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Philosophical Psychology, Jewish Tradition

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#### Abstract

During the Middle Ages (especially c. 900–1500) the Jews developed a rich and varied tradition of philosophical psychology, ranging from the stoically-inspired theories of Saadia Gaon to the Neoplatonism of Isaac Israeli, from the Aristotelianism of Maimonides and Gersonides to the anti-Aristotelianism of their sharpest critic, Hasdai Crescas. Jews made original contributions to the technical discussion of the soul, in discursive treatises and commentaries on philosophical texts. They also discussed the soul in traditional texts and genres – commentaries on Bible and rabbinic literature, sermons, and liturgical poetry – thus introducing "foreign" ideas into the very heart of classical Judaism.

This brief survey of Jewish psychological writings during the Middle Ages will focus on major figures and systematic works of philosophy and theology; it will make only occasional reference to the exegetical, homiletical, and liturgical material. The major developments will be presented chronologically, beginning with Judaeo-Arabic writings from the Islamic world, then turning to Hebrew texts from Christian Europe.

#### Saadia Gaon (882–942)

One of the first rabbinic Jews to write systematically about the soul, or about any other philosophical-theological subject, was Saadia Gaon, rabbinic leader and controversialist in Iraq during the early tenth century. Saadia discusses the soul in his biblical commentaries and commentary on *Sefer Yetsirah*. The fullest discussion, however, is found in his theological summa *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*.

In Book 6 of *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions* Saadia surveys and rejects six definitions of the soul – as accident, air, fire, a duality (soul and spirit), two kinds of air, and the blood – before presenting his own view: that the soul is a luminescent substance akin to, but even finer than the substance of the celestial spheres. It has its seat in the heart, works in the body through the veins and nerves, and possesses in general three faculties, which he associates with three biblical terms: *nefesh* refers to the appetitive faculty of the soul; *ruah* to the irascible or passionate; and *neshamah* to the rational. The soul, he maintains, is created in the heart when the body is fully formed, lives with the body a fixed duration of time, then separates after death, remaining apart till body and soul are reunited during the time of resurrection. Only then is the single composite existence that is human being – body and soul together – judged and given reward or punishment.

Already in Book 6 Saadia shows his primary concern to be not with abstract theories of the soul per se but with divine reward and punishment. In Books 7 through 9 this becomes the primary focus, as he presents a detailed explication of his eschatological theories. In general these sections draw much more from biblical texts than rational inquiry. Nevertheless, some philosophical and theological ideas are worthy of note. For example, his discussion of resurrection confronts a basic problem of individuation found already in earlier Christian theology: What body exactly is reconstituted and in what state? Old or young? Sick or healthy? The problem also of how flesh is reconstituted when combined with other things is raised. Thus to cite one famous example: A man is eaten by a lion, the lion drowns and is eaten by a fish, the fish is caught and consumed by a fisherman, who is subsequently burned to ashes. How can the flesh of the original man be reconstituted once digested and incorporated physiologically into another being?

These types of paradoxes are characteristic of Saadia's treatment of resurrection and redemption. Although they are not directly related to psychology, they are worthy of consideration in the history of the problem of individuation.

Isaac Israeli (c. 855–955)

Saadia was not the only Jew engaged in philosophy during the late ninth and early tenth century. He was rivaled by his near contemporary Isaac Israeli – philosopher and physician in Kairouan – who produced a very different literary corpus with strong ties not to Stoicism and Muʿtazilite *kalām* but to Neoplatonism. Each of Israeli's surviving philosophical works includes discussions of the soul; a brief discussion of them will be given here.

Israeli's *Book of Definitions* is Neoplatonic in form as well as content. Following the Alexandrian school tradition (and more directly its Arabic epigone al-Kindī), it presents a list of some 57 philosophical terms which are organized not alphabetically but conceptually. Following the definitions and descriptions of "philosophy" itself, he presents terms from above to below, according to their place within the cosmos: wisdom, intellect, soul, celestial sphere, sublunar, and celestial body.

