



## A Debate concerning Determinism in Late Medieval Jewish Philosophy

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## A DEBATE CONCERNING DETERMINISM IN LATE MIEVEAL JEWISH PHILOSOPHY

BY SEYMOUR FELDMAN

Throughout most medieval philosophical literature the problem of determinism was primarily discussed in the context of the classic dilemma between divine foreknowledge and human freedom. Even in many of the medieval commentaries upon Aristotle's *On Interpretation* the discussion of logical determinism was quickly transformed into the problem of theological determinism, i.e., whether or not God's omniscience determines human action. And in Muslim philosophy this is even more evident, with the ever-present doctrines of divine omnipotence and divine decree hovering over man's will to the point of overwhelming and perhaps annulling it altogether. Nevertheless, buried not too deeply were the seeds of another kind of determinism, planted by the Stoics, that here and there sprouted up, especially amongst the Muslim *falāsifa*. Stoic determinism was based upon a conception of nature whereby all natural phenomena are governed by strict causal laws such that no contingency exists.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, some of the Stoics, most notably Chrysippus, attempted to moderate their commitment to causal determinism by allowing for some notion of freedom and moral responsibility. This attempt to reconcile determinism with freedom has, since William James, been known in Anglo-American philosophy as "Soft Determinism" in contrast to Hard Determinism, which denies freedom and responsibility altogether.<sup>2</sup> Throughout most medieval Jewish philosophy the natural determinism of the Stoics was of no major significance in shaping discussions about free-will, which were primarily carried on in terms of the problem

<sup>1</sup> Cicero, *De Fato*, IV-V, XVII-XIX.

<sup>2</sup> William James, "The Dilemma of Determinism," *The Will to Believe* (N.Y., 1897). For the more recent literature, consult, B. Berofsky, ed. *Free-Will and Determinism* (N.Y., 1966), Part 1:2.

of divine foreknowledge. However, in the early fifteenth century the Spanish-Jewish theologian Hasdai Crescas (1340–1410) undertook an extensive analysis of the problem of human choice. Crescas, like his Stoic predecessors, was committed to a doctrine of natural causation along deterministic lines; and like some of the Stoics he too attempted to “soften” his determinism in order to make room for human choice. Nevertheless, not all of his successors, in late medieval Jewish philosophy, believed in the possibility of such a reconciliation and they criticized Crescas for his failure to recognize this impossibility. This essay is devoted to the debate over “soft determinism” that took place during this critical and catastrophic century of Spanish-Jewish history.<sup>3</sup>

## I.

Before we begin our exposition and analysis of Crescas’ discussion of choice, some words about his over-all intention and method are appropriate. Crescas’ book *The Light of the Lord (Or Adonai)* is a treatise in dogmatics. In his theological system, the principle of choice ranks as one of the foundations of the Torah, or divine revelation. It is a foundation insofar as there would be no point to a divine revelation containing commandments if man were to have no power to obey or not to obey. The whole concept of moral and legal responsibility hinges upon human choice. Accordingly, whatever the correct analysis of choice will turn out to be, it is a principle of Judaism that is logically implied by the assumption that there was a divinely revealed law. Thus, even before he presents the various arguments for and against choice, he postulates the dogmatic significance of this concept. His goal will be to present an analysis of choice that preserves its religious role within the schema of divine law and at the same time is philosophically sound. In developing his

<sup>3</sup> All of the participants in this debate were intimately involved in the events of this tragic period in Spanish-Jewish history. Crescas lost his only son in the pogroms of 1391; Joseph Albo was forced to participate in the “debates” of Tortosa in 1412–1414; Isaac Arama and Isaac Abravanel were among the exiles of 1492.

own doctrine Crescas, first, catalogues the various arguments for and against the principle of choice that were fairly current in the medieval philosophical literature; he then evaluates their respective merits, concluding with his own version of a *moderate, or soft, determinism*. These various arguments are arranged in two groups: philosophical and religious. Since I have discussed the more important of the religious arguments in another essay,<sup>4</sup> our attention here will be upon the philosophical arguments. Also, for the sake of both brevity and the logic of my over-all analysis I shall modify somewhat the order of exposition.

Crescas' formulation of the problem turns on the concept of contingency: he asks whether contingency exists in the world. Before we begin to examine the affirmative and negative arguments, a terminological preface is required. Throughout this discussion Crescas employs the term 'the possible' (*ha-efshar*). As a number of writers have noted, in Aristotle's modal logic at least two different notions of possibility are present: 1) the possible as opposed to the impossible; and 2) the possible as opposed to the necessary. In the first case, we are concerned with a state of affairs or proposition that is logically admissible: to suppose it is not to fall into logical nonsense. In the second case, we are concerned with a situation or proposition that *may* or *may not* be true as opposed to a state of affairs or proposition that *must* be true. It is in this latter sense that the possible is contingent.<sup>5</sup> Crescas assumes that choice presupposes contingency: to be able to choose to do X implies that either X or not-X may be the case; whichever it is is *contingent* upon the choice. The advocates of choice will argue that genuine contingency exists in nature, and hence there is choice; those who reject choice deny the reality of contingency.

Two of the arguments for contingency are alternative versions of the thesis that natural phenomena are contingent in their very

<sup>4</sup> S. Feldman, "Crescas' Theological Determinism," *Da'at*, 9, Summer 1982, 3-28.

<sup>5</sup> J. Hintikka, "Aristotle's Different Possibilities," *Aristotle: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Julius Moravcsik (N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1967), 34-39.

being. In the first place, even though it be admitted that events have causes, we observe that occasionally some, or all, of the conditions that are causally relevant for the occurrence of some event occasionally do not occur. That is, the causes of phenomena are themselves contingent, insofar as they may or may not happen. But if this is so, then their effects are also contingent. Accordingly, even if the causal tie between fire and smoke is pretty tight, perhaps necessary, there is no necessity that fire be present at or in any circumstance; and if it is not present, the occurrence of smoke is also contingent. The second argument for contingency in nature introduces the terminology 'chance' and 'accident.' If nature were governed by strict causal laws, as the determinist claims, there would be no chance or accidents at all, and we would not have a use for such terms in our language. Yet, nature does seem to afford examples of chance phenomena. Hence, not all events are necessitated by determinate causes.<sup>6</sup>

The next two arguments in behalf of contingency are more directly concerned with our main topic, choice. Again, the defender of contingency appeals to common sense: we observe that many things depend upon our acts of will. Indeed, often we will one thing at one time but do not will it at another time. This capacity to choose is testimony to the existence of contingency; for if there were no genuine contingency, we would not be able to will anything at all. Or, consider what would happen if there were no contingency at all: there would be no point in expending any effort in or trying to achieve anything. We might as well just ride with the tide of events and let things carry us along. This is, of course, the venerable "Idle Argument", often discussed in Greek philosophy.<sup>7</sup>

The final philosophical argument for contingency is more metaphysical. Volition is a function of a rational soul. But such a soul is

<sup>6</sup> Aristotle, *Physics*, II: 4-6. Alexander of Aphrodisias, *On Destiny*, chapter 8. Crescas, *Or Adonai*, Book II, Principle 5, chapter 1. These are Crescas' first and third arguments.

<sup>7</sup> Crescas, *op. cit.*, 2nd and 4th arguments. Aristotle, *On Interpretation* 9, 18b-32-33. Cicero, *De Fato*, XII, 29.

a separate substance, independent of matter. The independency claimed here is particularly concerned with the influence of the heavenly bodies upon the human soul, a topic that has an old history. The defenders of contingency want to claim that since the soul is separable from matter, it is not influenced by the heavenly bodies and hence is not subject to astrological determinism. This argument, however, can easily be generalized: if the soul is at least in one of its parts or functions independent of the body, it is not subject to *any kind* of physical determination, earthly or heavenly, with respect to that part or function. Not caused by external physical factors, the soul is in this sense free to choose or not to choose.<sup>8</sup>

In the next chapter Crescas proceeds to list seven arguments against the existence of contingency. The last three of these arguments are really theological in nature, since they all assume the principle of divine omniscience and then deny the existence of contingency as a valid conclusion from this principle. Since I have discussed Crescas' doctrine of omniscience elsewhere, I shall not consider these arguments here but focus upon the strictly philosophical arguments, all four of which being variants of the principle of causality interpreted either mechanistically or teleologically.

The first of these arguments is actually the counter-thesis to the first of the arguments advanced by the advocates of contingency. But it contains an additional feature that its defender believes strengthens the case for determinism. Natural phenomena that are subject to change, especially the kind of change Aristotle called "generation and corruption," have causes of these changes; in turn, these causes have themselves causes, and so on until we reach a First

<sup>8</sup> Crescas, *op. cit.*, 5th argument. Cicero, *De Fato*, IV, 8. This argument from the soul seems to be derived from an earlier debate in Spanish-Jewish philosophy between Abner of Burgos (1270–1346), a convert to Christianity, and his former friend, Isaac Pulgar. The former defended a strong form of astrological pre-destination, whereas the latter rejected it. Pulgar defended his position with this argument about the soul's autonomy; Abner rejected this argument. I.F. Baer has claimed that Crescas was deeply influenced by Abner's determinism. (I.F. Baer, "Sefer Minhag Qenaot shel Avner mi-Burgos v'haspa'ato 'al Hasdai Crescas," *Tarbiz*, XI (1940), 188–206; idem, *A History of Jews in Christian Spain* (Philadelphia, 1971), volume I, 328–353.

