus Spinoza (1632-1677) can helpfully be positioned between these two thinkers on many fronts, including here. And he’s

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1. See e.g. Pines, “The Philosophical Purport” on the relation among these works. See also Davidson, *Moses Maimonides*, 420-422 for discussion of Jacob Emden (1697-1776), who doubted whether they were written by the same Maimonides. Emden appreciated Maimonides’s contributions to *halakha* but found in the philosophical work whose authorship he questioned “inanities, empty words, striving after wind, and vanities [...] drawn from treasure houses of falsehood and lies”—so recommended its destruction.
  2. This epitaph at Moses Maimonides’s alleged grave originally referred to his almost unique importance as a Jewish thinker, thus comparable only to the Jewish prophet Moses. The phrase was eventually extended, and newly understood, to refer to Moses Mendelssohn as well. See for discussion Gottlieb, *Faith and Freedom*, 3.
  3. On this accusation, see Feiner, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 10.
  4. I am grateful to Paul Franks for sharing a 2019 poster from the Congregation Shaarei Chaim in Brooklyn, New York to this effect.

then no exception to the rule that historical philosophers are often contentious figures for the broader traditions they are born into. But arguably, Spinoza's troubles have proven to be the most severe relative to these others in the Jewish context, and in at least two senses. First, as with Maimonides or Mendelssohn, the coherence of his thinking has naturally been doubted, and he has been thought to exert a corrupting influence. But in Spinoza's case, judgements of his thought or person—or both—infamously led to a *herem* expelling him from his Portuguese Jewish community in Amsterdam. Indeed this ban, citing unspecified “abominable heresies” and cursing him at some length, has also been maintained until the present day.<sup>5</sup>

Second, as harsh as this all is, there's yet another reason to think that Spinoza has as a philosopher faced the greatest difficulties with respect to either Maimonides or Mendelssohn: namely that some *historical* and even *contemporary* scholars have considered Spinoza's writings to fall outside of Jewish philosophy full stop, too. In the case of the *former*, no less a prominent reference in the relevant literature than Julius Guttman (1880-1950), for example, argued that “Spinoza's system belongs more properly to the development of European thought than [...] Jewish philosophy”; and although Guttman recognized the influence of medieval Jewish philosophers on Spinoza, he also nearly suggested that Spinoza had exploited reference to them before he then deemphasized Spinoza's importance for modern Jewish thought as well.<sup>6</sup> And when it comes to the *latter*, the more recent work of Wiep van Bunge, for instance, makes the case for “integrating Spinoza's philosophy in the wider cultural history of the Dutch Republic” specifically because for him the idea “that Spinoza should, somehow,

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5. In 2015, the *herem* was upheld by Chief Rabbi of the Portuguese Jewish community in Amsterdam Pinchas Toledano (although Chief Rabbi of Israel Yitzhak Herzog had claimed that at least some portions of the ban are no longer valid in 1953). In 2021, Yitzhak Y. Melamed requested permission to film inside the Amsterdam Sephardic synagogue in the context of a documentary project on Spinoza, and was initially declared “persona non grata”; although he was later allowed entry, filming within the synagogue was still disallowed. For the original text of the *herem*, see the holdings of the Gemeente Amsterdam Stadsarchief <<https://archieff.amsterdam/inventarissen/scans/334/5.1.1.1/start/240/limit/10/highlight/8>>, accessed July 2022.

6. “Spinoza did not use [the medieval philosophers'] theses to develop his own system, but to advance his polemics against the Bible.” See Guttman, *Philosophies of Judaism*, 301-324, here 301f.

be regarded as an essentially Jewish philosopher” ought to be “abandoned.”<sup>7</sup> But while there’s no question that Spinoza was in serious dialogue with a number of his Dutch contemporaries and predecessors,<sup>8</sup> in recognizing as much we must not neglect (among other things) the importance of Spinoza’s early Jewish education, or of his continuously serious engagement with a range of thinkers in the Jewish tradition within the context of his metaphysics, his epistemology, his intellectualist ethics—to highlight just three areas of his thought treated most in this chapter—and far beyond. Furthermore, Spinoza’s posthumous legacy in Jewish culture, of course including philosophy, can’t be underestimated.<sup>9</sup>

These are at least the claims I defend in this chapter. In doing so, I must set aside many friends and foes of Spinoza who have linked him to Jewish thought in diverse ways. For example: following a long line of nineteenth-century women philosophers who engaged Spinoza from within the German-language tradition,<sup>10</sup> the German-Jewish thinker Margarete Susman (1872-1966) interestingly found in his universal perspective a Jewish worldview in 1914.<sup>11</sup> And long before her, the German scholar Johann Georg Wachter (1673-1757) had suggested in 1699 to critical ends that there were close ties between Judaism, Kabbalah, and Spinozism.<sup>12</sup> Such complex proposals deserve further attention on their own terms.

Meanwhile, in this chapter I rather review and build upon modern scholarship from figures like Harry Wolfson (1887-1974)—who sees Baruch

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7. Van Bunge, “Spinoza Jewish Identity,” 109f. and 102.

8. For an example of recent work on this front, see Sangiacomo, “Aristotle, Heereboord and the Polemical Target of Spinoza’s Critique.”

9. Schwartz, *The First Modern Jew* covers material engaging the image of Spinoza from the seventeenth all the way up to the twenty-first century. For other wide-ranging work on the reception of Spinoza, see also Goetschel, *Spinoza’s Modernity* and Wulf, *Spinoza in der jüdischen Aufklärung*.

10. See here my “Spinozism Around 1800 and Beyond.”

11. Susman, “Spinoza und das jüdische Weltgefühl.” See Goetschel, “Margarete Susman,” §5 for a brief treatment.

12. Wachter, *Spinozismus im Judenthumb*. Compare the later Wachter, *Elucidarius cabalisticus* and see for discussion of Wachter and his significance e.g. Laerke, “Spinozism, Kabbalism, and Idealism.” Concerning Spinoza’s actual exposure and philosophical proximity to Kabbalistic literature, see Melamed, “Spinoza and Kabbalah.”

as “the last of the mediaevals” and Benedictus “as the first of the moderns”<sup>13</sup>—by taking his cue to emphasize both the importance of philosophers in the Jewish tradition to Spinoza *and* the importance of Spinoza to philosophers in the Jewish tradition.<sup>14</sup> Given the limits imposed by a chapter-length discussion, my primary focus here is on links to Spinoza’s magnum opus the *Ethics* (E), although I make occasional reference to his early *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* (TIE), his *Theological-Political Treatise* (TTP), and his letters at various stages of the chapter as well.<sup>15</sup>

I proceed in three main thematic steps. Initially, I clarify some of the fundamentals of Spinoza’s metaphysics to the end of reviewing the affective therapeutic upshot of his ethical project (Section I). Next, with this relatively elementary dimension of Spinoza’s ethics in view, I explore the more rarified “blessedness” (*beatitudo*) that he envisions at least some readers achieving via a kind of intuitive knowledge (Section II). Finally, after highlighting just how special this epistemic, ethical achievement is supposed to be, some discussion is warranted concerning why Spinoza thinks most of us are bound to fail in reaching it and often knowledge generally, leading Spinoza to develop a more modest political-theological project as well (Section III).

In each of these three portions of the chapter, I note the significance of

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13. Wolfson, *Philosophy of Spinoza* I, vii. According to Touati, *Prophètes, talmudistes, philosophes*, 119f. it’s “impossible to understand Spinoza [...] without knowing medieval Jewish philosophy.” See Harvey, “Historiography of Jewish Philosophy” in this volume for an overview of the writing the history of Jewish thought featuring discussion of Touati and many others.
  14. In drawing upon work by Wolfson and others following him, I also set aside earlier scholarship, including pioneering German-language research from already the nineteenth century. See for instance Joël, *Zur Genesis der Lehre Spinoza’s*.
  15. I cite Spinoza’s letters by number. I reference the TIE by section number and then the TTP by chapter and section number with Roman and Arabic numerals, respectively. I also cite the *Ethics* in standard fashion, using the following abbreviations: pref(-ace), app(-endix), c(-orollary), p(-roposition), and s(-cholium). Additionally, “d” stands either for “definition” (when it appears immediately to the right of the part number), or “demonstration” (in all other cases). Hence, E1d3 is the third definition of Part One and E1p16d is the demonstration of the sixteenth proposition of Part One. Translations of Spinoza are all by Curley. Finally, I occasionally cite the original Latin on the basis of Gebhardt’s edition of Spinoza’s writings, by volume and page number in Roman and Arabic numerals.

both widely recognized and all-too neglected interlocutors. Venturing beyond Maimonides and Mendelssohn mentioned above, I especially consider other rationalist medievals—who each respond to Aristotle in important ways, as I stress throughout the chapter<sup>16</sup>—as well as diverse moderns within the German-language tradition in particular.

### I. Metaphysics and affective therapy: Crescas and Rosenfeld

René Descartes is the only predecessor explicitly named in the *Ethics* (see E3pref | II/137 and E5pref | II/277).<sup>17</sup> But Spinoza does with various aspects of his thought things that Descartes as well as the Dutch Cartesians would have never wanted to do; and for this reason and others, a number of Spinoza’s most central views can productively be seen in relation to his medieval Jewish predecessors as well. In this section, I outline several of Spinoza’s basic metaphysical tendencies with especial reference to Hasdai Crescas (ca. 1340-1410/11), once a leading Rabbinic authority in what is today Spain. Then, I likewise clarify what Spinoza considers to be the initial ethical significance of his metaphysical views, and with the help of the Austrian writer Oskar Rosenfeld (1884-1944), who was a key contributor to the archive of the Łódź Ghetto and its newspaper.

According to many current commentators,<sup>18</sup> the deepest commitment in Spinoza’s thought is to a version of the Principle of Sufficient Reason, which Spinoza implicitly formulates as follows: “For each thing there must be assigned a cause, or reason, both for its existence and for its nonexistence” (E1p11d2; cf. also E1a2-3). Spinoza’s adherence to this ambitious principle can be understood to lead him to a strict and rationalistic form of monism. By Spinoza’s lights, all that exists is a. the one substance that is God or nature (E4p4d)—host to infinitely many attributes, including both thought and extension (E1p14c1-2)—and then b. what follows in a rational order from God, namely: modes of this one substance, which inhere within it but which may appear to us as distinct

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16. On Aristotle and Spinoza more directly, see Manzini, *Une lecture d’Aristote*.

17. Compare Nadler, “The Jewish Spinoza,” 495 according to which Spinoza’s *Ethics* “unlike [the TTP] does not once mention any other thinker by name.”