The definitions given by Israeli are strongly metaphysical and generally fit into standard Neoplatonic emanationist cosmologies. Intellect is the first emanation or hypostasis, the specificality of all things and genus of genera; it knows itself and through knowing itself knows all other things; it is, however, of three types or stages: actual intellect; potential intellect; and a "second intellect" – which refers to the process of acquiring possible knowledge through sensation and experience, which can then be transformed into actual knowledge. Soul is second to intellect; it is a substance that perfects the body that possesses life potentially (according to Aristotle), or a substance connected with the celestial body (according to Plato).

After harmonizing these two views (following the standard Neoplatonic practice of harmonizing Plato and Aristotle), Israeli provides more detailed information about the different souls or types of soul, set in emanative order: The rational emanates from the intellect; it is highest in rank, is responsible for learning and knowledge in both the theoretical and practical spheres; it is because

of the rational soul that one can receive reward or punishment. The animal soul is lower than the rational, from whose shadow it emanates; it is possessed by animals, is concerned primarily with sensation and movement, rather than reason and understanding; because animals cannot reason, they are not subject to reward and punishment. The lowest soul is the vegetative, which emanates from the shadow of the animal; it is concerned primarily with desire and governs the functions of nutrition, reproduction, growth, and decay. Contrary to humans and animals, vegetables are not in possession of reason, movement, or sensation.

The emanative scheme presented in *The Book of Definitions* is reproduced, with some variations, in *The Book of Substances*, *The Chapter on the Elements*, and *The Book on Spirit and Soul*. In these treatises Israeli's ideas about soul and spirit are also sometimes explained in light of biblical terms and expressions. It is in his work where I Samuel 25:9 – "The soul of my Lord shall be bound in the bundle of life with the Lord thy God; and the souls of thine enemies, them shall he sling out, as from the hollow of a sling" – emerged as a popular biblical prooftext of both eternal reward and punishment for the soul, and where a Jewish eschatology is first developed out of Neoplatonic ideas and images. Like Saadia, Israeli combines biblical and rabbinic images with philosophy – in this case Neoplatonic philosophy – to create a striking image of the hereafter. For him, the soul is purified through good acts which correspond with reason, and is sullied by bad acts which are governed by the appetites of the animal soul. The pure soul is released into the spiritual realm, whereas the dark turbid soul remains below, caught in the cosmological sphere of fire, revolving eternally in this literal hell-fire.

### Moses Maimonides (1138–1204)

In the two centuries following Saadia and Israeli, Jewish thought was largely under the influence of Muʿtazilite *kalām* and Neoplatonism. This is especially the case in Islamic Spain, where Israeli inspired a long line of Jewish Neoplatonists. In the twelfth century, however, *kalām* and Neoplatonism gave way to Aristotelianism, which would come to dominate Jewish philosophical discussion about the soul for the remainder of the Middle Ages.

The most important and influential of the Jewish Aristotelians was Moses Maimonides, legal scholar, communal leader, physician, and philosopher in Egypt. To be sure, Maimonides does not fit neatly into any school tradition of Aristotelianism, nor did he write systematically on the soul (or any other philosophical subject). Yet his nonsystematic eclectic discourses and his enigmatic judgments did much to stimulate Jewish thought for several centuries to come. A brief description of his most fruitful discussions of the soul will be given here.

Maimonides' early commentary on the Mishnah, like all his writings, was novel in many ways. It is comprehensive, providing explanation of all Mishnaic tractates, including those without Talmudic explication; and it includes three systematic prefaces, two of which relate to the soul. As introduction to tractate *Avot*, a collection of Tannaitic wisdom sayings, Maimonides provides a synthetic primer in Aristotelian ethics, which would become the standard textbook in philosophical ethics used by Jews throughout the later Middle Ages. In the first few chapters, as introduction to the doctrine of the mean, he presents a brief discourse on the soul and its faculties. Borrowing from al-Fārābī's *Select Aphorisms* (sometimes word-for-word), he defends

the unity of the soul, the uniqueness of the human soul (which is essentially different than animal and plant souls), and describes the soul's faculties and their functions: nutrition, sensation, appetite, imagination, and reason – both practical and theoretical. By knowing the soul the physician of the soul, that is, the ethicist, can diagnose, treat, and cure the soul's sicknesses, leading it from extreme behavior to the mean and from a life of vice to a life of virtue. Yet the question remains: how does one determine what the mean is? Here Maimonides diverges from al-Fārābī (and Aristotle), identifying knowledge of God as the orienting ethical principle toward which all actions should lead.