Cause that is itself uncaused. The advocate of determinism claims that throughout this entire causal series the tie between cause and effect is necessary, allowing for no gaps, or "loopholes." Moreover, the First Cause has the unique property of being a necessary *per se* being: unlike every other thing or event, it must exist by its very nature, not merely by virtue of some external cause. But the causal ties amongst events that have led ultimately to the existence of this First Cause are such that they transmit in reverse to their events the necessity possessed by the First Cause, albeit in a less "pure" form. All of reality, according to this argument, constitutes then a fixed concatenation of phenomena bound together by necessity, whose ultimate source is the absolute necessity possessed by the First Cause.<sup>9</sup>

The second and third arguments against contingency also presuppose the principle of causality but are couched in terms that are reminiscent of Leibniz as much as of Aristotle. Consider some existent state of affairs that is *ab initio* regarded as contingent, i.e., before it existed it could or could not have existed. In either event there was a cause responsible for whatever is the case. This cause was called in the Arabic-Hebrew philosophical terminology, the "preponderating factor," [Arabic, *murajjih*; Hebrew, *makhri'a*] i.e., that which "decides," so to speak, for existence over non-existence. In Leibniz' terminology this is the *sufficient reason*. Now this preponderating factor is either itself self-sufficient, or necessarily existent, or is tied directly or indirectly to another cause that is a necessary existent, upon whose existence and causation everything else depends. Again, the series of natural phenomena, although containing members which are generable and corruptible, is a whole bound by necessary causal links. Thus, even a perishable or contingent item is necessary insofar as it is the inevitable result of a causal series of determinate causes and events. Accordingly, what the indeterminist calls "chance," or "accidental," events, do not really exist; they are merely phenomena that have not been properly located within their causal chains because of our ignorance.

<sup>9</sup> Crescas, *op. cit.*, Book II, Principle 5, chapter 2, first argument.

Crescas' third argument applies this general line of reasoning to human behavior and interprets the causal principle teleologically. Let us consider a particular human action from its inception to its consummation. At one moment we have an agent A who is sitting reading a book; at a subsequent moment he gets up and walks to the door and opens it. Why the change? Well, while reading, A heard a knock at the door; so he got up and opened it. In Aristotelian jargon, the knocking was that which "moved" A to stand and walk to the door. This motivity of the knocking "actualized" the potentiality for walking inherent in A. Now, it does not matter whether this motive cause [Arabic, *muharrik*; Hebrew, *mēni'a*] is external or internal: if it was not the knocking it could have been his desire to get some fresh air. In either case, the act has a cause which literally motivates the behavior. Again, in Leibniz' terminology, the act has a sufficient reason. If it is claimed that the will is itself the mover of any particular volition, not some external cause, and that accordingly the will is not determined but free, Crescas replies by showing that such an objection leads to either of two absurdities. Either the will turns out to be a self-mover, that is exempt from Aristotle's law that everything which moves from a state of potentiality to actuality is moved by something external to and different from itself,<sup>10</sup> or, each act of the will would be caused by another act of the will *ad infinitum*, which in this case would result in a vicious regress, since no particular volition would be actualized unless an infinite series of volitions had been gone through. Accordingly, the notion of the will itself being the agent of any particular volition is absurd.<sup>11</sup> Human behavior, therefore, turns out to be as causally determined as the behavior of rocks and plants.

Crescas' fourth argument takes the conclusion of the last argument and applies it to a different kind of case, which is also reminiscent of Leibniz. Consider two individuals who have the same physical and psychological make-up and in particular have identical

<sup>10</sup> Aristotle, *Physics*, Book III.

<sup>11</sup> Crescas' argument here anticipates the deterministic theses of both Spinoza (*Ethics*, I, Prop. 32; II, Props. 48–49) and Jonathan Edwards (*On Freedom of the Will*, Part III, Section 4).



interests and preferences. Suppose they go into an ice-cream parlor to get a cone. It follows from our hypothesis that if X chooses chocolate so will Y, and conversely. Now, suppose Y does not choose chocolate: there must have been some intervening factor [*mehaddesh*] that accounts for Y's different choice; after all, we assumed that their preferences were identical. The different choice requires an explanation. It could be that there was no chocolate left, and thus Y selected a different flavor. Of course, in that case X would have chosen similarly. In each case, the choice is determined by the preferences of the agents. If neither person had a preference for any of the flavors available, they would not have eaten any ice-cream from that store. For choices are preference-determined. This latter argument can be modified slightly and generalized to the case of an individual who has to choose between two alternatives that are equally attractive. This is, of course, the notorious example of Buridan's Ass or al-Ghazzali's Two Dates. Crescas' case, as well as those of his predecessors, assumes that in preference-identical or preference-symmetrical situations the choice is either thoroughly determined, so that the agents choose the same thing; or that the situation is thoroughly undetermined, such that the agent cannot choose at all. An arbitrary choice is impossible, since the presence or absence of preferences leaves no room for unpredictable or undetermined decisions.<sup>12</sup>

## II.

After having presented both the arguments for and against the existence of contingency, Crescas now proceeds to evaluate their respective merits and attempts to reach a conclusion concerning the question. It is quite clear from his criticism of the pro-arguments that he sides with their opponents. All the defenders of contingency have shown is that *in some sense or another* contingency exists; but none

<sup>12</sup> Crescas *op. cit.*, fourth argument. Averroes, *Tahafut al-Tahafut (The Incoherence of the Incoherence)*, translated by S. van der Bergh (London, 1954), volume I, page 19.

of their arguments have proved that causal determinism is false. Consider the first two of the Indeterminist's arguments concerning the alleged contingency inherent in at least some natural causal sequences, thus allowing for accidental and chance happenings. To the first of these arguments — causal chains are sometimes contingent — Crescas replies that it is a *petitio principii*. Whether or not the causal conditions of some event occur is a fact that is itself necessarily determined by a set of antecedent states of affairs. In the case where the usual causal antecedents of some event have not occurred, there is a reason why this is so; analogously, where given the usual antecedents the expected event has not occurred, there is a reason for this too. Every causal law has to be understood, "ceteris paribus." What look like exceptions to causal laws are really not exceptions at all, since upon closer analysis, or with greater information, they too turn out to be causally explicable. As Spinoza was to say later, the belief in contingency is just an excuse for ignorance. With this point in mind, we can say of so-called chance phenomena that they too are causally determined; it is just that either their causes are unknown or they are the results of a different and unanticipated causal chain. A farmer who digs a hole in order to plant a vine but finds a treasure is someone who is acting predictably for someone who wants to grow grapes. That he finds a treasure is certainly unexpected; but its presence in the ground is explained by the desire of the thief to hide it while he is in prison. Nothing here is uncaused.

Underlying Crescas' reply to the Indeterminist is a view of contingency that he believes is consistent with determinism and yet is also sufficient to ground the belief in choice and moral responsibility. Natural events are all causally determined; nevertheless, if they are prescinded from their causes, they are seen to be *logically contingent*. As Hume was to insist upon, several centuries later, every empirical event is such that we can conceive of its opposite; i.e., no natural event is logically necessary.<sup>13</sup> In Crescas' terminology, natural phenomena are "necessary with respect to their causes

<sup>13</sup> Hume, *A Treatise on Human Nature*, Book I, Section 3.

but contingent in themselves.”<sup>14</sup> The necessity present in nature is, of course, not logical but some weaker or different kind of necessity that some modern writers have labelled “natural necessity” or “physical necessity.” Laws of nature demarcate domains within which certain events are possible and other events are not possible. But within each domain the possible events are also necessary. Prior to quantum physics it was believed by many scientists and philosophers that most if not all scientific laws expressed natural necessities. This is Crescas’ view. To be sure, these necessities are not absolute: they are relative to a specific law of nature. In every case, we can conceive of the non-occurrence of the specified event in some *other domain*.

Crescas’ vocabulary here is metaphysical rather than logical. It is derived from an ontological analysis that was provided by Avicenna. In his attempt to defend both the Aristotelian thesis of the eternity of the universe and the Muslim dogma of creation *ex nihilo*, Avicenna put forth an analysis of being that parcelled out all existent things into three categories: 1) that which is necessary *per se*; 2) that which is contingent *per se*; and 3) that which is necessary through its cause although contingent *per se*. God is the only example of class 1; individual generable and perishable items of our world are examples of class 2; and the heavenly bodies are examples of class 3.<sup>15</sup> Now, for Crescas every natural phenomenon is a member of class 3, since, given its causes, an event is necessary, even though from a logical point of view it is simply a contingent fact. To be sure, an apple will sooner or later perish and cease to be an apple; but its genesis was a necessary fact, given the laws of nature and the presence of the relevant causal conditions. Unlike God, then, the apple is contingent in itself or, in Spinoza’s vocabulary, is not *causa sui*; nevertheless, it is a necessary event in the history of the world, as the latter is in fact constituted.

<sup>14</sup> Crescas, *op. cit.*, chapter 3.

<sup>15</sup> Avicenna, *The Healing: Metaphysics*, trans. A. Hyman, in *Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, edited by A. Hyman and J. Walsh (Indianapolis, 1973), 240–254.

