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Avicbron and the Fountain of Life

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Avicebron and the Fountain of Life

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Many of the terms encountered in the following article are more fully explained in the glossary at the end. A translation by Robert Zoller of the **Fons vitae** is to be released on www.new-library.com/zoller/books shortly.

Solomon ben Judah ibn Gabirol (1021?-?1058), more commonly known by his Spanish name Avicebron was a Jewish poet and philosopher born in Malaga (Iberian Peninsula). He wrote many poems in Hebrew, using Arabic meters and contributed lyrical poems of high rank to Jewish liturgy.

Avicebron was the first teacher of Neoplatonism in Europe. He set forth a doctrine of matter and form in his chief philosophical work, **Yanbu`al-Chayyah**. This had a great influence upon teachers in the European Medieval universities although most Jewish scholars received it unfavourably. It was translated into Latin in 1150 as the **Fons vitae** (The Fountain of Life) being divided into five books.

The Five Books of the Fons Vitae

Book I deals with Universal Matter and Universal Form. All things apart from God consist of these. And the direct relation between the two is that matter *receives* the impression of form.

The only thing above this Universal Matter and Universal Form is the First Efficient Cause, which is the Divine Will.

The diversity in beings, spiritual or corporeal is found only in their form. Thus, Universal Matter embraces all the spiritual and corporeal worlds. The potentiality to become, exists in all that is, outside of the Highest Deity, which is the Absolute Being.

This leads to an understanding of the first hypostate, which is the Universal Intellect. This being a direct emanation from the Divine Will and contains all form and universality. The second hypostate is the Universal Soul. It manifests itself in the Macrocosm (i.e. the whole universe). It is also manifest in the Microcosm (man) in different forms. Thus Matter is only potentially the form of all things in action.

Extending from this basic understanding we find that all nature resolves into the four elements, and these in turn resolve themselves into something, which is the substratum of their general form. Above the elements are the heavens, also possessing form and matter. They lack the qualities of the elements and generation and destruction. The form of the heavens is, therefore, different from the elemental form.

There are four species of Universal Matter:

1. the particular , artificial matter e.g. bronze.
2. the particular, natural matter e.g. that coming from the mixture of the elements.
3. the general, natural matter e.g. that which is the element of the elements.
4. the heavenly spheres or orbits.

Book II treats of the place in the universe of this Universal Matter, which is the substratum of corporeality. Above all the form of the existences is that of the Intellect, which embraces everything by its knowledge. The forms evident to the senses are images of the intelligible intellectual forms, the spiritual existences.

Book III presents proof of the existence of intelligible simple substances, showing them to be intermediaries between the First Efficient Cause (the Will), and the substance of the corporeal.

Book IV states that all these simple substances are composed of form and matter. This includes human soul.

Book V tells us that Universal Matter and Universal Form serve as a ladder up which Man may rise to knowledge of the Divine Will. Thus, knowledge of Will, Form and Matter is the most elevated Man can attain, as a finite being.

Avicbron's Significance for Astrology

Since the seventeenth century, with the adoption of Copernican Heliocentric Astronomy and the repudiation of both Ptolemy's astronomy and Aristotle's Physics, astrology has been without a cogent scientific, philosophical and metaphysical foundation.

Being deprived of its philosophical rationale, astrology has been demoted from a science to a superstitious practice and astrologers from philosophers to "metaphysical practitioners." Amongst contemporary rationalists both these words: "metaphysical" and "practitioner" are used as terms of scorn. The rationalist admits nothing save what his senses, science and reason declare to be true.

From his point of view, astrology, which cannot explain its foundations solely upon principles recognized by modern science, is perceived as a fraud. This contrasts sharply with the view in eleventh century Spain when Avicbron penned the **Fons vitae**. Then, astrology was regarded by those educated and qualified to judge, as being not merely a science (Latin *sciencia*, Arabic *`ilm*) but also a wisdom (*sapientia*, *hikma*).

Alfarabi's **On the Rise of the Sciences**, translated by the same Dominicus Gundassalinus who helped John of Spain translate the **Fons Vitae**, states that astrology, alchemy and magic are of a different order than the other theoretical arts and sciences whose causal rationales are readily comprehended by reason.