18. See most prominently Della Rocca, *Spinoza*—but also Garber, “Superheroes in the History of Philosophy” for pointed criticism.

objects. We must discuss in turn Spinoza's one substance, and then especially how its modes follow from it.

a. In supposing that his one substance has both the attributes of thought and extension (and more), and thus linking thought writ large with God, Spinoza recognizes that he's prefigured by key Jewish philosophers. Here we should particularly mention those influenced by Aristotle, who had associated God with thought in Book 12 of his *Metaphysics*, including Maimonides most prominently. Spinoza often wishes to distance himself from Maimonides because of severe disagreements, for instance regarding the relation of philosophy and scripture;<sup>19</sup> but Spinoza seems to have him in mind when he argues that the "order and connection of connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things" (E2p7).<sup>20</sup> While Spinoza takes this alignment further than Maimonides, he nonetheless admits:

[T]he thinking substance and the extended substance are one and the same substance which is now comprehended under this attribute, now under that. So also a mode of extension and the idea of that mode are one and the same thing, but expressed in two ways. *Some of the Hebrews seem to have seen this*, as if through a cloud, when they maintained that God's intellect, and the things understood by him are one and the same (emphasis mine; E2p7s1).

Maimonides had aligned knower, knowing, and known on several occasions. However, the following passage is particularly interesting alongside Spinoza's above, not least because Maimonides calls upon his own perceived predecessors here in the *Guide of the Perplexed* (GP):

You already know the fame of the dictum which the philosophers stated with reference to God, may He be exalted: the dictum being that He is the Intellect [*ha-sekheh*], the intellectually cognizing Subject [*ha-maskil*], and the intellectually cognized Object [*ha-muskal*], and these three notions

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19. See e.g. TTP VII 75, where Spinoza cites Maimonides at length and rejects his view that we should interpret religious texts allegorically to align with reason.

20. Compare here Klein, "Spinoza's Debt to Gersonides."

in Him, may He be exalted, are one single notion in which there is no multiplicity (GP I 68).<sup>21</sup>

In this case, it's simply “the philosophers” and not yet “the Hebrews” who have noticed there's “no multiplicity” here, in other words that there's rather unity among God and thought. Departing from Maimonides—or also Abraham ibn Ezra (1089/92-1164/67), who had likewise made such a suggestion and whom Spinoza called “a man with an independent mind and no slight learning” (TTP VIII 4)<sup>22</sup>—Spinoza will however propose that God isn't just thought but likewise extended, i.e. that the things we touch and feel are also God. For what could limit God from this realm or the other? If God has limits, there would need to be some reason for them, given the Principle of Sufficient Reason; but roughly speaking, Spinoza infers from the fact of God's infinite nature that none can be provided. In sum: Spinoza doesn't invoke any authorities by name in the rationalistic core of his argumentation.<sup>23</sup> Perhaps he thought that this could mislead or just distract. Yet he nonetheless makes clear he's pursuing a path that Jewish predecessors had at least begun to clear.

b. Let us return now to how modes ‘follow’ from the one substance understood as God or nature. For Spinoza, anything that can be brought about in God is necessarily brought about. “From the *necessity* of the divine nature there *must* follow infinitely many things in infinitely many modes” (emphasis mine; E1p16). One way to understand this view in less technical terms is to formulate it with reference to the omnipotence of God, as Spinoza realizes. He writes:

[I]ninitely many modes, i.e., all things, have necessarily flowed, or always follow, by the same necessity and in the same way as from the nature of a triangle it follows, from eternity and to eternity, that its three angles are

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21. I cite GP by book and chapter number in Pines's translation. See Harvey, “Portrait of Spinoza as a Maimonidean,” 164f. for discussion of Maimonides and Spinoza here.

22. See Harvey, “Portrait of Spinoza as a Maimonidean,” 164n75; Ibn Ezra writes in commentary on Exodus 34:36, for instance: “Be not astonished that the Lord calls ‘the Lord,’ for He is Knower [*yodea'*], Knowledge [*ve-da'at*], and Known [*ve-yadua'*]!”

23. For more detailed analysis of Spinoza's metaphysics here, see e.g. Stetter, “Spinoza's Substance Monism.”

equal to two right angles[—and insofar as we formulate things this way,] God’s omnipotence is maintained far more perfectly (E1p16s1).

Even what may seem to be the most absolutely adverse events will come about as God or nature produces the one order that’s possible, and that should then be understood as necessary—mere possibility is here eliminated (E1p33). In short, Spinoza arrives at this modal collapse from basic claims about the relations of ‘cause or reason’ that obtain among things and God or nature as the first, and specifically efficient, cause of these things through itself (E1p16c1-3). This necessitarianism will have wide-ranging consequences in Spinoza’s metaphysics and beyond, for instance with the preeminence of efficient causation forbidding any final causation or teleology, i.e. the notion of purposes in nature, contra the Aristotelians.

Spinoza is especially anticipated in his necessitarianism by Crescas, as he would have known. Spinoza cites “a certain Jew, called Rab Chasdai [*Ghasdaj*]” in a key piece of correspondence as having shown that one can both embrace actual infinity and develop a cosmological proof for the existence of God (Letter 12), a move Aristotle had excluded in his *Physics* that makes room only for potential infinity but that Crescas had made in his *Light of the Lord* (LL).<sup>24</sup> And Crescas had also offered in that latter work numerous arguments in favor of necessitarianism, beginning with the suggestion that because everything has its cause, and because God is the first cause, no thing can be the cause of itself:

[I]t is necessary that [...] causes be preceded by the existence of other causes, whose existence necessitates those causes. Of necessity their existence is necessary and not possible. When we seek further causes for these causes, the same rule will apply, until the series culminates in the first existent whose existence is necessary: God. It is thus established that the nature of the possible does not exist (LL II 5,2).

This view is largely grounded in an account of causality—one that agrees with Spinoza’s on several fronts, for instance in suggesting that everything has its

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24. LL I 2,3. I cite the *Light of the Lord* in Weiss’s translation by book, part, and chapter number. See for recent discussion of Aristotle, Crescas, and Spinoza here Laerke, “Spinoza and the Cosmological Argument According to Letter 12.”

determining cause, ultimately with God as the first determining cause—but modality has clearly also entered the picture too. Why, though, does Crescas rule out “the possible,” or what I have called mere possibility, and think that such chains of causes are also *necessary*? Why, in other words, couldn’t we have chains of causes that, at least at some given moment, go in this direction rather than that *alternative* direction? For Crescas as later for Spinoza, such a perspective would eliminate God’s omnipotence or specifically omniscience, as Crescas stresses in his sixth argument for necessitarianism:

If the nature of the possible were to exist, we would necessarily have to concede that the existence of a volition for one of two alternatives, without a necessitating cause, is possible. It would then necessarily be the case that God’s knowledge of it does not derive from His essence as does His knowledge of existents insofar as He is their cause; rather, His knowledge would be acquired and would emanate from their existence. Yet it is the height of absurdity that His knowledge should originate outside Him (LL II 5,2.).

Although Crescas largely formulates this argument in terms of God’s *knowledge*, the notion that God’s knowledge would originate outside of Him is also clearly a violation of God’s *power*, which Crescas stresses here is “infinite on all accounts.” God has namely the power to know infinitely, “with regard to everything whose existence can be conceived by the intellect—even if it is impossible by nature.” For both Crescas and Spinoza, God’s infinite power is actual and not potential (LL II 3,1f.; E1p11d3). Thus, it can’t be that some events are arbitrary, and so God’s knowledge of them merely *a posteriori*.<sup>25</sup>

Crescas and Spinoza proceed from here to reject free will on related bases. Although Spinoza already rules out free will generally and especially for God in E1, entitled “On God” and concerned with its nature (see e.g. E1p32c1), Spinoza then shows that no one else has free will either again in E2, focused on “The Nature and Origin of the Mind.” Here he emphasizes: “In the mind there is no absolute, or free, will, but the mind is determined to will this or that by a cause which is also determined by another, and this again by another, and so

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25. For further discussion of Crescas’s metaphysics, and with important references to Spinoza’s, see Harvey, *Physics and Metaphysics in Hasdai Crescas*.

on to infinity” (E2p48). Indeed all this causation also takes place necessarily, as we have seen (E1p33s1). A libertarian account of free will might have it that we can create new chains of causes. A deterministic but compatibilist perspective might envision a set of chains or then even several sets of chains of causes that can split like forks in the road, or that are somehow our own, or similar. But the strict deterministic *and* necessitarian view endorsed by Spinoza asserts that there’s ultimately just one necessary set of chains that never fork, and that extend far beyond us—which allows no room for free will.

Similarly for Crescas, even if there can be numerous sets of chains of causes, any mover has its necessary mover all the way back to God, which excludes free will:

[A]nything that passes from potentiality to actuality requires something external to effect the transition. It is therefore necessary that when the volition to do something newly arises in a man, this volition, which was in potentiality and passed into actuality, was necessarily actualized by something external to it that moved the appetitive faculty to join and concur with the imaginative faculty. [...] When this conjunction, which is the cause of the volition, exists, the volition indeed will exist of necessity (LL II 5,2).

Not only is there no room for absolute spontaneity here, but the notion of making a choice that’s at least somehow original to me is also off the table. Should I respond to Crescas that my free volition exists of necessity because of a free volition of mine that proceeds it, I will for him be on my way to realizing that such willing is an endless and, in a literal sense, impossible task. “[T]he prior volition will have one prior to it, so that one volition will require an infinite number of volitions. Yet this is the height of absurdity—on top of which, each one will be necessitated by the previous one, and so will not be something [merely] possible.”

The picture painted by both Spinoza and Crescas before him might seem so awash with necessity as to lead us to wonder: why bother developing such arguments at all? Won’t their opponents necessarily hold the positions they are already determined to hold anyways? Or, for Crescas—who still retains a more orthodox religious picture that interests Spinoza more for political reasons—why would God offer us any *stone tablets* as a guide, if our actions are already *set*

*in stone?* The poet and philosopher Judah ha-Levi (c. 1075-1141) had relatedly argued in defense of mere possibility and free will in his *Kuzari* (K):

Only a perverse, heretical person would deny the nature of what is possible, making assertions of opinions in which he does not believe. Yet from the preparations he makes for events he hopes for or fears, one can see that he believes in their possibility, and that his preparations may be useful. If he believed in absolute necessity, he would simply submit, and not equip himself with weapons against his enemy (K V 20 | 279).<sup>26</sup>

Above ha-Levi suggests, echoing Aristotle in *De interpretatione*,<sup>27</sup> that one can't really believe there are no mere possibilities. To think that our destiny outstrips any efforts we could make on our behalf would, the argument goes, simply leave us frozen. But here we must be careful not to assimilate necessitarianism and fatalism—as Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi later would in sparking a decisive controversy around the nature of Spinoza's thought and more in the late eighteenth century.<sup>28</sup> Neither Spinoza nor Crescas think e.g. that God has 'spoken' some particular fate for us without further mediation, such that all of our actions are directly fixed in advance. Both can then try to evade the worries of ha-Levi or others. Thus while ha-Levi cites scripture to the effect that we have free will so that we may practice obedience to God (K V 20 | 282f.), Crescas explicitly considers the meaning of revelation and clarifies his own rejection of fatalism as follows:

For although it is true that, if the things were necessary in respect of themselves the prescriptions and proscriptions would be futile, nevertheless, if the things are possible in respect of themselves and necessary in respect of the causes, the prescriptions and proscriptions [of the Torah] would not be futile but would rather have an important purpose. For they

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26. I cite the *Kuzari*, with which Crescas would have been familiar (see e.g. LL IIIA 2,4), in Hirschfield's translation by book and paragraph number followed by the page number of this edition.