Actually, Crescas' analysis of contingency can be construed as an implicit revision of Avicenna's metaphysical theory of being. Crescas is saying that class 2 is superfluous, since every contingent being is necessary, given its causes. From an abstract, logical point of view, the specification of class 2 is perhaps useful; but in reality it has no members, so it can be dispensed with. Here Crescas anticipates Spinoza's complete elimination of contingency. Unlike Crescas, however, Spinoza redefines the type of entity that is not necessary *per se* in terms of necessity, not contingency. Accordingly, both class 2 and 3 entities are for Spinoza necessary by virtue of their causes. The predicate 'contingent' is in principle eliminable, since it expresses only human ignorance.<sup>16</sup> Although Crescas retains the term 'contingent,' he nevertheless empties it of any empirical content and explicitly defends the reign of determinism in the world of nature, including human behavior. Thus, not only are our bodily movements caused, but our volitions and choices as well.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> The relevance of Crescas to Spinoza has been noted by several commentators: M. Joel, *Don Hasdai Crescas' religionsphilosophische Lehren* (Breslau, 1866); *idem*, *Zur Genesis der Lehre Spinozas* (Breslau, 1871); P. Bloch, *Die Willensfreiheit bei Chasdai Crescas* (München, 1879); D. Neumark, "Crescas and Spinoza," in his *Essays in Jewish Philosophy* (Cincinnati, n.d.), 308-316; H. Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza* (New York, 1969), volume 1, 406-422.

<sup>17</sup> The sources of Crescas' determinism have been investigated by several scholars. Although I agree that Crescas' determinism shows the influence of some of the Muslim *falasifa*, as Julius Guttman has argued, I stress the importance of Avicenna rather than Averroes, who for Guttman is decisive for Crescas. (J. Guttman, "Das Problem der Willensfreiheit bei Hasdai Crescas und den islamischen Aristotelikern," *Jewish Studies in Memory of G.A. Kohut* (New York, 1935), 326-349). Averroes rejected Avicenna's modal analysis and its application to ontology. For him the notion of a necessary and contingent being was incoherent. Crescas, however, accepts this idea and uses it not only in this context but elsewhere in his philosophy. (See his discussion of creation in *The Light of the Lord*, Book III, Principle 1).

More recently S. Pines has attempted to demonstrate the influence of Latin Scholastic ideas upon Crescas. (S. Pines, *Scholasticism after Thomas Aquinas and the Teachings of Hasdai Crescas and his Predecessors*, Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, No. 11 (Jerusalem, 1967)).

Having provided, at least to his own satisfaction, some room for contingency, if only in *logical* space, Crescas then undertakes to answer the standard Indeterminist criticism that if causal determinism were true, human action would not be voluntary, or free. This was in substance the point behind the Indeterminist's third and fourth arguments previously outlined. Crescas lays the foundation for his reply to this objection by appealing to a distinction found not only in Aristotle but also in Talmudic law, a distinction which has played a very important role in modern determinist literature as well. Crescas proposes that we define freedom by first differentiating between voluntary and involuntary behavior. A voluntary act is one, Aristotle claims, that is neither compelled nor done out of ignorance.<sup>18</sup> Since the latter factor is not relevant for our purposes, we shall set it aside. Compulsory behavior is not, Aristotle insists, properly attributable to the person who ostensibly has done it. If A pressed B's fingers in such a way that the trigger propelled a bullet that killed C, B is regarded as *not* responsible for the death of C. Even though B's fingers did move the trigger, his "heart was not in the act": B was compelled to pull the trigger and, in Aristotle's language "contributed nothing of his own" to the deed. Or, as Crescas puts it, the pulling of the trigger was "not an act of *his soul*" and he has not really "entered the deed."<sup>19</sup> If, however, B *wanted* to kill C because C had killed his wife, and then went out and bought a gun and proceeded on his own to kill C, then we have, of course, a different matter. But here too, it should be noted, B's pulling the trigger was caused. Obviously, the cause was different, and the difference will account for the attribution of responsibility to B. Nevertheless, Crescas insists, B's behavior *was* caused: he had a motive, perhaps not a good one, yet a motive nonetheless for killing C. In this sense his behavior is caused and hence determined. All Soft Determinists would claim, however, that although B's act was caused, it was nevertheless voluntary because *he wanted* to kill C and proceeded to do it *on his own*. Crescas urges us to differentiate

<sup>18</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, III: 1-3.

<sup>19</sup> Crescas, *op. cit.*, chapter 3.

between an act that is compelled and an act that is merely caused. In the former, the act is externally brought about, without the agent's consent; in the latter the "origin" of the act is the agent's desire, wish or motive. Compulsory acts are indeed excusable; but a merely motivated act is not. Voluntary, or free, action is then compatible with giving a causal account of its origin.<sup>20</sup>

The presence of compulsion functions in this analysis as an impeding, or negative, factor; we presume that people act voluntarily unless they are compelled by supervenient forces. In addition to this negative condition, Crescas now introduces a positive feature as an element in a free act: voluntary behavior, Crescas claims, is accompanied by a feeling of joy, which is an expression of the personality of the agent. Let us suppose that we are confronted with a moral problem, in which we are to choose between two competing alternatives. After deliberation we choose A over B, judging that A is the right thing to do. However A is judged to be right, the belief that A is right, the choice of A and the actual doing of A, all contribute to the agent's having a sense of satisfaction in his performance of A. This is a common experience that people often express by saying that they felt good, for example, when they gave charity. The presence of this feeling is, for Crescas, testimony to the fact that the agent has acted *voluntarily*.<sup>21</sup>

Now, in the moral philosophy of Crescas the right course of action is primarily identified with the doing of God's will as expressed in His commandments. Since God has explicitly stated that these com-

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, Spinoza, *Ethics*, I, Def. 7; Hume, *An Inquiry on Human Understanding*, Section VIII. M. Schlick, *Problems of Ethics*, trans. D. Rynin (New York, 1939), 143-156.

<sup>21</sup> Crescas, chapter 3. This notion seems to parallel the Stoic doctrine of assent, introduced by Chrysippus to avoid the undesirable consequence that actions would be involuntary if external conditions were *sufficient* to bring about the act. On the doctrine of assent (*sugkatathēsis*) someone is said to have acted voluntarily if he assents to the causal conditions that "predispose" (*prokatartikos*) but not necessitate his act. Plutarch, *Moralia: On Stoic Self-Contradictions*, 47:1055F-1057C. R. Sorabji, *Necessity, Cause and Blame: Perspectives on Aristotle's Theory* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1980), 79-83.

mandments define what is right and what is wrong and that their fulfillment means life whereas their rejection means death, it is clear that when a man obeys these commandments he knows that he is doing the good and avoiding the evil. Hence, he finds satisfaction in his performance of these commandments. Indeed, he experiences a distinct feeling of pleasure in such circumstances. This is the “joy of the commandment” [*simha shel mitzvah*] that the Rabbis extol, which in fact provides joy to God as well as to the person performing the commandment. Assured that obeying the commandments of God is both satisfying God’s wishes and such compliance is the good life, the pious believer lives in a state of joy. This life is, as the Rabbis state, a life of freedom precisely because it is a life filled with commandments, all of which being “ways of pleasantness.” What appears to be a legalistic burden turns out to be a source of joy. True freedom then is not only compatible with being “bound by the law but is actually defined in terms of it.”<sup>22</sup>

With this analysis of free action, Crescas is now ready to respond to the Indeterminist’s arguments concerning volition. In the first place, Crescas claims, the fact that the will is caused, or motivated, in no way renders it any the less “voluntary.” To be sure, the will, or our volitions, is caused; nevertheless, any given volition, or choice, is still logically contingent, insofar as it is logically possible that the person would have willed otherwise had the circumstances been different. Or, as Crescas puts it, prescindend from any set of causal conditions the will is indifferent to a pair of contrary alternatives; in this sense it is “intrinsically contingent.” Of course, in reality the will is not independent of causal determinations, and hence it will be motivated in one direction or another; yet the will remains, Crescas claims, free so long as the agent feels no compulsion.<sup>23</sup>

Secondly, the so-called “Idle Argument” is, Crescas argues, beside the point. Anticipating Spinoza’s answer to Schuller, Crescas replies

<sup>22</sup> Crescas, *op. cit.*, chapter 5. *Babylonian Talmud*, Sabbath, 30b; Berachot, 31a–b. *Proverbs* 3: 17.

<sup>23</sup> Crescas, chapter 3, reply to second argument.

to this stock objection by claiming that both the effort which we are urged to expend to perform the command and the command itself are themselves efficient causes of the act, if in fact we act according to the commandment. When we are prohibited from committing adultery and we successfully resist temptation, the injunction and the effort expended in fulfilling it are elements in the causal complex that is ultimately responsible for our not committing adultery. If the agent is asked, how come he resisted, given his well-known passion for the forbidden spouse, and he replies that adultery is proscribed and that he has been trying to live up to his moral commitments, he has supplied "sufficient reasons" for his forbearance. These reasons are not extraneous elements in the situation; on the contrary, they enter directly into the explanation of his behavior, and in this sense are "causes."<sup>24</sup> The "Idle Argument" would be pertinent *if* it were the case that a man were *destined* to be rich, such that no matter what he does he will be wealthy. In this case we could say that the man will necessarily be rich, since his "individual concept," to use Leibniz' terminology, *implies* that he be wealthy; he is, in Crescas' language, "essentially rich." But the determinist is not committed to this picture. On the contrary, he maintains that effort and skill are precisely the *causes* of the man's acquiring wealth. The acquisition of wealth is certainly not uncaused; but this does not imply that the person was compelled to be wealthy.