The other introduction relating to psychic matters prefaces an earlier chapter of the Mishnah, Chapter. 10 ("Heleq") of *Sanhedrin*. Working off the qualified first sentence of this chapter – all Jews have a share (*heleq*) in the world to come, except ... – Maimonides presents a survey of different conceptions of the "world to come." He counts five: the garden of Eden and Gehinnom construed as places of corporeal pleasure or pain; the messianic age, governed by an eternal king who rules an elite population of immortal giants; the time of resurrection, when all deserving souls are reconstituted with their bodies and live forever in peace; a this-worldly "world to come," characterized by universal health, wealth, peace, and security; the final view, according to Maimonides, combines all the others: a messianic age, when the dead are resurrected, experience infinite pleasure in the garden of Eden, and live forever in peace and security. Following a brief excursus on education and exegesis, in which the primarily rhetorical and heuristic character of any doctrine of reward is exposed, he presents his own purely spiritualistic view: that knowledge of God is the highest goal and contemplation of God the greatest reward; this alone is true delight; it has no share whatsoever in anything material.

Maimonides' ethics and eschatology are repeated in his comprehensive code of law, the *Mishneh Torah*. In the "Laws of Ethical Dispositions" Maimonides presents a complete ethical theory – in Jewish legal context – governed by the principles of Aristotle's doctrine of the mean (although there is constant tension between ethical moderation and intellectual extremism). In the "Laws of Repentance" the spiritualistic intellectualistic orientation of the Introduction to Heleq is reproduced in striking form: true love of God results from knowledge of God ("according to the knowledge, will be the love"), as exemplified by the single-minded passion of the lover in Song of Songs, who seeks conjunction with her beloved active intellect, or the rabbinic ideal in *Berakhot*: "In the world to come, there is no eating, drinking, or sexual relations, but rather the righteous sit with their crowns on their heads enjoying the radiance of the divine presence."

The Guide of the Perplexed – Maimonides' philosophical-theological magnum opus – also includes significant material about the soul and intellect, although generally it is difficult to determine what his true opinion might have been on any particular subject. The text itself is framed by the noetic nature of man – created in the (intellectual) image of God (Guide 1:1), and directed toward intellectual perfection as his final end (Guide 3:54) – and has discussions of soul and intellect throughout. For example, in Guide 1:72 and 2:6–7 Maimonides presents a fairly standard Neoplatonized-Aristotelian emanationist cosmology, with the active intellect – the last of the celestial intelligences – construed as the cause of existence and final aim of knowledge. In Guide 1:40–42 he lists various definitions – philosophical and nonphilosophical alike – of the equivocal terms "soul," "spirit," "life," and "death." And in Guide 1:68 he presents a summary of the Aristotelian doctrine of the identity of knower and thing known. Many of the traditional

theological doctrines in the *Guide* are understood with the help of the theory of the active intellect. Both prophecy and providence are explained as resulting from a divine overflow through the active intellect to individuals with properly prepared intellects.

There are other chapters in the *Guide*, however, which complicate matters, suggesting that cognition, for Maimonides, is far more difficult than it might first appear. In contemporary Maimonidean scholarship these chapters have led to a series of studies and counter-studies, arguing that Maimonides, who seems to place such great emphasis on intellectual perfection, conjunction, and knowledge of God, in fact believed that these designated goals could not possibly be achieved by any human being (except, perhaps, by Moses). Based on remarks about the limitations of the human intellect – incapable of apprehending even the celestial world, let alone God – recent scholars have suggested that Maimonides was a metaphysical critic (akin to Kant) or even a skeptic.

In Maimonides' own time, in contrast, he was accused of exactly the opposite: being far too enamored with the intellectual life. Based mainly on his commentary on the Mishnah and *Mishneh Torah*, he was charged with denying the religious doctrine of resurrection, and of promoting a purely elitist noetic doctrine of eternal reward, based solely on intellectual accomplishment. In response to these accusations, he wrote his "*Letter on Resurrection*," an apologetic tract, which might be considered his last philosophical-theological writing. Resurrection, he writes there, is rabbinic dogma, and he accepts it, just as others should; he does not deny it or explain it metaphorically. On the contrary, precisely because it is dogma and cannot be proved rationally it should simply be accepted on faith; and moreover denying it affects belief in other related subjects, such as miracles. Nevertheless, he reaffirms what he stated in earlier works: that the final reward, beyond any other reward, the "world to come" where one reaches true life without death, is incorporeal – made up of "souls without bodies, like angels."