27. "So there would be no need to deliberate or to take trouble (thinking that if we do this, this will happen, but if we do not, it will not)" (18b).

28. For a classic treatment of this controversy, see Beiser, *The Fate of Reason*, Ch. 4.

would be the causes that move things that are possible in themselves, just as do other causes that are causes of the effects (LL II 5,3).

For Crescas, if our actions were necessary “in respect of themselves,” then they would be what we could call completely fated. However, if things are simply up for necessary determination by other things, and so what Crescas calls “possible in respect of themselves and necessary in respect of the causes,” then the circumstances are very different. Most crucially, on this line of thinking the Torah can thus become just such a necessary cause.<sup>29</sup> Similarly for Spinoza (who for instance associates the fortune teller with superstition at TTP Pref 5f.): if our fate isn’t decided in advance, but we are rather subject to the range of necessary causes at hand at any given moment, then his own writings can be understood to enter—of course not spontaneously, but rather with their own long causal history, of which Crescas is indeed a part—just that necessary causal nexus whose joints it tries to carve. Spinoza’s arguments can thus, as effects that have themselves been caused, cause effects for us as we reconstruct and contemplate them.

If this picture seems bewildering, then that may be why Crescas, like the Jewish apostate Abner of Burgos (c. 1260-1347) years earlier,<sup>30</sup> felt that the truth of necessitarianism should be kept quiet. Crescas writes: “[T]o publicize this thesis is harmful to the multitude, for they will regard it as an excuse for wrongdoers” (LL II 5, 3). Nonetheless, Crescas thought it clear that his doctrine was in no tension with the existence of scripture, as for him “the divine science saw fit to set the prescriptions and the proscriptions as means to move people, and as powerful causes to direct them to human happiness” (LL II 5, 3). And Spinoza’s own “divine science,” or his metaphysical ethics, can be seen to hold a similar ontological status. Consequently, there need not be any tension between

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29. See Segal, “Crescas, Hard Determinism, and the Need for a Torah,” for more detailed engagement.

30. See for discussion Manekin’s chapter in this volume “Free Will,” where Abner’s views found in texts that remain untranslated today are framed as follows: “This causal determinism [...] should be hidden from the multitude, because [...] they would conclude that since everything is decreed, human endeavor is futile.” Crescas and also—apparently without having known Abner—Spinoza would have agreed with Abner that “human endeavor is,” however, “not futile because it forms an essential link in the chain of causes,” as Manekin puts it.

Spinoza's necessitarianism and his pursuing an ethical project, so long as it remains within certain limits.

With some of the fundamentals of Spinoza's thought in hand, I quickly turn to its first practical upshot now, which will of course 'necessarily' be 'determined' by its metaphysical backdrop. Here we must emphasize—following our gloss on why a necessary causal nexus doesn't demand our actions be fixed from step one without any mediation—that Spinoza's most basic ethical perspective isn't at all one of melancholic resignation. No less an aspiring advocate of the affirmation of life than Friedrich Nietzsche realized this after disavowing key aspects of Arthur Schopenhauer's thought. Nietzsche, who once called Spinoza his only predecessor,<sup>31</sup> felt that Schopenhauer's pessimism had him feeling stuck (perhaps not unlike ha-Levi's 'perverse heretic'—though of course Nietzsche aspired to such a status in another sense). Schopenhauer himself had recognized Spinoza's positive liberatory perspective, but despised Spinoza both for his related views on the 'affects' or emotions, and for his Jewishness. Indeed he considered all these dimensions of Spinoza's thought to be intimately linked. The German-Jewish thinker Helen Zimmern (1846-1934) nicely glosses the issue: "[Schopenhauer] branded Jews as confirmed optimists, and traced Spinoza's optimism [...] to this root"; for him, then, "Spinoza was always cheerful" on such a purportedly corrupt basis.<sup>32</sup>

Indeed to Schopenhauer's horror, Spinoza works out within both E3 and E4—entitled "Of the Nature and Origin of the Affects" and "Of Human Bondage, or of the Power of the Affects," respectively—the mechanics of the emotions in putting forward at least two major proposals. First, Spinoza contends that the affects originate in joy, sadness, and desire most fundamentally. Second, he argues that affects tied to the latter two can have us tossing at sea rather than flourishing in the way he thinks we can with the help of the first, i.e. joy, which was notably the one emotion Crescas thought we could attribute to God (LL I 3,5). Most broadly, Spinoza finds it important to develop a thorough analysis of the debilitating affects, because he thinks they are so likely to prevent us

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31. On these two generally, see my "Nietzsche and Spinoza."

32. Zimmern, *Arthur Schopenhauer*, 155. I am grateful to Zev Harvey for bringing this text to my attention. Compare also Schopenhauer, *Parerga* 1, 72f. For discussion of Schopenhauer and Spinoza, see Shapshay and van den Auweele, "Schopenhauer's Dialogue with Spinoza" as well as Melamed, "Schopenhauer on Spinoza."

from the kind of self-development we can achieve to exist in better alignment with our natures. Where joy is then “that *passion by which the mind passes to a greater perfection*,” sadness is “that *passion by which it passes to a lesser perfection*” (emphasis in original; E3p11s). Spinoza’s goal is to lessen our “bondage,” i.e. our being “determined by another to exist and to produce an effect in a certain and determinate manner” (E1d7), which for him will certainly result from our “lack of power to moderate and restrain the affects” (E4pref | II/205). Thus, at what we might call this initial level of Spinoza’s ethical thought, we are to lessen the impact of certain affects by understanding their causes, their necessity, and the necessary causes of what happens in the world more broadly, thereby positioning ourselves better. Spinoza reassures us in this spirit:

[W]e do not have an absolute power to adapt things outside us to our use. Nevertheless, we shall bear calmly those things which happen to us contrary to what the principle of our advantage demands, if we are conscious that we have done our duty, that the power we have could not have extended itself to the point where we could have avoided those things, and that we are a part of the whole of nature, whose order we follow (E4app | II/276).

Spinoza’s affective therapy glossed here—rejected by Schopenhauer as a kind of optimism, as noted—clearly follows from his metaphysics and his practically-oriented account of the affects. Yet how far can it go? The English philosopher Bertrand Russell inquired with some skepticism, in lectures written throughout the early 1940s and published in 1945: “Let us think of some of the things that are likely to happen in our time to inhabitants of Europe [...] Ought you, in these circumstances, to preserve a philosophic calm?”<sup>33</sup> But Spinoza’s therapeutic perspective has apparently provided relief to victims of even some of the most severe crimes of the modern era that Russell had in mind.

Rosenfeld writes from the Łódź Ghetto within Polish school notebooks in

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33. See Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy*, 578, which has many interesting thoughts to offer on a range of historical figures despite its spottiness. (In his passing treatment of Maimonides earlier on at 427, Russell for instance writes: “Some think that he influenced Spinoza, but this is very questionable.” However, as we have already seen in the present Section I, and will soon see in greater detail within the next Section II, it’s rather this claim itself that must be considered very questionable.)

1943, the year before he will be murdered at Auschwitz:

I am seeking to broaden the confines of life with my thoughts. I place myself into the *cosmos*, such a thought process heals me for a short time, lifts my despair. Sun, moon, stars, God, and I are one. Nothing can happen to me. I feel the millennium rushing past me—I am reading Spinoza in the ghetto, what good fortune, and I am discovering a beautiful *Zionist* matter, see elsewhere... (emphases and ellipsis in original).<sup>34</sup>

It's worth noting, as an aside, that if the final thought in this passage from Rosenfeld's diaries is likewise meant to concern Spinoza ("I am discovering a beautiful Zionist matter"),<sup>35</sup> then Rosenfeld is almost certainly channeling a creative reading of Spinoza's TTP developed by Moritz or Moses Hess (1812-1875); and crucially, Rosenfeld was reading both Spinoza's TTP and Hess around this time, as we know from further notebook entries.<sup>36</sup> In short: Spinoza had emphasized—like others influenced by Maimonides such as Joseph ibn Kaspi (c. 1280-1345)<sup>37</sup>—that "human affairs" are particularly "inconstant [*mutabiles*]" such that even the Jews, whose religion had eventually weakened them, could "set up their state again" should conditions thoroughly shift (translation altered; TTP III 55). Hess, who considered Spinoza a "true prophet," then turned Spinoza's account inside out and offered the following extraordinary takeaway: "Spinoza [...] held that the restoration of the Jewish kingdom depends entirely on the

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34. Rosenfeld, *In the Beginning Was the Ghetto*, 173. See for discussion Rose, "Oskar Rosenfeld," 36.

35. Rosenfeld could be reporting about two different things he's reading in this notebook entry. Rose finds him concerned with Spinoza throughout the passage. See Rose, "Oskar Rosenfeld," 51f.

36. See e.g. Rosenfeld, *In the Beginning Was the Ghetto*, 143 and 147.

37. Kaspi had asked in Discourse 8 of his *The Silver is Spent*: "[W]ho does not see constantly the revivals and collapses of constantly alternating nations?" and concluded from this apparent "insanity" that "these vicissitudes are evidence and reliable testimony for us of our return to the Land of Israel being possible, for the possibilities have not ceased." See this text edited and translated in Sackson, *ibn Kaspi*, 295-317. For discussion concerning Kaspi and politics, see also Green, *Power and Progress*. Cited by Harvey, "Spinoza, Mendelssohn, and Hess," §1, which also references additional figures and literature.

courage of the Jewish people.”<sup>38</sup> Although many scholars today know Hess only as a target of Karl Marx (1818-1883) and Friedrich Engels, these two worked closely with Hess over decades, and his influence as a “Father of German Social Democracy” and precursor to modern Zionism—a legacy that reaches to the leading Zionist thinker Theodor Herzl (1860-1904) himself, whom Rosenfeld also knew personally—deserves further discussion in connection with Spinoza and otherwise.<sup>39</sup>

More urgently in the context of this section of the present chapter, meanwhile: throughout the majority of the passage above in which Rosenfeld describes “how he place[s] myself into the universe,” he seems to find profound relief in the serene metaphysics that Spinoza offers. In contemplating it, Rosenfeld achieves a kind of ‘overview effect’ whereby one steps away from human existence in conceiving of it from a great distance.<sup>40</sup> Instead of looking at planet Earth as a mere blue marble from outer space, however—which was of course not yet technologically feasible—Rosenfeld instead undergoes his own kind of cognitive shift in study and then sees things, as Spinoza might put it, “from the perspective of eternity” (*sub specie aeternitatis*; see E5p29 etc.).<sup>41</sup> Russell couldn’t have known this—Rosenfeld’s notebooks, now held at Yad Vashem, traveled over some decades from Poland to Jerusalem, so would be published only years later. But it seems that Russell was then right to eventually concede: “There are even times when it is comforting to reflect that human life, with all that it contains of evil and suffering, is an infinitesimal part of the life of the universe [...] in a painful world [such thoughts] are a help towards

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38. Hess, *Rome and Jerusalem*, Letter 4. Cited by Harvey, “Spinoza, Mendelssohn, and Hess,” §4.