Crescas uses this point to reply to another objection raised by the critics of determinism, concerning the lack of appropriateness of reward and punishment if human behavior is causally determined. Let us consider, Crescas suggests, the divine commands and moral imperatives in general, as at least partial causes of the rewards and punishments with which they are *necessarily* associated. When God commanded the Israelites to honor their parents, He explicitly stated that if they observe this imperative they will themselves enjoy a long life. The injunction is itself a relevant factor in explaining the consequent long life if it is obeyed. Crescas generalizes this

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, reply to fourth argument. Spinoza, *Correspondence*, Letter 58. See also Letters 19, 21, 52, 54, 56, 75, and 78.



point by saying that the commandments are to be regarded as efficient causes [*sibot meni'ot*] for the performance of good actions and for their consequent rewards. In His goodness God wants us to attain the proper kind of human happiness. The latter is brought about by virtuous actions. In turn, virtuous actions are elicited by the appropriate exhortations and prohibitions, i.e. the commandments. There is here a three-term causal relationship: commandments – actions – consequences, such that the first and second terms can be regarded as means toward, as well as causes of, the third, which is the end. After all, a good God who wants us to be happy would not deprive us of the means that lead to this goal. The commandments are these means, and they are effective because they are causally related to the desired end in the same way as any natural effect is linked with its cause.<sup>25</sup> Accordingly, neither the command nor the effort exerted in complying with it is “idle.”

In an analogous way, the following common criticism of Spinoza's ethics can be dissipated: how can Spinoza consistently prescribe certain courses of action as beneficial if what we in fact do is necessitated by our passions, habits and beliefs? The moral therapy of Part V of the *Ethics* seems to be impotent given the metaphysical and psychological condition of man described in the previous books. This objection, Crescas answers, fails to recognize the causative role that the prescribed therapy plays. Knowing or believing that certain prescriptions are efficacious is itself a cause of following the prescription and a means for securing the desired goal. If in fact we perform these imperatives, the goal is attained. As Crescas says: “reward and punishment follow from the commandments in the same way as the effect follows from its natural cause.”<sup>26</sup> God, the moral philosopher, or the psychologist, attempts, each in his own way, to change our behavior; their exhortations enter our psychological constitution in varying degrees of persuasiveness. But once these prescriptions have become parts of our make-up, they func-

<sup>25</sup> Crescas, *op. cit.*, chapter 5.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* See the essays by De Dijn and Friedman in *Spinoza's Philosophy of Man*, edited by J. Wetlesen (Oslo, 1978).

tion as causal conditons of our behavior. Moral imperatives, the determinist can reply, are therefore not idle; just the contrary, they are literally *effective*.

The last of the Indeterminist's arguments was the claim that the human soul, including the will, is immune from physical determination because it is an incorporeal, separable substance. Crescas rejects this argument. He replies that the rational soul of a human being is, at least in part, determined by his biological constitution, and hence has to be considered as a material, or physical, entity. As such, it is therefore exposed to and influenced by all kinds of physical causes that can literally *motivate* the will; for the will is, Crescas claims, "the agreement between desire and imagination." In an ordinary case of a choice between two or more options, an individual will be influenced to choose one over the others by some external or internal cause, such as a pretty face, or a sensation of hunger, etc. Motives and stimulants will, of course, be diverse; but in any case, the choice will be determined by some such cause.<sup>27</sup> Unfortunately, Crescas' counterargument is brief. I say 'unfortunately' for two reasons. First, the argument and Crescas' reply are interesting both historically and philosophically. The thesis is reminiscent of Plato and anticipates Descartes; Crescas' counterthesis echoes Aristotle and looks forward to modern epiphenomenalism and perhaps to Hobbes as well. Second, as we shall see in the critical part of this essay, Crescas' counterargument will be the focal point of an important criticism levelled by a later medieval Jewish theologian. It would have been nice to have here more than what Crescas has in fact supplied.

Before moving on to the next stage in Crescas' argument for Soft Determinism, I want to summarize the results so far. Crescas has claimed that all events, including human behavior, are governed by strict causal laws. This means that choices too have causes. Nevertheless, contingency exists, insofar as all empirical events and phenomena are not absolutely, or logically, necessary: for any given empirical state of affairs we can always conceive of its opposite

<sup>27</sup> Crescas, *op. cit.*, chapter 3, reply to fifth argument.

without contradiction. This logical contingency is enough, Crescas believes, to provide the basis of human choice. Furthermore, so long as the agent is not compelled to do what he does and in fact feels satisfied with his action, he can be said to have acted freely. These conditions define then Crescas' Soft Determinism.

### III.

So far, Crescas has focused his reconciliationist analysis upon the problem of free action. At this juncture in his exposition he turns to the question of belief, which ought not to surprise us, since his book is primarily a treatise in dogmatics. Theological beliefs become relevant to a discussion of choice because, like his Muslim and Christian counterparts, Crescas maintains that assenting or not assenting to a theological proposition can be meritorious or reprehensible, and hence worth of reward or punishment. This problem is especially urgent, since two major sources of Jewish law list several theological doctrines amongst the obligatory commandments. The Mishnah explicitly states that a Jew who does not believe, for example, that resurrection of the dead is taught in the Torah forfeits his share in the World-To-Come.<sup>28</sup> In his *Book of the Commandments*, Maimonides gives as the first commandment the belief in God and as the second commandment the belief in God's unity. Crescas now asks the following question: if beliefs, like behavior, are caused, as his general commitment to determinism seems to entail, then it is not "open" to someone to believe some religious dogma. His belief or disbelief is as much necessitated by causes as his behavior. But if this is the case, the believer should not be held accountable and hence punishable for his beliefs or disbeliefs!<sup>29</sup>

<sup>28</sup> *Mishnah*, Sanhedrin, 10: 1.

<sup>29</sup> Crescas, *op. cit.*, chapter 5.

In a Hebrew article, published after the writing of this essay, A. Ravitsky has studied the development of Crescas' views on freedom in beliefs beginning with an earlier, unpublished, sermon to the analysis in *Or Adonai*. Ravitsky's essay is primarily textual-historical; it also compares the views of Crescas and those of Aquinas and Scotus. (A. Ravitsky, "The Development in Crescas'

There is a fairly common view that some beliefs, at least, are volitional, in the sense that what we come to believe is the product of an act of will, not of the intellect, and hence is "up to us." This doctrine, which had its representatives in Scholastic philosophy, has become quite fashionable in modern philosophy of religion, at least since Pascal, Kierkegaard and William James, for whom religious faith is more a matter of decision than of intellectual affirmation. Indeed, some contemporary philosophers of religion, influenced by Wittgenstein, like to speak of religious beliefs as being adopted through *choosing* to follow some "way of life." To adopt a religious belief, according to this theory, is not to consider the evidence for a dogma but to "will to believe" it. Often this involves a commitment to a whole system of beliefs en masse, not just to one belief alone. In any case, for this account of belief the will, not the intellect, is the primary factor.<sup>30</sup>

Crescas rejects this volitional model of religious belief, with its suggestion of an absolute freedom to adopt or not to adopt a belief or system of beliefs. Adhering to his general theory of determinism he holds that beliefs, as much as behavior, have causes, and that these causes "necessitate" the beliefs. The causes of beliefs are the facts that constitute the evidence for the beliefs. Thus, contrary to the volitional account of belief, Crescas' view maintains that religious dogmas "aim at truth," that they are evidentially grounded, and, most importantly, that the evidence for such propositions "binds" the believer.<sup>31</sup> Underlying Crescas' account of religious belief is his adherence to the traditional definition of truth as the correspondence between a belief, or proposition, and reality. Since

Views on the Question of Free Will" (Hebrew) *Tarbiz*, 51, no. 3 (1982), 445-469. An English abstract is provided.)

<sup>30</sup> See R.B. Braithwaite, *An Empiricist's View of the Nature of Religious Belief* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955); D.Z. Phillips, *Faith and Philosophical Inquiry* (N.Y.: Schocken Books, 1971) and *Religion Without Explanation* (Oxford: B. Blackwell, 1976).

<sup>31</sup> Crescas, *op. cit.*, chapter 5. The phrase 'aim at truth' comes from Bernard Williams, "Deciding to Believe," in his collection of essays *Problems of the Self* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 136, 148-149.

reality does not depend upon us, we have to adjust our beliefs to it. In this sense, we have no choice to believe anything we want. Moreover, if beliefs were solely or primarily the results of will, we could very well believe in contradictory or contrary propositions at different times; for there would be nothing to decide in favor of one as against the other, since evidence is irrelevant or unimportant. But, Crescas claims, this undermines the whole purpose of religious belief, which is concerned with specifying a community of believers who are all bound by a common set of required dogmas. If religious belief were merely a matter of will, then no criteria for dogma would exist; indeed, there could not be any dogmas at all.