These three sciences were accorded a higher status than the others as being non-disciplinary and as requiring for their successful and proper practice a given spiritual power or potency, i.e. a given *sapientia*, on the part of their practitioner.

It was just this requisite personal contribution on the part the operator that was rejected by Francis Bacon in his seventeenth century articulation of scientific method. This rejection led to the divergence of Western and Eastern science and to the split between astrology and astronomy, alchemy and chemistry and Natural Magic and Physics.

These spiritual powers or potencies (known in the Indian Yogic Tradition as *siddhas*) are the fruits of *sapientia*, the knowledge of hidden transcendental eternal truths, i.e. of the *occulta* (hidden principles of things) which Avicenna tells us are manifest in their exempla in the world around us. For further detail on this and those concepts expressed in the last few paragraphs please see [On the Occult sciences](#)¹

Ibn Gabirol makes clear in Tractate 1.1.7 and elsewhere in the text that he regards the **Fons vitae** as an exposition of wisdom. For Ibn Gabirol knowledge of the First Essence, (the Will) and the area under discussion in the **Fons Vitae**, (knowledge of Universal Matter and Universal Form) are the three highest sciences and the roots of all other sciences. It is the knowledge of these three sciences, which constitute wisdom and allows escape from death and so the union with the origin of life.

This metaphysical wisdom addresses the real cause of human generation - the joining of man's soul to the higher world and his return to his divine source.

¹ www.new-library.com/zoller/features

What Alfarabi states, ibn Gabirol explains: that the knowledge of astrology is perfected in wisdom. From wisdom comes the transcendental virtues and potencies, which permit the accurate practice of astrology and indeed transforms astrology from science to a wisdom.

The **Fons vitae** offers metaphysical justification to astrology by portraying the celestial spheres as emanations of the spiritual "wheels" of intelligible substance existing above them. In common with the Arabic Neoplatonists, ibn Gabirol sees the physical heavens as transmitting motions originating in the invisible intelligible realms to earth. In other words, the physical heavens receive from the soul, the intelligible motions which they {the heavens} pass on to the sublunar world thereby effecting change in the physical world.

For ibn Gabirol, nature is identified with the physical heavens and sublunary world. Nature begins with the surface of the higher containing heaven. It is the last of the simple substances. Nature emanates from the three-fold soul; specifically from the vegetal soul. Thus the physical heavens and their motions are an integral part of the process of the growth of natural things.

In ibn Gabirol's system, we have Universal Intelligence from which Soul emanates. From Soul comes Nature. Nature produces bodies. Just so, the bodies of the natural world are produced by the heavens. Esoterically, the celestials are the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, which Adam and Eve ate of. The Soul is the Garden of Eden and the Universal Intelligence is the Tree of Life reflected in the substance (Ether, the spirit), which sustains the nine Aristotelian predicates.

This is the key to the esoteric interpretation of Genesis alluded to in Agrippa's Occult Philosophy partially revealed by Thomas Vaughan in **Anthroposophica Theomagica**. By portraying the celestial spheres as emanations of the spiritual "wheels" of intelligible substance existing above them, Ibn Gabirol

subordinates the astral system to the Universal Soul, which emanates from the Universal Intelligence. The Universal Intelligence is itself derived from the conjunction of Universal Form and Universal Matter, which derive from the Will and Essence of God. By this arrangement, the heavens become a link in the chain of transmission of the forms (embodying the Divine Will) to Nature, which superintends their temporal embodiment in corporeal matter.

Philosophically, this provides an answer to the scientific question, **How do the things of this world come to be and pass away?**

Theologically, it asserts the pre-eminence of God while making of the stars executors of the Ideal Forms flowing out from His Will. Astrology in Ibn Gabirol's day was linked to religion, largely because there were no distinct boundaries observed between science and religion. A Moslem like Avicenna, a Christian like Gundassalinus and a Jew like ibn Gabirol each saw in astrology something relevant to his own religious revelation.

By subordinating astrology to the World Soul and the World Soul to Universal Intelligence ibn Gabirol performs a philosophical and scientific act: he articulates a chain of causes which explain how things come to be and pass away. But he also performs a theological act: he subordinates the physical heavens to the forms in the Universal Soul. But these forms derive from the intellects whose source is found in the ten-fold intelligible substance mean between the Creator and the last intelligible (the substance sustaining the nine predicates) which figures so prominently in ibn Gabirol's Third Tractate.