39. On Hess’s status as “Father,” see Avineri, *The Making of Modern Zionism*, Ch. 3. On Marx’s relation to Spinoza, which especially revolves around the TTP, see Field, “Marx, Spinoza, and ‘True Democracy’” as well as Matysik, *When Spinoza Met Marx*, Ch. 3.

40. On this term and the various upshots that seeing Earth from beyond its atmosphere has for a range of astronauts, see White, *The Overview Effect*.

41. Rosenfeld could have found in Maimonides a comparable perspective. See the anti-anthropocentrism of GP III 14, where Maimonides encourages the reader: “Consider how vast are the dimensions and how great the number of these corporeal beings [like Saturn, the stars],” and then proceeds to inquire, “what is the relation of the human species to all these created beings, and how can one of us imagine that they exist for his sake and because of him and that they are instruments for his benefit?” See Harvey, “Maimonides on Human Perfection, Awe, and Politics,” 4f. for discussion.

sanity and an antidote to the paralysis of utter despair.”<sup>42</sup> In digesting Spinoza’s metaphysical views reviewed above, Rosenfeld seems to discover just this kind of comfort.

Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, other figures in the Jewish philosophical tradition would dispute the value of such prospects. The critical theorist Theodor Adorno (1903-1969) survived the Shoah in exile, and would by 1947 associate Spinoza with the corrupt side of Enlightenment in definitive work written with Max Horkheimer (1895-1973).<sup>43</sup> In 1949, Adorno then famously suggests that “[t]o write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric,”<sup>44</sup> where under “poetry” he would include any cultural production that could possibly make the world seem like it was in order or simply the way it had to be. Following rather a post-Kantian line and what he would have thought to be the primacy of the practical,<sup>45</sup> Adorno instead pursues a “negative dialectics” in his writings that often take on a broken or “fragmentary” form themselves. In particular, he argues that a cultural phenomenon such as an artwork ought to be unreconciled like our existence, which should be changed. On this view the artwork, also conceived of as philosophical, acquires “truth content” as it aligns with the deeply contradictory nature of the modern world in particular, which one ought to divulge.<sup>46</sup>

Of course, we can’t adjudicate here debates concerning nothing less than the purpose of philosophy and related enterprises altogether. But in this section, we have now made some first attempts to follow Wolfson’s cue in positioning both Baruch and Benedictus in relation to predecessors and successors,

42. Russell, *A History*, 579.

43. “Enlightenment’s mythic terror springs from a horror of myth. It detects myth [...] in any human utterance which has no place in the functional context of self-preservation. Spinoza’s proposition: ‘the endeavor of preserving oneself is the first and only basis of virtue’ [E4p22c] contains the true maxim of all Western civilization, in which the religious and philosophical differences of the bourgeoisie are laid to rest.” See Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, here 22 (but compare 75 and 79).

44. Adorno, *Prisms*, 34.

45. For discussion of one prominent post-Kantian’s conversion, for practical reasons, from a necessitarian picture to one that allows for absolute freedom and a more straightforward social-critical outlook, see my “Fichte’s First First Principles.”

46. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*. For discussion, see also Hohendahl, *The Fleeting Promise of Art*.

respectively, regarding issues in metaphysics and with reference to what I have loosely labeled a first ethical dimension of Spinoza's thought. Thus, we can now turn in a similar spirit to a second ethical dimension of Spinoza's project, tied up more directly with his exalted "intuitive knowledge [*scientia intuitiva*]" and so his epistemology.

## II. Epistemology and the highest good: Maimonides and Maimon

We have seen in the previous section that Crescas anticipates Spinoza on several fronts, in his metaphysics and beyond. We also saw that Maimonides prefigures Spinoza's alignment of God and thought. Interestingly, Crescas dismisses this kind of intellectualism repeatedly, mocking in harsh terms the idea that some medieval Jewish Aristotelians like Gersonides also defended, according to which the highest virtue lies in the development of our cognitive powers. Crescas writes, for instance:

If only I knew with respect to a soul that intellects one of the intelligibles established in the book *Elements*—for example, that the angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles—and intellects nothing else, if this intelligible alone would constitute it so that it would achieve immortality [...] This, however, is all foolishness and false imaginings (LL II 5,5).

Crescas, a professed enemy of Aristotelianism on numerous fronts, draws a definite line here and refuses to go where Maimonides had gone. Instead, he proposes that "the Philosopher" who most anticipates Maimonides, i.e. Aristotle,<sup>47</sup> suggested unity among God as knower, knowing, and known partly just because "his eyes were never illumined by the light of the Torah" (LL II 5,5).

In this current section, we must therefore leave Crescas behind and return primarily to Maimonides in exploring both the higher echelons of Spinoza's intellectualist ethics as well as the apparent importance of this dimension of Spinoza's thought for the eighteenth-century Jewish Enlightenment thinker

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47. That Crescas reads Maimonides as an Aristotelian here is arguably a point against one commentator's unorthodox proposal that the heritage of Maimonides's "dictum of the philosophers," referenced in the prior section, is neo-Platonic; see Lachterman, "Mathematical Construction, Symbolic Cognition and the Infinite Intellect," 511f.

Salomon Maimon (1753-1800). One obvious place to start in outlining Spinoza's epistemology is his distinction between three kinds of cognition starting under E2p40. Spinoza's initial move here is to clarify that the human mind naturally forms "notions they [humans] call *Universal*, like Man, Horse, Dog, etc." after seeing so many of these things that it can no longer simultaneously isolate them in the mind (E2p40s1). According to this story of abstraction, we repeatedly see furry four-legged creatures, for example, which are more likely than not friendly to humans, until we are eventually forced to use a shorthand: 'dog,' perhaps. But this is significantly a vice—not a virtue—of the mind, as the individuality of each being is in time glossed over, and our cognition becomes less exact. Worse still, the way we generate such 'universals' is influenced by the limited set of individuals we just happen to have come across (we can never perceive them all), leaving room for much confusion. My understanding of 'dog,' averaged from the dogs I have experienced, might then significantly differ from someone else's, averaged from those they have experienced. This may go some distance to explaining not only why some people 'like' dogs while others don't, but also why disagreement is the default across the history of philosophy; alleged universals aren't truly universal, but are instead necessarily localized and incomplete.<sup>48</sup> Spinoza thus goes on to classify cognition built up at least partially from universals as of only the *first* or *second* kind (imagination or reason, respectively), and to rank even the latter below another way of knowing that doesn't employ universals: intuitive, at-a-glance insight, i.e. cognition of the *third* kind (Ep40s2).

We will soon see that Spinoza is prefigured by Maimonides when it comes to his notion of intuitive knowledge. But already just Spinoza's tripartite division echoes that offered by his predecessor as well. While Spinoza will eventually have to disagree with Maimonides about what kind of cognition is enjoyed by the religious prophet,<sup>49</sup> for example, Maimonides begins his *Guide of the*

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48. For further discussion, see Newlands, "Spinoza on Universals" and "Spinoza's Early Anti-Abstractionism."

49. For Maimonides, only Moses prophesied without the aid of the imagination; in other cases of prophecy, intellect and imagination are mixed (GP II 45). For Spinoza, meanwhile, Christ takes pride of place (TTP I 25), and otherwise prophets may boast only of imagination and not intellect: "no one needed a more perfect mind in order to prophesy, but only a more vivid imagination" (TTP I 25). Furthermore, for Spinoza there's generally an inverse relation between intellect and imagination among the prophets (TTP II 1).

*Perplexed* by distinguishing metaphorically  $\alpha$ . “those who never once see a light, but grope about in their night,”  $\beta$ . “[those whose] darkness [...] is illumined, however, by a polished body or something of that kind,” and finally  $\gamma$ . “those for whom the lightning flashes” (GP I Intro | 7).<sup>50</sup> Here again, three different kinds of cognition are at work, now among three kinds of cognizers. And the differences among them are just as substantial. At first sight, the gap between Maimonides’s second and third kinds of cognition—using imperfect tools to illuminate things, or instead enjoying the bright light of occasional or even repeated lightning—might seem far more drastic than that in Spinoza, for whom instances of both the second and third kinds of cognition are “necessarily true” (E2p41). But the distance between Spinoza’s notions of rational and intuitive knowledge is arguably just as large, since as noted cognition of the third kind has the major advantage that it’s generated without universals. Furthermore, *scientia intuitiva* also takes place in an entirely different register as concerns time and carries a particularly divine character for this reason, too. In order to clarify this to the degree we can manage here, let’s consider the example Spinoza himself offers and try to ‘see’ how it works.

Spinoza asks us to conceive a set of four numbers. We have the first three and must find another, keeping in mind the relations among each; the first is to the second as the third is to the fourth. How shall we proceed?

Merchants do not hesitate to multiply the second by the third, and divide the product by the first, because they have not yet forgotten what they heard from their teacher without any demonstration, or because they have often found this in the simplest numbers, or from the force of the Demonstration of P7 [sic] in Bk. VII of Euclid,<sup>51</sup> viz. from the common property of proportionals. But in the simplest numbers none of this is necessary. Given the numbers 1, 2, and 3, no one fails to see that the fourth proportional number is 6—and we see this much more clearly because we infer the fourth number from the ratio which, in one glance, we see the first number to have to the second (translation altered; E2p40s2).

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50. Cited by Harvey, “Portrait of Spinoza,” 156ff.

51. Although the leading English translation of this text has Spinoza reference “P7 of Bk. VII of Euclid[’s *Elements*],” this is in error and the original Latin cites “prop. 19. lib. 7. Euclid,” where proportionality among four numbers is discussed.

According to Spinoza, many will turn to an algebraic formula (e.g.  $1x = 3 \times 2$ ) and even hearsay—perhaps the second and first kinds of cognition, respectively, both tied up with so-called universals. But in at least some cases, we are in the position to find a solution “in one glance [*in uno intuito*],” just like some realization under the flash of Maimonides’s lightning, whereby the third kind of cognition obtains. And Spinoza suggests that we might come to know more than just fourth proportionals in such a way. Presumably his own work “in geometric order” is supposed to have some intuitive character, as we grasp how various propositions come together.