Crescas' cognitive account of religious belief implies that dogmas are not to be accepted on "blind faith", but are to be construed as conclusions resulting from evidence that brings about belief. In this context Crescas uses two terms for the grounds of our beliefs that he used earlier in his discussion of psychological causation: 'motive' (*mēni'a*) and 'generator' (*mehadesh*). The evidence for a proposition *moves* us to believe it; or, the evidence "generates" belief. This is fairly clear in the case of a strict deductive proof, say in geometry, where the premises entail the conclusion. Anyone who understands the proof recognizes its "force" and is "compelled" to accept the conclusion. Indeed, here it is correct to say that the premises *necessitate* the conclusion. Now, what does this signify for religious belief? It means in the case of a sound proof for God's existence, that we *must* accept the conclusion. But if I *must* believe that God exists, because His existence has been validly proved, how can I *not* believe this proposition such that I would be punished for my disbelief but rewarded for my belief? In mathematics and physics we are, of course, not worried about the necessity to believe theorems; indeed, we welcome the opportunity. Here we do not care about reward or punishment. In religion, however, the matter is otherwise; religious beliefs are dogmas that specify who are saved or damned, who are rewarded or punished. But if there is no element of choice in my beliefs about God, since these beliefs have been proved, how can I be held responsible for my belief or disbelief in them?

However, it could be objected that the number of such beliefs is

relatively small, and thus Crescas' problem is not so serious. Indeed, Crescas himself admitted that only a handful of the nineteen dogmas of Judaism were demonstrable by means of philosophical argument. In fact, most of the important and unique beliefs of Judaism, e.g., the Sinaitic revelation, are not susceptible to philosophical demonstration at all, since presumably they are historical facts.<sup>32</sup> Accordingly, it could be argued that we need not worry about being "compelled" to believe in these dogmas, and hence our *choice* to believe or not to believe in them warrants reward or punishment. Nevertheless, Crescas maintains that we are in some sense "compelled" to believe in these dogmas too, just as we are in the case of the dogma of God's existence, and so the problem of reward and punishment for beliefs still obtains. Admittedly, the necessity that leads us to believe in the Sinaitic revelation differs from the logical force of a valid argument for God's existence. But, Crescas claims, it still compels, albeit in a different way. The Jews who witnessed that presumed fact had no choice whether to believe or not to believe, since the circumstances were such that they were "made to see and know" that God spoke to them and that Moses was his prophet.<sup>33</sup> Although empirical evidence does not necessitate a belief in the same way as does a valid argument, nonetheless it still can produce conviction that is "compelling" and gives what used to be called "moral certainty." After all, if I hear a brass band whose sounds are almost deafening and I see them right in front of me, and if everyone else around me too complains of their loud playing, why should I doubt what I hear and see? Moreover, if everyone agrees as to what music they are playing, to disbelieve my senses would be to play the Cartesian game, "The Evil Demon." But why should I play this game, especially if no one else does? Accordingly, Crescas concludes, empirical beliefs too can be sufficiently *determined* by their evidence, so as to *force* themselves upon us. Crescas finds support

<sup>32</sup> The Mishnah singles out three dogmas, none of which is obviously provable by reason: the divine origin of the Torah, resurrection of the dead and divine providence.

<sup>33</sup> *Deuteronomy*, 4:35 and *Exodus*, chapter 19. This is the focus of Crescas' earlier sermon on the role of miracles in religious belief (cf. note 29).

for this claim in a Talmudic story that relates how God overturned Mt. Sinai and suspended it over the heads of the Israelites, who were then forced to accept the Torah.<sup>34</sup> Now, if this is so, what point is there in the Mishnah's specifying the dogma in Sinaitic revelation as a belief the denial of which results in heresy and punishment? Do we have a *choice* in this matter, such that we are accountable for our *beliefs*?

In attempting to answer this question, Crescas reverts to a point he made earlier in connection with his analysis of free action. Although actions are caused, they can be said to be free if there is a concomitant pleasure or joy in the doing of the act; it is this feeling that is really the subject of praise or blame, not the act itself, since it is the attendant joy that makes the act voluntary. Crescas now applies this principle to the case of beliefs. *Having or not having a belief* itself is admittedly not a matter of choice; all beliefs are evidentially determined. Nevertheless, attendant to a belief is a feeling of either joy or regret, which is for Crescas a matter of will [פעל נפשי] and hence subject to reward or punishment. Consider the case where two individuals both assent to the veracity of a prophet; yet, whereas A gladly performs the precepts commanded by the prophet, B performs them grudgingly. In this situation there is no question of disbelief, since B is prepared to admit that the prophet is a genuine prophet; he just does not like what the prophet wants him to do. Here, Crescas claims, it would be justified to reward A and to punish B, not for their beliefs, since they have the same beliefs, but for their respective feelings toward the prophet. The same is true for theoretical beliefs. Assume that there is a sound proof for God's existence and that both A and B assent to the soundness of the proof, but their feelings differ. For example, A is glad there is such a proof and continues to reflect upon it and to inquire further into religion; whereas B is either disappointed and resentful, cursing the day he ever began to study philosophy, or he is satisfied with the proof but ends his inquiry altogether, blessing the day he came across the argument concerning the First Efficient Cause. In this situation,

<sup>34</sup> Crescas, *op. cit.*, chapter 6.

Crescas maintains that again A is praiseworthy for his belief, whereas B is blameworthy, even though their beliefs are the same. That which is the object of the praise or blame is then the emotion accompanying the belief, not the belief itself. And this too is reflected in that Talmudic story referred to earlier, wherein it is related that the Israelites were in fact held responsible for accepting the Torah at Sinai because they "re-accepted" it with joy in the days of Queen Esther. Accordingly, even though what we come to believe is in various ways determined and hence not *ad libitum*, we can nevertheless be held responsible for our beliefs insofar as our emotional responses to these beliefs are, Crescas claims, our own.<sup>35</sup>

#### IV.

Although convinced of the correctness of his position, Crescas is aware that it is both relatively novel to the Jewish tradition, and perhaps even superficially heretical. Immediately following the statement of his deterministic conclusion he adds that wide dissemination of this thesis might be harmful to the masses, since they would construe his doctrine to be a version of Fatalism, a theory Crescas rejects. The masses might infer from Crescas' doctrine the view that all human effort is superfluous, that a person's moral behavior is pre-destined, and hence man is not held responsible for his deeds. This would, Crescas claims, be a misunderstanding of this theory.<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, it turned out that not only

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, chapter 5-6.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, chapter 3. A textual matter is of some interest and importance in this context. Warren Harvey has recently shown that all the printed editions and most of the manuscripts of the *Or Adonai* are especially corrupt on this particular topic. He maintains that the genuine reading is found in the Florence manuscript, which itself was "corrected" in the margin by either a student of Crescas or perhaps by Crescas himself in order to mitigate the determinism espoused therein and thereby to satisfy more traditional readers. All subsequent manuscripts accepted this "correction." (W. Harvey, "L'zihui mehabran shel ha-hiṣtaiguyot min ha-determinism b'sefer Or Adonai l'rabbi Hasdai Crescas — 'edut ktav yad Firenze," *Kiryat Sefer*, September, 1980, 794-801.)



the masses, who most likely did not read his book, but subsequent Jewish thinkers found Crescas' Determinism unacceptable and they responded critically to it. Throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries there was a tradition of "Crescas-Kritik" on this particular issue, even from thinkers who were generally sympathetic to his views on other topics. What I propose to do in this section of the essay is to present a critique of Crescas' Determinism, using materials gleaned from a number of late medieval Jewish writers who could not accept Crescas' doctrine and who subjected it to criticism. Since in some cases one author borrowed from another, or offered similar criticism, I shall, for the sake of economy, combine several authors as representative of one position or argument. The particular writers who present collectively this "Crescas-Kritik" are Joseph Albo (d. 1444) — Crescas' own pupil — Abraham Shalom (d. 1492), Isaac Arama (d. 1494), and Isaac Abravanel (d. 1509). All of these theologians lived through the catastrophic century of the decline and disappearance of Spanish Jewry, the home of Jewish philosophy for most of the Middle Ages.<sup>37</sup>

Joseph Albo reacted negatively to Crescas' analysis of choice, and his response was seconded by all the above-mentioned thinkers, who found Crescas' Soft Determinism too "hard." They argue that on Crescas' theory the concept of contingency is virtually empty:

"What good is there in saying that they are possible considered by themselves, as long as they are determined and necessary from ... the causes? For they can not come into existence in any other way."<sup>38</sup>

Underlying this criticism is a dissatisfaction with the merely *abstract* possibility of a different choice or action, which *in fact* could not have been otherwise. Crescas' Soft Determinism implies that in some possible universe, *different from our own*, agents could have done other than they have done in this world. But this "hypothetical freedom" is just not enough, Albo claims. What is required

<sup>37</sup> I.F. Baer, *The Jews in Christian Spain*, volume 2, 254–258.