### Levi b. Gershom, Gersonides (1288–1344)

The thirteenth century was largely a time of transition in the history of Judaism, as the centers of Jewish thought moved from the Islamic world to Christian Europe. Dozens of translations of philosophical writings from Arabic to Hebrew, along with Hebrew encyclopedias, summaries, glossaries and other reference works, laid the foundations for the emergence of a tradition of philosophy in Hebrew. Although the thirteenth century produced some creative and original thinkers, it was not till the fourteenth that the hard work of the translators produced a mature philosophical culture. This is represented most fully by Gersonides, generally considered the most original Jewish philosopher in the later Middle Ages.

Among the many subjects that preoccupied Gersonides during his productive career are the soul, the intellect, and the possibility of conjunction with the agent intellect. He discusses these in his commentary on Averroes' *De anima*, in his commentaries on the Bible, and most systematically in Book 1 of his theological summa, *The Wars of the Lord*. The latter will be our focus here.

Gersonides' discussion of intellect and immortality in the *Wars* is framed by Aristotle's *De anima*, especially the notoriously ambiguous text at 3:5. There Aristotle introduced the notion of a passive (or potential or material) intellect, which can "become all things," and an active intellect, which causes or "makes" all things; the latter is "separate, impassible, unmixed ... it alone is immortal and eternal." Gersonides does not engage Aristotle directly. For him the study of Aristotle means the study of the commentators (Alexander, Themistius, al-Fārābī, Averroes), who developed different and incompatible interpretations of Aristotle and inconsistent theories of intellect and intellection. Gersonides' aim in the *Wars* is to explain clearly the different views, show their weaknesses, and develop his own position out of and in contradistinction to theirs. His opinion, he claims, will emerge as superior in terms of philosophical argumentation. It will also help support the traditional doctrine of individual immortality – at least in some degree.

The discussion of the different views, leading to his own original hypothesis, can be summarized as follows:

According to Alexander of Aphrodisias (as Gersonides construes his position), the material or potential or human intellect is a disposition in the soul which comes to be with the body; it is the capacity to know, and nothing more. It knows through a process of abstraction: the senses provide material forms to the imagination, and the imagination intelligible forms to the intellect, which can see them with the help of an agent or active intellect – an external celestial incorporeal cause of thinking, which shines light (as it were) on a potentially intelligible substance, in the same way that the sun shines light on a potentially sensible substance. When the intellect is thinking an intelligible, it is actually thinking; when it is thinking an intelligible substance completely separate from matter, it can become one with this separate intelligible and survive eternally through it. The sum total of its thoughts is called acquired intellect; when these acquired thoughts are separate intelligibles, they survive, having achieved some sort of union with the eternal thoughts the mind is thinking.

Themistius, according to Gersonides, defends a completely contrary – largely Platonizing – reading of Aristotle, a view which Averroes then develops in detail (as Gersonides understands him). According to this view, the material or potential or human intellect is not a disposition that comes to be with the body, but rather a separate substance, which is an incorporeal one, and eternal by nature. It itself possesses universal knowledge; in contrast, it can know individual particular things only through the individual body or soul. As with Alexander, Themistius (as developed by Averroes) considers the agent or active intellect an external cosmic intelligence, but it is identical with the material intellect. In other words, the potential or material or human intellect is an individual instantiation of the universal active intellect. Although the material intellect can acquire particular knowledge with the help of sense and imagination, this knowledge does not perdure. Only the material intellect, with the death of the body, when it returns, as it were, to its original state in the active intellect, survives the destruction of the body.

In Gersonides' opinion all of these views are deficient in some way, and through his criticism of them he develops his own view, which for him answers all the problems of the others. To sum up his criticism, in Gersonides' opinion Alexander can account for particular knowledge – through abstraction – but seems incapable of explaining universal knowledge; for if the material intellect comes to be with the body, it is also subject to destruction (following a basic principle of

Aristotelian science), yet universal knowledge, in Alexander's acquired intellect, is eternal. Themistius, for his part, cannot account for particular knowledge, for the only way a separate intellect can know individuals is by mixing with the body, but if it mixes with the body, it is no longer separate. That the material and active intellects are one in essence, different in accident, is given the lengthiest discussion by Gersonides. He focuses on problems of individuation: if the active intellect is really one, then the material intellect in all humans should be one, but there is a manifest difference between individuals; and if the material intellect, on the other hand, is many, then one would conclude that a single thing is both one and many at the same time.