Finally, for Spinoza cognition that develops in an intuitive manner has a particularly divine character not just because of its unique temporality, such that a simultaneity of knowledge and knowing obtains, but also because it involves direct reference to God in a way that makes this knowledge most profound, allowing us greater joy and power. Spinoza defines the third kind of cognition most crucially in a difficult passage that we can’t do justice to in the present chapter: “this kind of knowing proceeds from an adequate idea of the formal essence of certain attributes of God to the adequate knowledge of the [formal] essence of things” (E2p40s2).<sup>52</sup> Out of this epistemic descent directly from God to things arises what Spinoza calls “intellectual love of God” (E5p33). In aligning such intuitive knowing with God, Spinoza follows Maimonides (and Aristotle) here in privileging cognitive, in the most general sense theological pursuits over for instance material ones; and all three defend on therefore related bases an intellectualist ethics according to which knowledge is most valuable.<sup>53</sup>

Spinoza thus begins an early work by recounting how he ruled out “wealth, honor, and sensual pleasure” as ultimate goods: “After experience taught me that all the things which regularly occur in ordinary life are empty and futile, [I saw that the true good is] knowledge of the union that the mind has with the whole of nature” (TIE I 13). Aristotle had similarly distinguished, e.g. in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, contemplation as the highest good, or that which can be taken as a pure end and not a means to some other end taken to be good. Maimonides had then built upon such ideas—initially via Abu Nasr al-Farabi,

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52. See for further discussion Melamed, “Scientia intuitiva.”

53. See Wolfson, *Philosophy of Spinoza* 2, 236.

but eventually through an Arabic translation of Aristotle's text<sup>54</sup>—writing:

[T]rue human perfection [...] consists in the acquisition of the rational virtues—I refer to the conceptions of the intelligibles which teach true opinion concerning the divine things. This is in true reality the ultimate end; this is what gives the individual true perfection, a perfection belonging to him alone [such that] through it man is man (GP III 54).

In short, for Maimonides we reach our ultimate aims through cognition—ideally cognition of “divine things.” Similarly for Spinoza, “since the intellect is the better part of us [...] our supreme good [*summum bonum*] must consist in the perfection of the intellect” (TTP IV 12). Once again: cognition of a particular kind will get us furthest. Where Maimonides aligns “divine science” with “apprehension of the active intellect” that's associated with something like Aristotle's God (GP I 62), Spinoza similarly proposes that “blessedness is nothing but that satisfaction of mind that stems from intuitive knowledge of God” (E4appIV | II/267). Such knowing is so divine on Spinoza's view that it will even turn out to be God's own knowing (E5p36), uniting finally knower, knowing, and known.

To be sure, when it comes to this alignment, its affective rewards, and more, reference to the Renaissance thinker Leone Hebreo (circa 1465-after 1523) is warranted as well. Although Spinoza doesn't cite him explicitly, his *Dialogues on Love*—more Neoplatonic than Aristotelian, in this case—was registered in Spinoza's library.<sup>55</sup> But regardless, here again Spinoza has departed from major predecessors outside of the Jewish philosophical tradition, for instance Thomas Hobbes who would deny not only these thinkers' intellectualism, but indeed even the possibility of a highest good per se.<sup>56</sup> And once more, Spinoza's tendencies

54. See Harvey, “Influence of Nicomachean Ethics,” 127-129.

55. For the entry concerning Hebreo's text, see *De boeken*, 41; and for some discussion of this, see the earlier account of Spinoza's library *Inventaire des livres*, 210-212.

56. See the opening of *Leviathan*, Ch. XI, according to which “the Felicity of this life, consisteth not in the repose of a mind satisfied [...] there is no such Finis ultimus, (utmost ayme,) nor Summum Bonum, (greatest Good,) as is spoken of in the Books of the old Morall Philosophers.” Cited by Melamed, “Spinoza and Some of His Medieval Predecessors,” 379n17.

can be understood to have an important legacy in the broader Jewish tradition, too. As I emphasize throughout the remainder of this section, Spinoza's notion of a third kind of cognition that brings one closest to God seems to have been an influence upon the radical Jewish Enlightenment thinker Maimon, if also concurrent with the influence of Maimon's namesake Maimonides.

In addition to having worked in thorough detail on Maimonides's *Guide of the Perplexed*, Maimon apparently came to familiarize himself with Spinoza's writings as well. Regarding his engagement with Kant and predecessors, Maimon writes in his *Autobiography* (A):<sup>57</sup>

The technique I used to study [Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*] was quite unusual. After reading it through once, I vaguely understood each section. I then tried to sharpen my understanding through my own reflections in order to work my way to the author's meaning. This is actually what one calls *thinking oneself into a system of thought*. Because I had also employed the same method in mastering Spinoza's, Leibniz's, and Hume's systems, it was only natural to look to create a kind of *coalition system* (emphasis in original; A 230).

Maimon's technique—strange or not—was to follow in each case the relevant work's necessary order slowly and systematically. In describing here some dimensions of his remarkable philosophical omnivorism, which one scholar has helpfully explored under the guise of “intercultural commentary,”<sup>58</sup> Maimon explicitly compares his work on Kant with his study of Spinoza and others. Indeed, it's easy to imagine taking on in this manner especially Spinoza's *Ethics*, what with its geometric character. But more specifically, Maimon would also have been deeply curious about E2 and E5 discussed within this section of the present chapter. Maimon once tried to ground morality in “a drive to develop my cognitive faculty,” as “[t]here is nothing in the world, indeed nothing outside the world, which can possibly be thought to be good without qualification except striving after cognition of the truth.”<sup>59</sup> Maimon was thus interested in points of

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57. I cite Maimon's *Autobiography* in Reitter's translation by page number.

58. Freudenthal, “Interkultureller Kommentar als Methode systematischen Philosophierens.”

59. Emphasis removed. Maimon, “New Presentation of the Principle of Morality,” 165. See for discussion Quinn, “Salomon Maimon's ‘New Presentation.’”

affinity between God’s intellect and our own, and the apparent consequences of this interest as well as his engagement with Spinoza turn up in texts like the 1793 “On Progress in Philosophy.”<sup>60</sup>

Here for Maimon, construction—at least in mathematics, and with the help of other tools including his “Law of Determinability”<sup>61</sup>—is held up as a model of intuitive knowledge that approximates the divine. Maimon is most explicit on this after giving an account of the views of German rationalist Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, whose “system” Maimon ultimately identifies with that of Spinoza. According to Maimon, the differences between Spinoza and Leibniz are only apparent, and such appearances are due to Leibniz’s political caution more than anything else (GW IV 47).<sup>62</sup> Maimon thus illustrates the actual sense of Leibniz and/or Spinoza, which he furthermore agrees with:

God, as an infinite power of representation, conceives from all eternity all possible beings; that is: he conceives himself limited in all ways. He does not think discursively, like us; rather, his thoughts are simultaneously presentations. Should one object by saying that we have no notion of such a manner of thought, I would answer: we certainly do, in that we partly possess the same. *All mathematical notions are thought by us, and simultaneously presented as real objects a priori through construction. In this sense, we are like God [as] mathematics teaches us the difference between merely discursive and real thinking [...] God thinks all real objects, not merely according to Principle of Non-Contradiction that is held so highly in our Philosophy, but rather as we think the objects of mathematics (if indeed in a more complete way); that is, he brings them*

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60. I cite Verra’s edition of Maimon’s *Gesammelte Werke* (GW), pending the appearance of a major new critical edition in progress, by volume and page number.

61. On Maimon’s Law of Determinability, see Schechter, “The Logic of Speculative Philosophy and Skepticism.”

62. Maimon is arguably following Gotthold Ephraim Lessing here, who according to Jacobi claimed that Leibniz “was, I fear, a Spinozist at heart,” shaping the Pantheism Controversy mentioned in passing within Section I of this chapter. See Jacobi, *Werke*, I,1 23f. Maimon writes a few years later: “The way of making this harmony [of the monads] understandable by presenting God as a watchmaker, and the monads as the watches he has produced similar to himself and wound up, is popular, exoteric, and too crass to seriously attribute to this great man [Leibniz]” (GW IV 41f.).

forth simultaneously through thought (emphasis mine; GW IV 42).<sup>63</sup>

Of course, we can't concern ourselves at present with how accurate Maimon's account of Leibniz might be;<sup>64</sup> and we must also set aside the fact that Maimon's rationalism evident above, which sets a high standard for knowledge, will alongside other commitments ultimately lead him to a deep form of skepticism departing from Spinoza.<sup>65</sup> Most important now is simply that Maimon's notion of intuitive construction should remind us of Spinoza's third kind of cognition. Although Maimon engages with Maimonides's "dictum" discussed in Section I of this chapter—aligning God as knower, knowing, and known—in some detail within other writings,<sup>66</sup> Maimon references Spinoza and not Maimonides in this extended passage cited above. For Maimon here, the finite human understanding can think at least some of mathematics in a way comparable to how God thinks everything. Maimon is, in other words, tempted by the possibility offered by Spinoza whereby "the eyes of the mind, by which it sees and observes things, are the demonstrations themselves" (E5p23s).

By embracing this possibility in at least some cases, and in making other

63. Compare with Maimon's discussion of the sublime at GW III 55 ("*Creatio ex nihilo* does not entirely lie outside of our concepts") or his claim that through his Principle of Determinability "the form (when it is not addressed immediately) that befits the given material becomes possible, determined *a priori*." See my translation and discussion "Salomon Maimon's 'History of His Philosophical Authorship in Dialogues.'"

64. Maimon himself says regarding his interpretation: "[I]f the Leibnizians refuse to concede this, then let them call it Spinozism" (GW IV 58). And Kant, for his part, responds to almost contemporary claims made by Maimon in a related context, and similarly associates them with Spinoza: "I very much doubt, however, that this was Leibniz's [stance] and [...] Herr Maymon's perspective is actually the one in unity with Spinozism, and could be used most excellently to refute Leibnizians *ex concessis*." Kant, *Gesammelte Schriften*, XI 48.

65. Thielke, "Apostate Rationalism" along with Freudenthal, *Definition and Construction* account for how this high standard for knowledge contributes to Maimon's skepticism. Notably, Maimon refers to his position in the *Essay on Transcendental Philosophy* as a blend of "rational dogmatism and empirical skepticism" (GW I 558). Spinoza is generally a harsh critic of skepticism; see Schmid, "Spinoza Against the Sceptics" for an overview. On some skeptical strands in Spinoza's thought, however, see also de León Serrano, "The Place of Skepticism."