<sup>38</sup> Joseph Albo, *Iqqarim* (The Book of Principles), translated by I. Husik (Philadelphia, 1946), Book IV, chapter 1, page 7.

is a genuine ability in this world to choose or do differently from what in fact we did choose or do. In C.A. Campbell's more modern idiom, the relevant sense of freedom is "categorical," or unconditional, freedom: the capacity to do X or not to do X, independently of antecedent causal conditions; or the ability to act contrary to the causal conditions.<sup>39</sup> Without this kind of freedom there is *no* point in saying we have *chosen* to do X; for, if our "choice" to do X was caused in such a way that no other alternatives were open to us, then what kind of choice is that? It is no consolation to know that had I been a different person or had the circumstances been different, I could have chosen or done otherwise. Our choices and actions take place in *this* world, not in some hypothetical universe. On Crescas' account, the possible, or contingent, would exist "only logically and conceptually, but not actually." It is, Albo claims, a concept without any real use.<sup>40</sup>

The kind of contingency that Albo claims to be relevant here is the one that later Scholastic writers called 'liberty of indifference.'<sup>41</sup> In Albo's language, it is the contingent that is "indifferent with respect to its causes" [*efshari 'al-shivui bebhinat sibbotav*]. A century earlier than Albo, Duns Scotus defined freedom to be a condition such that the agent has at some time both the capacity to do not-X as well as the capacity to do X. Or, in the 16th-century Jesuit Luis Molinas' words, to which Albo's terminology closely proximates:

"That agent is called free which in the presence of all necessary conditions for action can act and refrain from action or can do one thing while being able to do its opposite."<sup>42</sup>

Albo suggests that in a truly contingent state of affairs the agent

<sup>39</sup> C.A. Campbell, "Is Free-Will a 'Pseudo-problem'," *Mind*, 60 (1951), 446-465.

<sup>40</sup> Albo, page 8. Abraham Shalom, *Neve Shalom* (Venice, 1574), Book XII, second question, chapter 1, page 208b.

<sup>41</sup> A. Kenny, *The God of the Philosophers* (Oxford: Oxford U. Press, 1979), 61.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

chooses one of several possible alternatives; it is the agent's *will* that determines the choice, not any external or internal stimuli. For example, in performing a miracle God is free because He is not bound to perform it by any cause other than His own will.<sup>43</sup> Analogously, in a human free action, the act is free because the agent just *wills it*.

Another criticism of Crescas' concept of choice is voiced by Isaac Arama and Isaac Abravanel. If in fact all events are determined, and hence necessary, at least in terms of their causes, as Crescas claims, to describe them as contingent will in practice turn out to be nothing more than a confession of our ignorance of their causes.

“The [thesis that a] thing is a contingent *per se* but necessary by virtue of its cause is in fact false in my opinion. For with respect to a thing that is necessary by virtue of its causes, what contingency remains in it? Does the ignorance of its causes confer contingency on it? It would be better to say of it that it is something necessary but its causes are not known.”<sup>44</sup>

Arama accuses Crescas of giving us a rather idle notion of contingency, since in reality there is no such thing. Like Albo, he describes this notion as merely “verbal.”

“As far as I am concerned, I do not see in his doctrine anything of real substance; it is just words. For something that is necessary when its causes are present or impossible when the causes are impossible is, when we assume either the existence of the causes of their impossibility . . . simply necessary. What kind of contingency is there in the thing by virtue of which it would really be contingent? Can the ignorance of causes be called ‘contingency’?”<sup>45</sup>

Arama's criticism anticipates Spinoza's remark that the term ‘contingent’ can only mean ignorance of causes, if strict causal determinism is posited. It is no wonder that Spinoza ultimately rejects

<sup>43</sup> Albo, p. 11.

<sup>44</sup> Isaac Arama, *'Aqedat Yitzhaq* (Presburg, 1849), Genesis, Gate 28, page 215a. my translation.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, Gate 19, page 136a.

the Avicennian tri-partite division amongst necessary *per se*, possible *per se* and possible *per causam* entities or events. Once the commitment to causal determinism is made, the only relevant distinction to be drawn is that between those things that are necessary as such, i.e. from their own essence, and those that are necessary by virtue of their causes; the possible or contingent has ceased to be a significant concept.<sup>46</sup> However, Arama, unlike Spinoza, believed in the importance of this concept; so he rejected both causal determinism and Crescas' attempt to reconcile determinism with contingency.

Rejecting Crescas' determinism as incompatible with genuine contingency, his critics develop an alternative account of choice that they believe is more consonant with both reason and religious tradition. The basic ground-rule they adopt is that an acceptable account of choice must allow for genuine attributions of praise and blame, such that reward and punishment are *legal and moral* consequences of actions, not merely natural effects of them. In short, they reject Crescas' concepts of choice as an affirmative psychological response to an external stimulus and of a free action as an unimpeded realization of such a response. They maintain that choice is not merely a predictable response to a determinate stimulus in the absence of restraint. In their view choice involves reason, or the intellect, as well as desire and imagination. It may be that an individual is hungry and desires to eat, especially since the refrigerator is replete with all kinds of goodies. Nevertheless, he is on a diet; and he *knows* that eating these snacks is not good for him. Wanting to lose weight because, again, he *knows* that obesity is not healthy, our hungry dieter refrains from eating; but he could have chosen to eat

<sup>46</sup> Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part I, Prop. 33, Scholium 1. In Book IV, Definitions, Spinoza distinguishes between the 'contingent' and 'the possible.' On this distinction the contingent is that which is neither necessary *per se*, i.e., it is not *causa sui*, nor impossible *per se*. In the language of Book I, Prop. 33, it is the necessary by virtue of its causes. The possible is something the knowledge of whose causes is defective, so that we do not know from this information whether it will come about. Here Spinoza too empties the notion of contingency of any real content. (Isaac Abravanel, *Nahalat Avot*, III: 15.)

had he wanted the immediate satisfaction of his desires over his good health. According to Arama, every choice involves not only desire and the capacity to realize this desire — which Crescas would regard as sufficient for freedom —, but knowledge as well.

“The definition of choice is as follows: it is desire taken under the advice of the intellect . . . Choice is the union of the intellect with the sound will.”<sup>47</sup>

Arama goes on to distinguish between volition and choice, the former being a wider concept than the latter. Any case of an unrestrained act is for Arama *voluntary* [*beratzon*]. However, an act that is chosen is one that involves deliberation, and this is, of course, based upon reason. Here Arama appeals to a different locus in Aristotle: the account of choice in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book III, Chapters 2–3 and Book VI. In these chapters Aristotle gives due weight to the role of reason in choice, and this is the account that Arama believes to be correct. In fact, according to Arama, man’s *essence* is to be a creature who chooses. Moreover, choice is that which makes man like God and is the link that binds man to his divine maker.<sup>48</sup> Here Arama combines two exegetical traditions in Judaism concerning the meaning of the biblical phrase “Let us make man in our image.” In one view, classically represented by Maimonides, man is like God insofar as he is a rational being.<sup>49</sup> On another account, suggested by Philo, man is like God insofar as he has free-will.<sup>50</sup> Arama defines man’s freedom in terms of his reason: the truly free individual acts by choosing rationally between two or more alternatives. Crescas’ analysis of choice, Arama suggests, reduces man to the level of the brutes, who behave according to desires alone and do not choose at all.

At this point in his account of choice, Arama goes beyond Crescas and considers a topic that he finds also in Aristotle. Not only is

<sup>47</sup> Arama, *Aqedat Yitzhaq*, Genesis, Gate 8, 68a; my translation.

<sup>48</sup> Arama, *op. cit.*, Genesis, Gate 3, 33a; Gate 7, 58b.

<sup>49</sup> Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. S. Pines (Chicago, 1963), Part I, chapters 1–2.

<sup>50</sup> H. Wolfson, *Philo* (Cambridge, Mass., 1948), volume 1, 431–456.

choice different from volition but it is also to be distinguished from mere contingency. Some philosophers conflate contingency [*efsharut*] with choice [*behira*] such that one chooses between any set of possible alternatives, no matter whether they are good or bad, so long as one is not constrained by any external force. This is, however, not real choice. For Arama, as we have seen, choice is a matter of reason as well as desire, and this means that a choice is always a preference for the good. Indeed, when a person picks some option that turns out to have bad consequences, or is just intrinsically evil, Arama claims that we really do not consider the person to have chosen at all; he just desired what he picked.

“Now, choice is not attributed except to what is good. Is it possible to say of someone who has taken for himself something bad that he has “chosen” it? On the contrary, of such a person we say that he did not know how to choose!”<sup>51</sup>

Granted that what the person has selected was, so to speak, open to him in the sense that it was a real alternative: it was possible for him to eat the forbidden food just as much as it was possible for him to refrain from eating it. If he eats, his action was indeed contingent, but it was not an act of choice.

“The possibility [*efsharut*] for evil is in reality not a good or virtue in man, just as the possibility for death is not a good for him ... Choice, however, was considered by God to be a good when He endowed man with it ... [For God] gave man counsel and knowledge to choose the good and in so doing he is free from the inferiority and dominance of matter ...”<sup>52</sup>

Free-will is then for Arama the capacity to choose the good amongst genuinely open alternatives, which man is able to do by virtue of his reason. When he pursues the evil, this is not real choice, but merely a volitional act, so long as his behavior is not constrained or compulsory.<sup>53</sup> On this theory of choice some of those acts that

<sup>51</sup> Arama, *op. cit.*, Genesis, Gate 8, 68a.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, Deuteronomy, Gate 93, 43a.

Crescas considered to be free actions are for Arama not really free, since they were not the outcomes of deliberation.