These intellects are conscious collaborators with God's Purpose. In other words, theologically, they are angels. Ibn Gabirol's cosmos is a living, judging being composed of a hierarchy of living, judging beings. Although he uses the language of Neoplatonism to express his vision of things, that vision is derived not from philosophy, but from the Old Testament.

The scientific basis of astronomy is the reduction to mathematical law of the movements of the planets. This is achieved by sensible observation and rational analysis. Neither the mathematics nor

the sensible observations are beyond the capabilities of the ordinary human consciousness. There is nothing transcendental about them. With judgement, however, that is, with the accurate discernment of the significance of astronomical motion: with astrology, with seeing what it all means, it is otherwise.

For the ninth century Persian astrologer [Abu Ma'shar – link to article Prince of Astrologers] astrology is not only a valid science, rooted in principles of natural science and proved by experimentation. It is also the highest science dealing with nature precisely because it transcends the evidence of pure sensible perception. In his opinion, astrology is founded upon two disciplinary sciences: astronomy and judgment.

The greatest authority on the first of these is Ptolemy's Almagest. The source of the second is observation and to the teachings of the wise and of philosophers who have reduced such observations into a logical science. The study of the "teachings of the wise" is a rational enough endeavour. This will improve the astrologer's performance beyond what he can accomplish on his own trying to re-invent the wheel (so to speak). But true insight and greater accuracy in prediction accrue from true intuition.

This entails the observation of the astrological powers in the moment and how they derive from the Divine Will via the Ideal Forms in the Universal Intelligence. This kind of observation requires a power of attention far in excess of that available to the average person whose attention span is short and easily distracted. The kind of power of attention required results from two things: accurate metaphysical indoctrination and prolonged and focussed development of attention.

The first of these Ibn Gabirol presents the disciple with explicitly. He regards his **Fons Vitae** as the doctrinal expression of this wisdom. The second he alludes to numerous times throughout the **Fons Vitae**. It is what those steeped in the Indian tradition recognize as a *jnanayoga* and as a *rajayoga* - that is, as a Gnostic instruction and a one-pointed mental concentration on emptying the mind of the not-Self as a means of uncovering the true Self.

In the process the disciple discovers that his soul comprehends all that is. The fruits of this endeavour are several but perhaps the most immediate is that the disciple can see the whole and begins to judge from a wider understanding than was heretofore possible. As part of this wider understanding is the recognition that the astronomical system is merely a part of a wider spiritual reality which includes intelligible substances operating as conscious participants in the agenda of the Divine Will.

What this means for astrology is that an astrology based upon ibn Gabirol's metaphysics is not a dead, mechanistic astrology in which one's fate is inflexibly fixed but rather one in which judgement and understanding are found at every level. In such an astrology, although the working of fate is still in force, there is room for the alteration of one's fate through knowledge and understanding.

If the angelic intellects associated with the several celestial spheres are intelligent understandings or understanding beings, it seems a rational expectation that through becoming like them, one may participate in their operation. Indeed this is the Master's constant exhortation to the disciple: attain wisdom and understanding.

I see two major insights into astrological metaphysics afforded by the **Fons vitae**. The first of these we have already dealt with, namely that the perfection of the science of astrology is found in wisdom (i.e. gnosis). Secondly, that the celestial spheres, as part of the operation of Nature, take the forms in the Universal Soul and connect them to material bodies in the sublunary physical world. But these forms in the Universal Soul enter the soul from two directions: from the operation of the senses and from the Universal Intelligence, whence emanates the Universal Soul.

Indeed the forms found in the physical world, which the senses perceive, come ultimately from the Universal Intelligence, which contains all forms found in Universal Form. Thus, the Soul is not the source of astrological forces, but merely a stage in their transmission. Rather we must look for the origin of the

astrological forces in the ten-fold intermediary linking the Creator with the substance containing the nine predicates (the last intelligible substance) and ultimately in the Will of God.