66. See A 153f. and *Giv'at ha-Moreh*, 103 (partially translated in Lachterman, "Mathematical Construction, Symbolic Cognition and the Infinite Intellect," 513).

moves provocative for his time,<sup>67</sup> Maimon became one of the very first and most creative post-Kantians, as Kant himself realized.<sup>68</sup> Regarding intuitive knowledge, Kant had sketched but also ruled out in crucial paragraphs of his *Critique of the Power of Judgement* what he considered to be a solely divine “*intellectus archetypus*,” which would exceed the merely discursive capacities of our “*intellectus ectypus*.”<sup>69</sup> But after Kant, the German Idealists put pressure on such cautiousness here; and thinkers as decisive for the post-Kantian tradition as Johann Gottlieb Fichte are apparently influenced by Maimon not only in accepting his interpretive claims regarding Leibniz,<sup>70</sup> but more importantly in pursuing like Maimon this path that Kant had blocked. Fichte thus writes already in 1795 (admittedly without elucidation, but interestingly not long after embracing what he called “intellectual intuition” as a foundational pillar of his thought): “My respect for Maimon’s talents knows no bounds. I firmly believe that he has completely overturned the entire Kantian philosophy as it has been understood by everyone until now.”<sup>71</sup>

In pointing to a higher mode of thought, supposing that the distinction between our intellect and God’s is really one of quantity and not quality, Maimon departs from Kant with the help of Spinoza.<sup>72</sup> But Maimon isn’t alone in having been attracted to Spinoza’s ideas on such fronts. Albert Einstein (1879-1955), for instance, claims to find the divine prospects in Spinoza’s epistemology decisive.<sup>73</sup> Einstein thus emphasizes not only that he “believe[s] in Spinoza’s

67. For discussion of other contributions by Maimon, see e.g. Melamed, “Maimon and the Rise of Spinozism” and my work with Nance, “Introduction.”

68. See Kant, *Gesammelte Schriften* XI, 49 (though compare also Kant’s later negative and indeed anti-Semitic remarks at 494).

69. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, §77. On the decisive significance of this text and surrounding passages, see Förster, *Grenzen der Erkenntnis?*, 219-274 and related work.

70. See Fichte, *Werke*, I 101: “Maimon shows in a piece which is very much worth reading (‘On Progress in Philosophy’) that the Leibnizian system, thought in its completion, is nothing other than Spinozism.”

71. Fichte, *Early Philosophical Writings*, 383f.

72. For further recent discussion concerning Maimon and the philosophy of mathematics, see also Chikurel, *Maimon’s Theory of Invention*.

73. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe is another crucial case entirely outside of the Jewish tradition; see my Yonover, “Goethe, Maimon, and Spinoza’s Third Kind of Cognition,” which I have

God,”<sup>74</sup> but furthermore writes in a remark that presumably applies to his own person: “if those searching for knowledge had not been inspired by Spinoza’s *amor dei intellectualis*,” i.e. the intellectual love of God that arises out of instances of intuitive knowledge, “they would hardly have been capable of that untiring devotion which alone enables man to attain his greatest achievements.”<sup>75</sup>

### III. Etiology, or philosophical diagnosis: Gersonides and Rée

Still, despite some prominent cases of engagement with Spinoza’s epistemology and his notion of intuitive knowledge, no one—including Spinoza—would doubt the intensity of the challenge Spinoza issues insofar as he encourages us to pursue the distinguished third kind of cognition, following Maimonides or anticipating Maimon and others. Indeed Spinoza wraps up his magnum opus by asking: “For if salvation were at hand [...] how could nearly everyone neglect it?” This *erotesis*, expecting the response that “salvation” is of course *not* “at hand,” leads Spinoza to conclude: “But all things excellent are as difficult as they are rare” (E5p42s).

Spinoza arrives at such an unforgiving epistemic outlook for several reasons, but not least on the basis of detailed accounts of why we go epistemically wrong in many important specific cases. In this final section of the chapter, we must step back from Spinoza’s first-order philosophical views and explore some of his second-order moves on this front, along with his general metaphilosophical tendency to account for the errors of his opponents, all with reference to two philosophical physicians who should be considered alongside Spinoza here: the *first* another medieval rationalist predecessor to Spinoza, Levi ben Gershon or Gersonides (1288-1344), who was a key Jewish philosopher, scientist, and also doctor in the south of France; the *second* a nineteenth-century German-Jewish successor of Spinoza, Paul Rée (1849-1901), who was active in prominent circles in the period and, despite concurrent medical pursuits as well, had an important influence as a psychological philosopher that has since been largely forgotten.

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significantly drawn upon in this section.

74. See the original *New York Times* report of 1929: “Einstein Believes in ‘Spinoza’s God.’”

75. Einstein, *Ideas and Opinions*, 52.

Spinoza would have known Gersonides's commentaries and more as a result of his Jewish education, for instance through work with his teacher Saul Levi Morteira (1569?-1660) who references Gersonides in several extant sermons.<sup>76</sup> In an all-too overlooked note, Spinoza then explicitly calls Gersonides a "most erudite man" years later while rejecting his biblical chronology (TTP adnotatio 16). But why? Most striking here isn't that Spinoza is issuing a compliment per se, I suggest. As we have seen in the prior sections, Spinoza wasn't afraid to hint at or indeed acknowledge major medieval Jewish predecessors like Maimonides, Crescas, and others. More surprising is rather that Spinoza is now directing his positive remarks at Gersonides specifically, despite sharp disagreements with him in his rationalizing tendencies when it comes to scripture and far beyond. Regarding this first issue: Gersonides is bold in exploring a range of unorthodox ideas in his *Wars of the Lord* (WL),<sup>77</sup> but he also follows Maimonides in supposing that the notions of revealed religion are going to be consistent with philosophical truth: "If the literal sense of the Torah differs from reason, it is necessary to interpret those passages in accordance with the demands of reason" (WL Intro | 98).<sup>78</sup> Meanwhile, one of Spinoza's primary aims in his *Theological-Political Treatise* is to show that "there are no dealings [...] between faith, or Theology, and Philosophy." According to Spinoza at this advanced point in the text: "No one can fail to see this now, [f]or the goal of philosophy is nothing but truth. But the goal of faith [...] is nothing but obedience and piety" (TTP XIV 37f.). Gersonides and Spinoza also part ways on the question of whether we may boast of free will (WL III 5 and E2p48 etc.), or on their understanding of the place of the human being in nature (WL IV 4-6 and E3pref). Finally, they take up highly divergent approaches to philosophy in at least one significant sense: Gersonides's *Wars of the Lord* notably begins with an emphasis on the human being in Book 1, and only later reaches its

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76. See on this Saperstein, *Exile in Amsterdam*, 85. Cited by Harvey, "Gersonides and Spinoza on Conatus," 83. See also Wolfson, *Philosophy of Spinoza* 2, 196.

77. I cite the *Wars of the Lord* in Feldman's translation according to book and chapter number where relevant, and otherwise provide the page number of Gersonides's introduction in this edition.

78. Compare here WL I 14, which seems to take a different line in supposing that religious doctrine would have the upper hand, and which would in any case be equally anathema to Spinoza in its uniting theology and philosophy.

most detailed discussions of God in Books 5 and 6; in contrast Spinoza's *Ethics* importantly prioritizes God—as noted above, E1 is even entitled “On God” and its first move is to define that which is the cause of itself—before turning to human-centric concerns later.<sup>79</sup>

Despite this and other major differences, however, there are also deep affinities between Gersonides and Spinoza, including a metaphilosophical parallel that is my focus in this section. This concerns what I have elsewhere called *etiology*,<sup>80</sup> namely the practice of providing second-order accounts of the errors of one's philosophical opponents, but *not* in order to show that they are wrong concerning first-order matters.<sup>81</sup> To understand Gersonides's interests here, we must primarily turn to the extensive introductory comments to his *Wars of the Lord*, where he takes a range of stances on questions of method, presentation, and similar while keeping in mind the end of successfully shaping the philosophical views of his readers.

For instance, in introducing one aspect of his tendency to focus at length on philosophical alternatives to his own views, Gersonides draws a first therapeutic analogy and writes:

[W]hen it is necessary for the resolution of a particular question to establish one part of a disjunction of contradictories and to disprove the other part, it is proper for the author to disprove the latter before he proceeds with the former, if at all possible. This is analogous to the procedure of *the physician, who tries to remove the malady before he brings about a healthy constitution* (emphasis mine; WL Intro | 102).

In other words, if either all Ps are Qs or no Ps are Qs, and it's the case that all Ps are Qs, then we ought to begin by disproving that no Ps are Qs. Consider the alternative approach, and continue supposing that all Ps are Qs: if we begin by showing this, Gersonides seems to be suggesting—even though it's true—our interlocutor may become upset and think ‘Why are they setting out to show that all Ps are Qs when I know that no Ps are Qs? What about my views?’ Gersonides

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79. For Spinoza on “the [proper] order of philosophizing,” see E2p10s2.

80. See for further treatment of this notion my “Nietzsche, Spinoza, and Etiology (On the Example of Free Will),” which I partially draw upon here.

81. I am grateful to Gideon Rosen for discussions concerning this framing.

finds it wise to begin with negative demonstrations to generate momentum for positive demonstrations.

But matters get much more complicated in Gersonides. This isn't just the *battle* of the lord, where we must choose between two disjuncts; instead, in waging a careful *war* Gersonides is often juggling numerous philosophical views of numerous historical philosophers at once. And each of these views developed by prior thinkers has numerous premises at its foundation—premises that themselves have their numerous grounds. For instance: in just the first book of the *Wars of the Lord*, Gersonides spends several chapters canvassing prior stances on the immortality of the human intellect. In Chapters 7-9 of Book One, Gersonides outlines the views of Alexander of Aphrodisias, al-Farabi, and numerous others. Then, in Chapter 10, he develops criticisms of some of these theories, before in Chapters 11-13 going back and forth between issuing further critique and putting forward his own account. Gersonides thus begins Chapter 11: “Having discussed the views of our predecessors concerning the topic of immortality and having demonstrated that none of these views has been proved by the arguments adduced in its behalf [...] it is now proper for us to examine this problem directly to determine which of these opinions is the true one” (WL I 11).

Gersonides has seemingly followed his own advice. But let us look again at his strategic positioning, to which we have not yet done justice. Gersonides supposes not only that we should deal with false views before laying out true ones, but that we should furthermore dismiss more *distant* views that inform those we are ultimately aiming at before confronting such most *prized* false views. And here again, Gersonides explores a medical analogy to the end of outlining his approach to philosophical diagnosis:

[A]n ill person must be introduced gradually to the therapy, so that he doesn't experience too strong a stimulus. Therefore, *when an author realizes that the reader has corrupt opinions, whose contraries he is about to establish, he should uproot them step by step.* Since [...] he has no physical means to persuade him and the reader actually doesn't want to be disabused of these ideas, the author must use for [this] all the means available that are not too strong. In this way the malady will be removed and the patient will be cured. Hence *the author should try to dissipate that which nourishes those opinions before he actually uproots them.* Even [in

removing] this nourishment the author should adopt a definite order, i.e., *the nourishment that the reader will miss the least should be removed first; and this should continue gradually without stop until all the sustenance that sustains this opinion will be removed.* Then it will be easy for the author to uproot that opinion, indeed, the opinion might disappear by itself (emphasis mine; WL Intro | 102f.).

We already know Gersonides thinks it's helpful to proceed negatively, i.e. by ruling out some false views that others might hold and that might prove a stumbling block to their grasping the truth. But there are many false views out there and on many issues. For Gersonides, then, we should pick the low-hanging false fruit first, again to avoid riling up our interlocutors as we rehabilitate them. In proposing this, and despite Gersonides's own Aristotelianism, I suggest that he largely departs from Aristotle here in an important sense worth noting.