The next criticism of Crescas' account of choice concerns Crescas' reply to one of the arguments for contingency discussed earlier in this essay. According to that argument, man is immune from strict causal determinism because his soul is essentially an incorporeal substance. Crescas rejected this argument and claimed that like everything else the soul is in part subject to natural laws governing stimulus-response behavior. This claim is now challenged by Isaac Abravanel, who defends the theory of the soul as advocated by the Indeterminists. Like Arama, Abravanel understands choice to be guided by reason, which he regards as the chief component of the human soul. Since human reason is a part or the expression of divine reason, man's soul is an incorporeal substance of divine provenance and is thus not completely subject to the laws of nature. To be sure, every event has a cause; but the crucial question is, what is the cause of a free action? For Abravanel, like Arama, the answer is reason, which is not under the sway of either external physical causes or internal psychological motives.

“The efficient cause in the performance of the commandments is the intellect insofar as it understands the truths and orders the divinely ordered deeds. The deliberation, understanding, the choice and the ordering — all done by the intellect—, is from the intellect itself; it is not something necessitated from some previous cause ... The intellect is not constrained or compelled in its understanding or choosing either by the internal constitution or the bodily dispositions, nor by the celestial configurations ...”<sup>54</sup>

Using Platonic language we could say that for Abravanel man's intellect is a “self-mover,” and it is precisely in this autonomous action that man is free.

At first sight it would seem that Abravanel's criticism of Crescas on this score is a *petitio principii*. After all, how does he know that his theory of the soul is correct and Crescas' theory is wrong?

<sup>54</sup> Abravanel, *Nahalat Avot*, III: 15. my translation.

Abravanel appears to be especially vulnerable on this point, since he offers no independent argument in behalf of his own psychology. However, Crescas himself advocates virtually the same theory of the soul elsewhere in his treatise. Consider the following three passages, the first taken from Crescas' account of the purpose of the Torah, which he holds to be a foundation of divine revelation, and the second and third from his doctrine of immortality of the soul, which is for him a true belief of Judaism.

- 1) "The soul of man is his form and is a spiritual substance capable of intellection ..." <sup>55</sup>
- 2) "The soul which remains after death, remains everlasting in nature and is self-subsistent without change, either specifically or individually, ... since the human soul does not have any intrinsic causes of decay ... It is self-subsistent insofar as its definition shows that it is a substance, not a mere disposition ..." <sup>56</sup>
- 3) "... it is appropriate to say with certainty that [the soul] is immortal, since it has been defined as an intellectual substance that has no inherent cause of decay ..." <sup>57</sup>

It is evident from these three passages that Crescas and Abravanel hold virtually the same theory of the soul and its immortality. It is, therefore, puzzling to find Crescas saying that the soul *is* subject to physical stimuli and hence determined by them. Of course, the soul is subject to physical stimuli in so far as it has some corporeal faculties, such as the imagination. But this is not at issue. The indeterminist is claiming that some parts or functions of the soul (e.g. the intellect) are independent of physical stimuli, and hence autonomous. Abravanel's argument against Crescas is then *ad hominem*: Crescas inconsistently holds a theory of the soul that is virtually identical with that advanced by the indeterminist, but criticizes it in such a way that his account too would be equally vulnerable.

<sup>55</sup> Crescas, *Or Adonai*, Book II, Principle 6, chapter 1. my translation.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, Book III, Principle 2, chapter 1. my translation.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter 2. my translation.



Once it is recognized that man is a self-mover insofar as his intellect is capable of rational action, several of the determinist's arguments adduced by Crescas are invalidated. Consider the twin claims that a contingent act as such needs a cause that either "preponderates" [*makhri'a*] for one alternative over another or provides a "sufficient reason," an efficient cause [*mēni'a'*; *motzi*], for the transition from potentiality to actuality. To each of these claims Abravanel makes the same response: the preponderating factor, the sufficient reason, or efficient cause, is the intellect when we choose the good or the will when we choose evil.

"That which preponderates in man so that one of two opposite contingent states of affairs is brought about such that the perfect and the good are done is the theoretical reason [*ha-sekkel ha-'iyuni*] by virtue of which he chooses the good ... This is from itself and not from some other cause prior to it. In the case of evil actions, the preponderating factor is his will, or appetite, which has the power to will or not to will something without any outside cause ..."<sup>58</sup>

Again, for someone who believes, as Crescas presumably does, that the soul is an incorporeal substance, autonomous action is possible, and autonomy here signifies emancipation from the sway of external forces and internal passions.

Let us now return to Crescas' analogue to Buridan's Ass or to al-Ghazzali's Two Dates. In both Crescas' case of the two men with identical choices and al-Ghazzali's example of the man who cannot choose between two closely similar dates, we have, so it seems, a situation of indifference, such that either the *same* choice is necessary or *no* choice is possible. Abravanel attempts to refute this claim by reminding Crescas that on his own theory of the soul each person is more than just his body. Insofar as each human being has a soul, which is an incorporeal substance, each individual has a distinct personality, which is *his* form.

<sup>58</sup> Abravanel, *Nahalat Avot*, III: 15, 190. Unlike Arama, Abravanel believes that we can choose to do evil. But in this case the choice is irrational, deriving from the appetite, or will, uninfluenced by reason.

“Although the two men may be alike in their matter they differ in their form and souls. For the soul is not a mere bodily disposition in man; rather, it is a separate, spiritual substance, different in each individual according to his nature, level and spirituality.”<sup>59</sup>

Now, if it is the case that our two men are such that despite their biological similarities their psychological constitutions differ, then it is not impossible that one will choose to do good and the other evil. Consider a set of identical twins: it would be Abravanel’s contention that although they have the same genetic-physical make-up, they could exhibit different moral choices since their souls differ. Since Crescas is committed to a theory of *individual* immortality and reward or punishment, he must grant that the soul of each human being is different from the soul of another. But if this is so, the choices can differ; and they differ because they are not merely responses to identical physical stimuli.

It is possible to derive a different, and perhaps a stronger, argument against Crescas’ example from both Arama’s and Abravanel’s accounts of choice. Both critics distinguish between a rational selection amongst alternatives and a non-rational, or an irrational selection. The former they respectively call ‘choice’; the latter they label ‘volition’, ‘non-rational’ or ‘irrational choice.’ Despite their differences, which are mainly terminological, Arama and Abravanel are suggesting a different solution to the problem of preference-symmetrical situations, like al-Ghazzali’s two dates or Crescas’ two men. By defining choice as a phenomenon wherein reasons, especially good reasons, obtain, they can account for a selection where no sufficient reasons are present. Consider again Crescas’ example. The two men have identical preferences for everything. Hence, if there is a difference in choice, for Crescas there must be a “sufficient reason” [*mehadesh*] to explain the discrepancy. But must the explanation be “sufficient” in the Cresquian sense? Obviously, if the persons have the same preferences they will *choose* the same thing. But could not one of them select something different

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

by just *taking* indifferently? Consider the example used by Ullmann-Margolit and Morgenbesser: a person goes to a supermarket and wants to buy a can of Campbell's tomato soup. Does the person have a *preference* for one can over another, if all of them are equally accessible and not broken? When one can is taken — and people *do* take the cans — is the taking properly called a “choice?” Better to describe this situation as one of “picking.” Here no reason, or good reason, is present that would justify considering the taking of one can over another to be a choice; for there certainly is no preference for the can picked over the cans that were not. One just sticks out the hand and grabs a can. In Crescas' example, this analysis would mean that although the two individuals would rationally choose the same thing, one of them could “will” (in Arama's terminology) or “choose non-rationally” (in Abravanel's language) X and the other Y. For just as where there is no good reason to choose X over Y one could still *pick* X over Y, so too where two persons are preference-identical one of them could *pick* differently from the other. Arama and Abravanel are in the last analysis accusing Crescas of a faulty, indeed a too narrow, account of choice, one that collapses the difference between selections based upon preferences and those not so based.<sup>60</sup>

After this argument against Crescas' analysis example of the two men, Abravanel proceeds to consider another form of determinism that was quite widespread in the Middle Ages; indeed still is popular: astrological determinism. For our purposes, however, we can ignore the specifics of this kind of determinism, for astrological determinism, if true, is just a particular kind of natural causation. The believer in astrology is committed to a special form of the claim that human behavior is caused by natural, physical forces. Accordingly, we shall generalize Abravanel's argument against astrology and apply it to Crescas' psychological determinism. The most Abravanel is prepared to concede to the astrologist or the determinist in general is that physical causes influence the *biological*

<sup>60</sup> E. Ullmann-Margalit and S. Morgenbesser, “Picking and Choosing,” *Social Research*, 44 (1977), 757–785.

constitution of an individual. Whatever relevance such causes or this constitution may have upon us, human behavior is, Abravanel contends, still under the sway of the intellect.

“... the human soul can change the heavenly arrangement and annul the disposition that follows from it insofar as it [i.e. the soul] changes the internal constitution and characteristics toward the contrary side by virtue of its proper ordering and pleasant arrangement.”<sup>61</sup>

In his own behalf Abravanel quotes Maimonides' contention that no matter how strong a man's habits or dispositions may be, he can nevertheless alter them *if his intellect so chooses*.<sup>62</sup> In general, then, the human soul is capable of choosing amongst alternatives in such a way that the choice derives from the intellect, and hence is independent of external or internal physical or biological forces. To someone who holds, as Crescas apparently does, that the soul is an incorporeal substance this argument should be compelling.