What then is Gersonides' own view? For him, the material intellect is a disposition or capacity created in the imagination. It is created, but can become eternal – for the principle that nothing that comes to be can become eternal is false (he argues this in Book 5). Here, for the most part, he agrees with Alexander, and rejects the view of Themistius and Averroes. With the active intellect, however, Gersonides begins to break new ground. He agrees that the active intellect is a separate external incorporeal cosmic intelligence, which is a cause of existence and knowledge, but the way he defines it is different. For Gersonides, this active intellect is the cause of all existence in the lower world, insofar as it possesses all forms that prime matter is capable of receiving, and in their myriad relations. And, for the same reason, it is the cause of thought, since in it are all the possible intelligible forms, in all their myriad relations – it provides the grounds, as it were, for all thinking. In this sense the active intellect is – to use Gersonides' terminology – the order, justice, pattern, or "nomos" of the sublunar world.

One question remains: If the active intellect is the pattern of the world, can an individual human intellect know it completely and conjoin with it, and what would conjunction mean? For Gersonides, all knowledge comes through experience of the world; all knowledge is scientific or inductive; it is always the result of learning. In his opinion, there is no innate knowledge or illumination from above; even first principles are learned. Therefore any sort of complete cognition or union with the active intellect is impossible; human beings, through rational study, cannot possibly acquire complete understanding of all forms in the world in all their complex relations; they cannot possibly see the world from the perspective of the active intellect. Yet precisely because the active intellect is the pattern of the world, and the world is a reflection of it, the knowledge gained through empirical study provides some share in or taste of this universal pattern.

It is this combination of ideas, perhaps born of Gersonides' own inclination toward the empirical that led him to a remarkable conclusion: that immortality consists in the little knowledge one acquires through the rational scientific empirical investigation of the world, and this little knowledge is different – and unique – for each individual intellect. In this way does Gersonides – the staunch Aristotelian, the sturdy empiricist – defend the doctrine of an individual immortality.

Hasdai Crescas (c. 1340–1410/1411)

Although Gersonides was critical of his Aristotelian forebears, and often worked hard to undermine their theories, he was nevertheless committed to constructing a positive scientific understanding of the world. Hasdai Crescas, in contrast – chief rabbi of the Jews of Aragon, legal

scholar, polemicist, and theologian – mastered Aristotelianism for a different reason: to topple it from within. Through his careful study of the massive corpus of philosophical texts available in Hebrew, he set out, in his *Light of the Lord*, to free Judaism from the doctrines of Aristotle and his Jewish epigones. In particular, he focused his attention on philosophical proofs for the existence, unity, and incorporeality of God (and the Aristotelian principles upon which they were based), philosophical ideas about the origin of the world, divine knowledge of individuals, prophecy as a natural perfection, providence as consequent upon the intellect, and – most important for our purposes – the noetic doctrine of immortality, achieved through conjunction with the active intellect.

The main discussion of intellect and immortality in *Light of the Lord* is found in Book 2, Part 6, where Crescas first presents a summary of the Aristotelian theory of knowledge and conjunction – based mainly on Jewish adaptations – followed by a refutation of it. The ideas of the philosophers, as Crescas understands them, are as follows: through the acquiring of true knowledge, the human or potential or material intellect can become constituted as an incorporeal substance, called the "acquired intellect," which will exist forever. This state of existence, this achieving of knowledge, is considered by them the final aim of human existence; and the intellect's eternal contemplation of universal truths after death is what it means to be truly happy: it brings with it true beatitude and leads to the highest form of pleasure.