Gersonides supposes like Aristotle an architectural picture according to which our views are informed by other views that are informed by premises, which are in turn informed by principles, and so on. Each of these must be targeted to the end of defeating some view that's taken to be the ultimate prize. And furthermore, Aristotle does on rare occasions explicitly note the power of tracing the origins of our opponent's misguided ideas. For instance, in the *Nicomachean Ethics* he suggests:

[W]e should state not only the truth but also the cause of error—for this contributes towards producing conviction, since when a reasonable explanation is given of why the false view appears true, this tends to produce belief in the true view [...].<sup>82</sup>

Yet beyond cases like this one, as the philosopher of *the mean* in more than one sense, Aristotle is arguably keener than Gersonides to find insights in predecessors and even then-common sense, while Gersonides is more willing to slowly but definitively declare a range of views false. Most importantly, insofar as Gersonides outlines at length false views that have been informed by false premises, I suggest, he can be seen as outlining what I have called

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82. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1154a22. I am grateful to Hendrik Lorenz for emphasizing the relevance of this passage.

the etiology of his opponents' misguided ideas. In short, Gersonides and soon Spinoza then aren't so generous as Aristotle, who will often find a true needle in a false haystack (or more).

'But,' one might say, 'anticipating objections to one's ideas is required of any good philosopher!' Indeed—and Crescas, for example, is thus right to explore at some length seven arguments in favor of mere possibility prior to rejecting this notion with seven arguments pushing in the other direction, which makes his necessitarian conclusions that follow all the more compelling. Before rejecting free will, Crescas thus argues in a passage plausibly channeling ha-Levi's argument discussed in Section I above:

If the nature of the possible did not exist, and man's acts were necessitated, then effort and industriousness would be futile. Futile, too, would be study and training, as well as preparation and initiation, and so also zeal in accumulating goods and useful things and in avoiding harmful things. This is the opposite of what is well known and sensed (LL II 5,1).

As we have seen, Crescas fully denies this kind of move. But it's important that, before doing so, he explores in some detail it and other possible lines that would make room for mere possibility, i.e. precisely that which he discards.

I propose, however, that Crescas's gesture here is much closer to *avoiding a strawman* than etiology. In contrast, I suggest, the moves made by Gersonides—extensively exploring the roots of philosophical errors in such a strategic manner—comprise something more substantial that I now emphasize prefigures Spinoza. A few contemporary scholars have noticed affinities between passages in Gersonides and Spinoza here, in one case even claiming: “[W]ere we asked to read [the introduction to Gersonides's WL] not knowing who had written it, we might suppose it to be penned by Spinoza.”<sup>83</sup> But while there may be much of interest to Spinoza in Gersonides's remarks concerning philosophical strategy, the specific affinity between Gersonides and Spinoza when it comes to etiology deserves careful analysis, not least because it's worth distinguishing this practice carefully with respect to related and likewise very interesting moves made by Gersonides.<sup>84</sup> Additionally, at least one commentator

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83. Garrett, *Meaning in Spinoza's Method*, 139.

84. Garrett brings, for instance, Gersonides's interest in what I would call *philosophical tragic*

who helpfully cites Gersonides has however mistakenly supposed that Spinoza (if not also Gersonides) pursues a kind of *genealogy*, where Spinoza would then allegedly put the cart before the horse on occasion to rule out some view *because of* its origins—as genealogy is here understood as the practice of providing second-order accounts of the errors of one’s philosophical opponents *in order to show* that they are wrong concerning first-order matters. This particular commentator feels “forced to conclude, then, that Spinoza’s critique” in question “is fundamentally flawed,” since if the purpose of Spinoza’s account of the origins of his opponents’ views is “to refute,” then “we must also conclude that his choice of argumentative strategy in service of that aim is mistaken and that his (apparent) view that such beliefs are false remains unjustified.”<sup>85</sup>

Etiology isn’t genealogy, at least understood in this sense, however. Or more straightforwardly: the purpose of Spinoza’s account of the origins of his opponent’s views *isn’t* to refute them. Spinoza is, like Gersonides, namely interested in an important but less ambitious gesture, where no risk of genetic fallacy arises, which becomes clear upon close analysis of a range of cases. For instance: perhaps along the lines of Gersonides’s “step by step” rejections,

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*irony* under the umbrella of his general rehabilitative project, without distinguishing it from etiology. But these things—etiology and philosophical tragic irony—aren’t one, even if they are both ultimately acting in the service of Gersonides’s attempt to transform us philosophically. Gersonides proposes: “if it happens that the author turns the sustenance for [a false] opinion into sustenance for the view that he wants to establish, this is all the more [to his advantage]. This is like war, where one tries to diminish the allies of his opponent; and if one is able to persuade one of the allies to come to one’s own side, one gains the ascendancy over his opponent in two ways: his opponent is thereby weakened, and he himself is correspondingly strengthened” (WL Intro | 103). In other words, when an opponent’s argument actually runs counter to their stated aim, they not only lose ammo, but we gain some—an attractive result, if one can manage it. However, mobilizing ideas in a manner so tragic for our opponent isn’t necessarily the same as outlining the origins of our opponents’ errors, or what I have called etiology. And it’s all the more important to keep these distinct things distinct, because Spinoza is likewise interested in such ironic turns. Arguably echoing Gersonides and indeed anticipating the kind of ‘immanent critique’ favored by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Spinoza will thus use notions of God, e.g. those according to which he’s omnipresent, against their often intended sense, e.g. to the end of demonstrating pantheism: “So the weapon they aim at us, they really turn against themselves” (E1p15s | II/58).

85. Rumbold, “Spinoza’s Genealogical Critique,” 555.

proceeding from the less to the more controversial, we saw in Section I of this chapter how Spinoza moves from rejecting misguided conceptions of mere possibility to denying teleology and eventually free will.<sup>86</sup> But although we reconstructed there at least briefly Spinoza's necessitarianism, his rejection of final causation, and his denial of free will, with our first-order focus we temporarily set aside his explanations of his opponents' purportedly ignorant errors on these fronts. We must now turn directly to these, i.e. to Spinoza's relevant second-order moves, which mean to *diagnose* and not *demonstrate*.

Why then, for Spinoza, do so many people wrongly think that things can be merely possible? Spinoza's answer is a particular variety of ignorance: "a thing is called contingent only because of a defect of our knowledge" (E1p33s1; see also E4d4). In other words, we think that something could have happened otherwise because we don't understand its necessarily determining causes. Next, according to Spinoza these necessarily determining causes are never purposeful—but why do so many people think things have ends nonetheless? For Spinoza, "everyone must acknowledge: that all men are born ignorant of the causes of things, and that they all want to seek their own advantage, and are conscious of this appetite" (E1app | II 78). In other words, humans are again ignorant of the actual conditions of their actions—perhaps more precisely, their *doings*—but are now aware that they have some desires; they thus understand their doings in terms of ends they would allegedly be following, instead of acknowledging the real causes of things, because their conscious thoughts lead them astray. To make matters worse, humans also transfer this thinking in terms of ends from themselves to the rest of the world and then see ends within it, from an anthropocentric perspective. Because "they find [...] many means that are helpful in seeking their own advantage," they infer "a ruler, or a number of rulers of nature [...] who had taken care of all things for them, and made all things for their use" (E1app | II 79). Spinoza has thus accounted for both belief in mere possibility and teleological thinking. Finally, to get now to the highest prize: why, for Spinoza, do we think we have free will? Humans "are conscious of their volitions and their appetite, and do not think, even in their dreams, of the causes by which they are disposed to wanting and willing, because they

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86. Here I depart from Melamed, "The Causes of Our Belief," 127, which suggests a different ordering of these views: "The belief in divine teleology relies, among others, on the erroneous belief in human teleology. The belief in human teleology relies on the belief in free will." I draw on Melamed's treatment more broadly in this section, however.

are ignorant of [those causes]” (E1app | II 78). Human beings know that they want things—and when they get them, they think it’s their knowing and then freely willing their desires that put them in this position. But really they don’t act purposefully, and are instead necessarily determined by efficient causes to whatever they end up doing.<sup>87</sup>

In each case glossed briefly above, Spinoza has clarified the apparent origins of the ways of thinking that he rejects. Centuries prior, ha-Levi had strongly affirmed belief in free will, supposing that “the mind wavers between an opinion and its opposite, being permitted to turn where it chooses,” and suggesting that “the *refutation of appearances* is most difficult” (emphasis mine; K V 20 | 280f.). But Spinoza has here accounted for appearances; and he will offer related and similarly powerful accounts of many further errors, for instance the belief in miracles (TTP IV 1), in a range of texts that deserve much more attention in this respect. Meanwhile, having asked and answered questions concerning why people mistakenly hold various metaphysics views, our biggest ‘Why?’ question must now be: why does Spinoza go to such lengths to cover all this ground? One might think that rejecting some view and demonstrating one’s own would be enough. But there are at least two major reasons why Spinoza might exhibit such etiological tendencies, which we can briefly survey, and which can be understood in relation to Gersonides.

First, both are committed to the already ancient idea that there are decisive differences between human beings as regards their intellectual capacities. According to Gersonides, this commitment manifests itself, for instance, in a distinction between “[those who] will reject our ideas because they find in them something unfamiliar to them by virtue of the opinions they hold” and then “those who are deeply perplexed [*asher navochu*] by these questions and who are not satisfied with what is merely said” (WL Intro | 94). In other words, because rational capacities vary widely, some people will apparently be happy to accept what they are told, while others will want more. One way the intellectually advantaged might want more is in desiring an explanation of why they had gone wrong when they had indeed gone wrong. Although for Gersonides there may

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87. Compare here Crescas (although again Crescas’s tendencies on this front don’t seem as self-conscious and consistent as Spinoza’s or Gersonides’s): “The person [...] senses no constraint or compulsion. Since it is possible for the person in himself to will both alternatives equally, it is called will rather than necessity,” though in fact the person is not “in himself” (emphasis mine; LL 5,3).

be plenty of people among this potential intellectually advantaged set, they are in any case marked as different. For Spinoza, meanwhile, the situation is still bleaker, as it seems that only a small minority of philosophers are in the position to understand the most important matters. Thus, “those who are persuaded that the masses [...] can be induced to live only according to the prescription of reason are dreaming of the golden age of the poets, or of a myth” (TP I 5); and so on Spinoza’s political-theological program, “ordinary people” would become “obedient, not learned” in falling under the sway of religious tradition guided by the state (TTP XIII 26).<sup>88</sup>

A second and more attractive reason why both Gersonides and Spinoza might present a substantial interest in etiological argumentation, furthermore, is that they both subscribe to the intellectualist ethics uniting the ultimate good with knowledge, discussed in Section II of this chapter. Anticipating Spinoza here again, Gersonides agrees with both Aristotle and Maimonides in supposing that “human happiness is achieved when a man knows reality as much as he can, and it becomes more noble when he knows the more superior things than when he knows only the things of inferior rank and value” (WL Intro | 96). Gersonides is then perfectly explicit that “my strong *desire to remove the obstacles* that block the man of inquiry from attaining the truth on these questions leading to human happiness *led me to undertake this project*” (emphasis mine; WL Intro | 97). In short, Gersonides clears up the errors of his philosophical opponents so they, too, can enjoy knowledge of “more superior things.” And Spinoza’s intellectualist ethics can be seen as leading him to etiology as well. As with comprehending the dynamics of the emotions, where Spinoza acknowledges that “it will doubtless seem strange that I should undertake to treat men’s vices and absurdities in the geometric style” (E3pref | II/138), similarly it might appear odd to investigate the origins of false philosophical positions themselves. But we make important epistemic progress here and come to more secure convictions. As also Aristotle had noted in the unusual passage from the *Nicomachean Ethics* cited above, learning from our philosophical mistakes then leads us to a deeper form of understanding, which we know Spinoza holds to be our “absolute virtue” (E4p28d).