Finally, it was Crescas' contention that beliefs as well as behavior are determined, such that volition has no place in the acquisition of a belief. Nevertheless, in the case of theological dogmas, the acceptance or rejection of a belief can be meritorious or blameworthy. Crescas attempted to locate the grounds for the appropriate reward or punishment in beliefs in the emotional response of the believer toward the dogma whose acceptance was caused as much as any of his actions. Abravanel is not totally happy with this analysis of the “ethics of belief.” After all, if one's actions and beliefs are determined, so are one's emotions. Why should someone be rewarded or punished for his feelings about his beliefs, if these feelings are the effects of causes that necessarily lead to these beliefs? Shifting the locus of the reward or blame to the attendant emotion accomplishes nothing, since the emotion is equally subject to the law of causality. If Crescas is right in his advocacy of universal causation, then our emotional responses are no more deserving of praise than our hiccups.

<sup>61</sup> Abravanel, *Nahalot Avot*, III: 15, 192.

<sup>62</sup> Maimonides, *Eight Chapters on Ethics*, chapter 8.

Abravanel offers a different account of belief-acquisition and the appropriateness of reward and blame in religious dogma. Let us consider in turn the two types of religious belief discussed by Crescas. In the first case, we have the belief in the existence of God. Here, Crescas argued, there is no point in making the belief itself the locus of praise or blame, since as the valid conclusion of a sound argument the belief in God's existence is *incumbent* upon all rational beings. The "will" has no place here.<sup>63</sup> In this sense one could consider the acceptance of this conclusion as "compulsory," and not capable of being a commandment, and thus not deserving of reward or punishment. Up to this point Abravanel would agree with Crescas. Where our assent to a proposition is dictated by the soundness of the argument, there is no point in talking about the believer voluntarily giving his approval and, if he does, receiving a reward. With Crescas, Abravanel would have rejected Descartes' analysis of judgment, wherein the will can freely assent to dissent from or suspend judgment on a proposition. On the contrary, those cases where the argument is "compelling," we do not *choose* to believe the conclusion; we *must* believe it.<sup>64</sup>

But this is only one part of the story, Abravanel now argues, and only the concluding part. What about all that which precedes the inferring of the conclusion? After all, we have to examine the premises and determine their truth. Moreover, even before we do this we have to prepare ourselves for the whole enterprise. In the case before us, this would mean studying some physics and metaphysics, as well as logic. Now, this whole process of first embarking upon the study of natural theology and its relevant ancillary subjects is, for Abravanel, a matter of choice. Most people in fact do not make this choice at all! But for those who do, this decision will involve quite a number of activities and studies, all of which being, for Abravanel, voluntary, and hence capable of being praised or blamed. To be

<sup>63</sup> Crescas, *Or Adonai*, Book II, Principle 5, chapter 5.

<sup>64</sup> Descartes, *Meditations*, Fourth Meditation. Perhaps Spinoza's rejection of the Cartesian account of belief owes something to Crescas. Abravanel, *Principles of Faith (Rosh Amanah)*, trans. M.M. Kellner (East Brunswick, New Jersey and London, 1982), chapter II, 9th premise.

sure, the conclusion that God exists is as “compelling” a belief as that the interior angles of a triangle total  $180^\circ$ , since in both cases, Abravanel claims, these propositions have been soundly proved. But our belief in God can be a subject of religious reward, even for those who have proved it, because one gets to that conclusion after having freely entered into a complex of preparatory activities leading to this belief. It is this antecedent exercise that is the locus of the praise according to Abravanel, not the concomitant or subsequent feeling, as it is for Crescas.

The same is true for the second type of religious belief previously discussed. Let us grant Crescas that the certainty produced by certain kinds of empirical evidence may be as convincing as the certainty yielded by a valid argument, and hence the religious belief subsequent to such evidence may be no more “voluntary” than the belief in God’s existence. Our case was the Sinaitic revelation, whose facticity the Jew is *required* to accept. Crescas locates the religious reward for this acceptance in the individual’s emotional response toward the acceptance of belief. Abravanel would agree with Crescas that the acceptance of certain empirical beliefs is brought about by circumstances that hardly allow for any choice. To be in those circumstances is to be almost “compelled” to believe. Like Crescas, Abravanel claims that this was the case when the Israelites accepted the Torah at Mt. Sinai. But again, there is more to this story than just the divine revelation, which was after all the culmination of the Exodus from Egypt. Now, as before, we have to look at the *antecedent* circumstances. From the very beginning of this whole episode it was open for any individual Israelite to have opted not to leave Egypt. Just as there were non-Israelites who joined the Exodus,<sup>65</sup> so there might have been Israelites who chose to remain in Egypt. Although the Bible does suggest that all the Israelites did leave, it is possible that some remained, or could have chosen to remain. Moreover, the Bible does say more than once that there were Israelites who did leave but who frequently thought of returning. Finally, as the Israelites approached Mt. Sinai they were

<sup>65</sup> Exodus, 12: 38.

commanded to perform and observe certain preparatory rituals before they would actually experience God's presence. Here too, it was open for any Israelite to engage in the prohibited sexual activities with his wife and thus to forfeit the opportunity of hearing God's voice. To be sure, when God did speak it was no longer a "live option" to deny the fact: the Israelites were, Abravanel agrees, "made to know" that God had spoken to them. But again, none of them *had* to abstain from his wife. As in the case of God's existence, the locus of praise and blame in religious dogma is not, as Crescas held, in the concomitant or subsequent feeling toward the belief but in the *antecedent process leading to the acquisition of the belief*. Here the "will has a place," and our affirmations or denials are appropriately praised or blamed. Accordingly, Abravanel concludes, even where the evidence for a religious dogma is either actually or virtually compelling, there is genuine choice involved in the acceptance of such a belief, since the acquisition of this belief is the outcome of a process whose antecedent phrases are, at least in part, voluntary.<sup>66</sup>

Actually, the voluntary dimension in the acceptance of religious dogmas that are allegedly based upon historical facts is even more evident where the believer is not one who has in fact experienced the event but one who accepts its authenticity on the basis of reliable tradition. And this is exactly the case discussed in the previously cited passage from the Mishnah. The Sinaitic revelation is to be believed by Jews who were not there; yet they are required to accept this claim by virtue of credence in the reliability of the traditions that they have received from their forefathers. In this case there is no point in asking for the empirical facts that "compel" belief, since there are none. Of course, the acquisition of religious beliefs does not take place in a vacuum; indeed, for most people such beliefs are acquired along with their baby food. However, at a certain stage in

<sup>66</sup> Abravanel, *op. cit.*, As Aristotle noted, it may be that the alcoholic no longer has any choice whether to drink or to abstain; nevertheless, he is blameworthy because at one point *he did choose to begin drinking* (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, III: 5.)

one's religious development there will arise occasions wherein it will be "up to the individual" to decide whether to "go along" with what his parents have told him about religious beliefs. He will have to *choose* whether to undertake and engage in the activities that either confirm or stimulate belief in the traditions of his forefathers. It is this choice that is deserving of reward or punishment. It turns out then that on Abravanel's doctrine the descendants of the original Israelites are more deserving of reward than those who left Egypt for they believe freely in facts that are completely beyond their perceptual experience. Ironically, then, Abravanel could say with Paul that faith in things unseen is a virtue.<sup>67</sup>

## V.

Crescas was right in his premonition that his espousal of determinism, no matter how "soft," would be unsettling. He was wrong, however, in thinking that only the masses would be disturbed; for, as we have seen, throughout the fifteenth century a number of Spanish-Jewish philosophical theologians were sufficiently disturbed by Crescas' determinism to criticize it in their writings. This is especially remarkable in that all of them were generally in sympathy with Crescas' anti-Aristotelian bias. Nevertheless, they sensed that there was something both religiously and philosophically difficult with determinism, even in its softer version. Soft Determinism has had a long career, and it still has its advocates in contemporary Anglo-American philosophy. But even its more modern defenders have to contend with libertarian critics who, like Albo, Arama and Abravanel, five centuries earlier, find even Soft Determinism too hard to digest. For the libertarian, the determinism in the tradition from Crescas through J.S. Mill is just a not too well disguised attempt to make us accept the thesis that we really do not want what we want.

<sup>67</sup> Since Abravanel knew Latin and occasionally refers to Aquinas, it is possible that he was influenced by the latter's discussion of faith as a virtue.



## Epilogue

Perhaps the most telling “argument” against Crescas’ determinism is expressed in the following episode. In one of the manuscripts of the *Light of the Lord* virtually the whole section on choice is missing.<sup>68</sup> But the pages are missing in a very odd way: the margins of the pages remain whereas the text is lacking. Since the margins are perfect rectangles it is unlikely that worms were responsible for the absence of the text, unless, of course, our worms had read Euclid. The more likely hypothesis is that some pious reader took upon himself the liberty of editing and “improving” the original simply by cutting it out with a knife. This is a very neat solution of and an argument against Crescas’ Soft Determinism.

<sup>68</sup> This is the Sulzberger manuscript located in The Jewish Theological Seminary of America in New York.