How one can achieve this state of intellectual bliss, however, is not entirely clear. For Crescas, there are two different ways of understanding it. First, the view that knowledge of any truth whatsoever will lead to some degree of acquired intellect and some level of immortality. This idea, which Crescas seems to draw from Gersonides, is dependent on the view that intelligible forms in the sublunar world are part of the plan or order or "nomos" in the active intellect, thus to know any part of the plan is to know a part of the active intellect. According to this opinion, the more knowledge one attains the greater one's pleasure and larger one's share in eternal bliss. The second view – which Crescas seems to draw from Maimonides – is that the intellect can become constituted as an incorporeal eternal substance only when it contemplates an incorporeal separate intelligence, such as God, the angels, or the active intellect; conjunction requires knowledge of the intelligence itself, not any part or instantiation of it.

The philosophical theory of conjunction – no matter which way it is construed – is, for Crescas, not only incoherent but also dangerous. First, if one achieves some share in immortality simply by knowing any rational truth, then anyone can attain it. Reason and philosophy, moreover, would seem to be superior to revelation and law, for it is through thinking, not through acting and obeying, that final reward is achieved. The second theory is no less problematic – on different grounds. The problem is that, according to Maimonides, knowledge of God (and apparently all incorporeal substances) is possible only through negation, and negative knowledge, knowing what God, the angels, or the active intellect is not, cannot lead to any positive identification between knower and known. By knowing what is not the active intellect one is not led to any union with the active intellect. If conjunction with the active intellect requires complete and positive knowledge of the active intellect, and knowledge of the active intellect is impossible, then conjunction is impossible. Or, to modify slightly an infamous conclusion attributed to al-Fārābī: immortality of the soul is nothing but an old wives' tale.

Crescas has another argument as well, which is more creative, and which, in many ways, leads more directly to his own opinion on the subject. If the final aim of human existence, he argues, is knowledge and intellectual cognition, which constitutes the intellect as a separate incorporeal substance, then the final aim of man is to become not-man. That is, the final aim of man as composite of form and matter is to become pure intellect, completely separate from matter. Not only is this incoherent, he concludes, but it is in violation of divine justice, for how can the intellect alone, existing eternally, joyfully contemplating universal truths, receive this reward for what was accomplished by the human being during life, as body and soul.

What then is the final aim of human existence, according to Crescas? And if immortality is possible, and not trivial, what is it and how is it achieved? Here Crescas draws more from Scripture and tradition to present a theory contrary to that of the philosophers. For him the soul is a self-subsisting spiritual substance disposed toward thinking. That is, the soul is not a substrate, which serves and is subordinate to intellect; rather thinking or intellectual cognition is just one of several things that contribute to the happiness of the soul – which is the final perfection. In fact, thinking is itself subordinate to action, to obedience to the law and observance of the commandments, by which love – the highest ideal and truest happiness, is achieved. As the Rabbis say: "Which is better, study or action? Study, because it leads to action." This is why eternal reward is achieved even by the minor child who does nothing more than say amen after the communal prayers.

Crescas' critique of the Aristotelian ideas of acquired intellect and conjunction with the active intellect had varying success. It was used, borrowed, modified, and developed by a host of students and followers during the fifteenth century, including Joseph Albo; and it was rejected by others, such as Abraham Shalom, who attempted to defend Maimonides and Gersonides against Crescas' attacks. As in other areas of Crescas' philosophy, perhaps here also it was only in Renaissance and early modern times when his ideas were fully appreciated – for example, in the philosophy of love of Judah Abarbanel or the intellectual love of God of Spinoza.

See also: Abū l-Barakāt al-Baġdādī; Alexander of Aphrodisias and Arabic Aristotelianism; Aristotle, Arabic; Avicebron; Consciousness; Contemplative Happiness and Civic Virtue; Dominicus Gundissalinus; Doxographies, Graeco-Arabic; al-Fārābī, Abū Naṣr; Galen, Arabic; al-Ġazālī, Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad; Gersonides; Happiness; Hasdai Crescas; Ibn Bājja, Abū Bakr ibn al-Sā'iġ (Avempace); Ibn Sīnā, Abū 'Alī (Avicenna); Ibn Tufayl, Abū Bakr (Abubacer); Internal Senses; Isaac Israeli; Judah Halevi; al-Kindī, Abū Yūsuf Ya'qūb ibn Ishāq; Knowledge; Moses Maimonides; Parva naturalia, Commentaries on Aristotle's; Philosophical Psychology; Plato, Arabic; Plotinus, Arabic; Saadia Gaon; Themistius, Arabic

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