The forms of these ten intermediaries are to be found in Universal Intelligence. They exist in Universal Soul only in a derivative mode. This means that, if we limit our astrology to merely psychology, we deal with merely secondary, personal idiosyncrasies, not with universals. The particular soul is subsumed in the Universal Soul. The Universal Soul is subsumed in the Universal Intelligence. The forms in the Universal Intelligence derive from the Word.

Ibn Gabirol gives us a way of relating the forces active in the microcosm to those operating in the macrocosm but in order to avail ourselves of the grander picture, we must not limit astrological significance to the merely psychological. It is this link between the individual and the Totality that was severed when astrology lost its philosophical rationale.

For Ibn Gabirol, the astrological forces operate in a limited way in the microcosm. They operate in a Universal (Macrocosmic) way in the Universal Soul and in the Universal Intelligence they operate in a Unific mode in all worlds: Nature, Soul, Intelligence. The **Fons vitae** affords us an overview from which the vicissitudes of the microcosm on the physical, psychological and spiritual (level of Intelligence) levels may be explained (Natal Astrology) and related to the macrocosmic (Mundane Astrology) level which may also be addressed on the Natural Level (earthquakes, agricultural productivity, vulcanism, famine, drought, etc, the level of mass psychology (fads, fashions, politics, international finance), and the spiritual level: the rise of religious sects, new religions, holy war, religious hegemony.

The **Fons vitae** seeks to articulate and transmit to the disciple the metaphysical place from which both the individual's fate and the fate of the World are seen to be emanations from the spiritual forces of the Divine Will. Ibn Gabirol's value for us is that his **Fons vitae** played an influential role in the development of

Kabbalah and of the "Western Esoteric Tradition"; that he subordinates all to Universal Matter and Universal Form and both these to the Word; that he links astrology to Wisdom.

Glossary

Compiled by Mark Gemmill, Vancouver, Canada .

Hypostate (also hypostasis) - literally something which "stands" (stasis) "under" (hypo). This is a Neoplatonic term referring to the basis or foundation that underlies spiritual and corporeal substances. The One (God), the Universal Intellect, the Universal Soul and Nature are hypostates.

"Nature emanates form the *three-fold soul...*" -- an Aristotelian categorization of living beings. As "soul" is the source or cause of living entities, Aristotle defines them as such in three ways: vegetal (nutritive), perceptive, and rational. Vegetal Nature applies to all life (plant, animal and human) and describes the generation and growth (hence the term nutrition) of life, yet also its corruption, decay and death. The perceptive emanation of soul applies only to animals and humans. Perception is the ability to "perceive" sense data from objects outside of one's being. Perception is conditional upon the organs of sense and their individual capacity. The Rational emanation of soul applies only to humans and involves perceptions of the mind (i.e. non-physical/material perceptions). Activities such as thinking and imagining come under this category.

The 9 Aristotelian predicates - a predicate is something which "is said of" something else. For instance: "Ibn Gabirol was an Astrologer". The term "astrologer" describes or predicates that essence which is Ibn Gabirol. Aristotle listed 9 types of predicates (quantity, relation, quality, action, passion, condition, situation, time and place). "Substance" was also listed as a predicate but included as a heading in this list (which would make it ten), as we can talk about the substance (essence) "man" or "mankind" as a divine idea that also describes, or predicates the essence known as Ibn Gabirol.

Substance (essence) - Similar in meaning to hypostasis, a substance "stands (stance) under (sub)", or precedes something else. Whereas hypostasis refers to broad universal states of being, substance refers to particular objects of inquiry that do not predicate or describe anything else. For instance, we can talk about the *substance* of Ibn Gabirol as an individual human being, the divine idea that underlies his existence. When we speak of Ibn Gabirol in terms of his manifest characteristics (i.e. the accidents, or particulars of his life) we would be referring to that which "predicates" his essence. See The 9 Aristotelian Predicates

Universal Intellect – this is the hypostate, which proceeds from the unknowable God, the One, and the First Essential Cause. The Universal Intellect contains all the forms of spiritual or divine ideas (Universal Form).

Universal Soul – this is the hypostate, which proceeds from the Universal Intellect and represents the life of intellectual substances.

Nature – this is the hypostasis, which governs the operations of nature and the birth, life and death of all embodied life.

Body – this refers to corporeality, or life as experienced in a physical form.

Intelligible Substance – divine idea or form that can be known, or “apprehended by the mind”.