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88. This picture is complicated by the simple fact that Spinoza shares it publicly. For discussion, see Garber, “Should Spinoza Have Published His Philosophy?” Regarding Spinoza’s account of the politics of religion and its legacy in Maimon, which has generally been missed, see also Melamed, “Maimon’s Political Theology.”

Of course, as in other cases above, Spinoza's etiological impulses can be understood in relation to predecessors outside of the Jewish tradition, too. Concerning early modern figures: Spinoza references both Descartes and Francis Bacon on the "true cause of error" generally in Letter 2, for example—although from a strongly critical perspective. According to Spinoza, especially Bacon "speaks quite confusedly about this, and proves hardly anything."<sup>89</sup> In any case, grasping Spinoza's tendencies here in relation to Gersonides may shed significant light on the broader significance of the strategies of both, and furthermore provide us with a powerful lens through which we can grasp Spinoza's obscure but substantial compliment to Gersonides with which I began, i.e. that he's a "most erudite man." Additionally, insofar as we isolate an etiological tendency in Spinoza with the help of Gersonides, we can better understand engagement with Spinoza among later thinkers who may pursue such second-order account-giving still more prominently. I now turn to just one understudied figure to conclude this section, namely Rée.

Although a critical treatment of Rée by Theodor Lessing (1872-1933) must be considered highly speculative at best with its Zionist aims and more, it seems to have been at least partially on the right track in reminding the reader, in passing, of Spinoza's status in the Jewish tradition while interpreting Rée's life and thought.<sup>90</sup> Among other things, Rée denies us freedom of the will with reference to a version of the Principle of Sufficient Reason in several works, including the 1877 *Origin of the Moral Sensations* (OMS),<sup>91</sup> and thus echoes Spinoza already on this first-order front. Indeed Rée realizes this, as he begins a chapter of this work on moral responsibility and free will: "some people think the will is free, but [...]" and then humorously goes on to provide bibliographical references over approximately thirty lines, for Spinoza's E1p32 and E2p49s as well as for passages in works by more than a dozen other thinkers—all within the *body* of the text. The playful character of Rée's polemical bibliographizing should be understood in relation to Nietzsche, whom he anticipates on several

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89. For discussion of Spinoza and Bacon on methodological and epistemological issues, see Garrett, *Meaning in Spinoza's Method*, 78f. and Gabbey, "Spinoza's Natural Science and Methodology," 170–176.

90. Lessing, *Jewish Self-Hate*, 47.

91. I cite the *Origin of the Moral Sensations* by page number according to Small's translation in *Basic Writings*. See here OMS 106 and 110.

fronts and with whom he then shares a decisive three-way friendship that includes Lou Salomé.<sup>92</sup> But beyond parodying here academic writing—like this present chapter presumably—as Nietzsche would from at least *Birth of Tragedy* onwards, Rée likewise anticipates Nietzsche by developing second-order views on free will accounting for why we think we have free will even though we don't have it. Nietzsche will therefore cite Rée a decade later in his *Genealogy of Morals*, despite pejoratively calling him there an “English genealogist” knowing full well that he was a German Jew—Rée's Jewish heritage was even the subject of discussion among figures including Cosima Wagner and Nietzsche's anti-Semitic sister<sup>93</sup>—and previously praising him in *Human, All Too Human* as “one of the boldest and coldest of thinkers,” “a German” comparable to “skillful marksmen who again and again hit the bullseye.”<sup>94</sup>

In any case, Rée particularly offers in his early work referenced by Nietzsche at least two distinct reasons as to why we refuse to acknowledge that we don't have free will. Let us first consider Rée's argument that this error is the result of fear of the consequences of undermining moral responsibility:

Even those who have in fact understood the boundedness [*Gebundenheit*] of the will do not usually dare to utter the proposition ‘All acts of will are necessary’ in public. For [...] those they have punished might say: ‘Why are you punishing me? I had to act in that way’ [...] People are afraid of the conclusions of the mob: if everything is necessary, then, giving in to our instincts, we will steal, pillage, and murder (translation altered; OMS 106f.).

Rée's specific gesture above may initially appear closest in *content* to that made by Abner and Crescas referenced in Section I. As we saw there, Crescas thought that people would find the denial of free will to be an “excuse for wrongdoers,” and

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92. Salomé cites Spinoza as “the one thinker” she approached in her childhood, and after returning to his writings on various occasions throughout her life, she may have known them best with respect to this trio that I speculate would have discussed him. For a brief discussion of Salomé and Spinoza, see my “Spinozism Around 1800,” §4.

93. See Small, *A Star Friendship*, 48-51.

94. Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, Preface §4 and *Human, All Too Human*, I §36. (This latter text was also written while Nietzsche was living with Rée.)

so proposed that the truth of his views should be kept from the naïve. Although Rée presumably wouldn't have known such writings, he comparably points to the first thoughts that some people might have upon learning there's no free will. Rée suggests, with Kantianism in mind, that "our discreet philosophers hide the truth behind the ambiguous expressions 'freedom of the mind' and 'moral freedom' [since in realizing] they can no longer save the thing itself, they want at least to save the appearance" (OMS 107). That is, they are nervous to admit the truth and instead scramble. One of Rée's answers to this worry is to clarify punishment in terms of deterrence rather than retribution, where he again references Spinoza (OMS 117). But in any case, the etiological impulse Rée acts upon in diagnosing the errors of his opponents is comparable in *form* as well to that made by Spinoza, as Rée is likewise consistently trying to account for why some people wrongly affirm that we may will freely. Indeed Spinoza had also identified fear as the root of superstition (TTP Pref 5), and Rée even cites elsewhere in this work Spinoza's E1app that was our crucial reference above in this section.<sup>95</sup>

Still, despite some tendencies shared with Spinoza here, Rée's hint at a second and more phenomenological account of why we think we have freedom of the will seems even closer to what we saw in Spinoza's *Ethics*:

After the man [who had previously reeled in the power of his affects] has acted [...] and perhaps given in to his passion, he thinks: I could have acted differently, and so arises the deceptive illusion that commonly misleads people (OMS 105).

In other words, now something about the experience of being aware of our doings in different cases gives us the wrong impression, namely that we aren't just conscious of these doings but are rather consciously acting in them, or are at least capable of this. More specifically, Rée suggests that we can be misguided by the experience of first acting necessarily according to reason and then later, on another occasion, acting necessarily according to passion.

Rée will expand upon such moves within his 1885 *The Illusion of Free Will*:

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95. See especially the reference to Spinoza's account of the illusory nature of basic moral notions in OMS 122, where among other things Rée reviews his account of the "origin of the concepts of good and bad."

*Its Causes and Its Consequences*, which remains untranslated and which can be read as fleshing out a Spinozistic etiological tendency to make still further sense of why so many will cling to the notion of free will.<sup>96</sup> But instead of turning to this work, which must be put off for another occasion, we should finally note Rée’s apparent motivation for clarifying matters like these, securing also his intellectualist ethical credentials: “knowledge of the true and the beautiful is higher in rank [...] indeed, it is the highest thing that human beings can attain and therefore must be sought without consideration of its utility or harmfulness” (OMS 165). For Rée as for Spinoza and Gersonides, clearing up our illusions plays a crucial role in securing knowledge. Additionally, the way that Rée—who wrote his dissertation on Aristotle’s ethics—conceives of knowledge as “pleasurable [*lustvoll*]” should remind us of Spinoza’s “intellectual love of God” and comparable ideas of other Jewish Aristotelians referenced above.

### Conclusion

As we have seen throughout this chapter, Spinoza’s references to medieval Jewish philosophers such as Maimonides, or then Crescas and Gersonides—to this date especially understudied in this connection—are explicit and rich, of great historical *and* philosophical interest. We must therefore wonder why, for commentators like van Bunge, “it has proved to be extremely difficult to trace any [...] Jewish sources” for Spinoza’s philosophy, “most notably in his main work, the *Ethics*,” or even otherwise. Despite his claim of “an absence of indications” that “Spinoza was particularly interested in Jewish thought” following his *herem*,<sup>97</sup> each of Spinoza’s explicit references to numerous figures in the Jewish tradition explored or at least mentioned above obtains after 1656. Furthermore, we have seen that Spinoza’s response to these figures is often serious—contra Guttman, too—as Spinoza negotiates or perhaps even takes up some of their tendencies, and thus compliments them much more warmly than most of his other predecessors, for instance Descartes and Bacon.

This being said, it’s of course also true that Spinoza departs from the Jewish philosophical tradition in many ways, and we have thus continuously

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96. See in particular Rée, *Illusion der Willensfreiheit*, 17-26.

97. Van Bunge, “Spinoza’s Identity,” 102.

emphasized important gaps between Spinoza and his relevant predecessors at the same time. By these means, we should have avoided an accusation leveled by van Bunge against Wolfson, who allegedly “reduced [the *Ethics*] entirely to fragments of Jewish mediaeval philosophy.”<sup>98</sup> Yet while we must be careful to distinguish Spinoza’s distance from these forerunners, doing so certainly doesn’t require that we forget them; and more careful scholarship is needed, especially when even sympathetic scholars concede too much in suggesting for instance that “there is no explicit, ‘smoking gun’-type evidence that Spinoza engaged [medieval Jewish philosophers] in the *Ethics*, since neither [here] nor in any of Spinoza’s extant letters does he mention them.”<sup>99</sup> To the contrary: as we have already seen, for example, Spinoza explicitly cites Crescas in his key Letter 12 as having anticipated him.

Furthermore, moving beyond Spinoza’s relation to his predecessors, we have repeatedly shown throughout the chapter that Spinoza becomes an inspiration for a range of fascinating thinkers in or adjacent to the Jewish tradition following his death, in the German-language context: from major Enlightenment philosophers like Maimon to the Holocaust-era writer Rosenfeld and beyond. Further work is then needed not only on Spinoza’s Jewish philosophical influences, but also on the wide range of thinkers he influenced with various relations to Jewish philosophy and culture.<sup>100</sup>

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98. Van Bunge, “Spinoza’s Identity,” 102.

99. Nadler, “The Jewish Spinoza,” 504.

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