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Crescas Among the Textual Reasoners

Mark Randall James

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CRESCAS AMONG THE TEXTUAL REASONERS

MARK RANDALL JAMES
Independent Scholar

We are delighted to present this issue of the *Journal of Textual Reasoning (JTR)*, which features distinguished scholars examining Hasdai Crescas's work as a resource for contemporary Jewish thought. The issue is occasioned by Roslyn Weiss's important new translation of Crescas's under-appreciated masterpiece, *Light of the Lord (Or Hashem)*, the first complete translation of this text into English.[1]

Just before the first COVID lockdowns in 2020, I had the privilege of meeting Roslyn Weiss, who had come to Colgate University to give a talk on Plato. I was impressed by her subtle reading of Plato and, over dinner afterwards, even more struck by her open and thoughtful spirit. When we learned that she had recently published her translation of *Light of the Lord*, Steven Kepnes and I proposed that we build an issue of the *JTR* around her new translation. Weiss helped me put together a list of Crescas scholars, who were invited to contribute essays touching on the relevance

[1] Hasdai Crescas, *Light of the Lord (Or Hashem)*, trans. Roslyn Weiss (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). An updated paperback edition was published in 2021. Page numbers are cited from Weiss's edition.

of Crescas for contemporary Jewish thought. The response was overwhelming, even though for many of these scholars, the task involved venturing beyond their usual disciplinary boundaries.

It soon became clear that this overwhelming response had a lot to do with *affection*—affection for Crescas, the under-appreciated rabbi and philosopher, but affection too for Roslyn Weiss, about whom everyone seemed to have a kind word to say. This, surely, is a beginning worthy of Crescas, according to whom it is in love more than knowledge that the soul attains its true end: "that which is essential to the perfection of the soul is something distinct from intellection, namely, love."[2] As Weiss herself comments, "all lines of thought in *Light of the Lord* are interconnected, converging on the single unifying theme of love."[3]

An unfortunate side effect of this overwhelming response, particularly when combined with a global pandemic, was that it proved unwieldy to put together an issue of the *JTR* in our usual dialogical format. This issue takes instead the more conventional form of a collection of monological essays on a common theme. Nevertheless, our hope is that this exciting collection of engagements with Crescas helps both to introduce him to English-speaking readers and to further the work of the *JTR*. For perhaps more than any other medieval philosopher, it is Crescas whose work is best suited to serve as a prototype for the philosophical project of Textual Reasoning.

The task of this longer-than-usual introductory essay is twofold: to introduce Textual Reasoning to those who come to these pages with an interest in Crescas, and to introduce Crescas to readers of the *JTR* for whom his work is unfamiliar. In this way I hope to motivate the hypothesis guiding this issue: that Crescas too deserves a place among the textual reasoners.[4]

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[2] *Light of the Lord* II.6, 220. For more on the role of emotion and affect in Crescas's thought, see Esti Eisenmann's contribution to this collection.

[3] Weiss, 1.

[4] For studies of other modern approaches to the interpretation of Crescas, see the essays in this issue by Ari Ackerman and Zev Harvey.

I

In an early experiment with what would become Textual Reasoning, Steven Kepnes, Peter Ochs, and Bob Gibbs recorded a philosophical dialogue on the theme of "postmodern Jewish philosophy," which, with added commentary from other Jewish philosophers, they published as the book *Reasoning After Revelation*.[5] Early in the discussion, Peter Ochs proposes using the term "postmodern" not to refer to a particular historical period, but rather to a possible relational "moment" within a context or practice of inquiry:

> The "postmodern" would represent our way of criticizing our own "modern" criticisms of the traditions of discourse that we maintain. "Tradition" would then represent those collections of texts that bear meaning and require critical inquiry. If those texts were not potentially "oppressive," then we would have no reason to engage in critical inquiry; but if those texts were merely oppressive, then we would *have* nothing worth inquiring about.[6]

So interpreted, "postmodern" philosophy is a way of critiquing antecedent "modern" critiques which, by their over-generality, tend to reify the "tradition" being criticized while losing sight of their own debts to that tradition. To be postmodern, on this view, is not to *reject* modern criticism outright. Such a rejection, ironically, would simply reiterate a modern critique, with an earlier modernity now playing the role of oppressive tradition. Rather, "postmodern" philosophy involves delimiting the scope of critique, so as to clarify that there are rules implicit in the "tradition" whose recovery can guide critique: "Criticism is offered on behalf of some particular suffering that takes place within an identifiable tradition of discourse, according to rules of criticism that are still to be recovered within that tradition."[7]

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[5] Steven Kepnes, Peter Ochs, Bob Gibbs, et al., *Reasoning After Revelation: Dialogues In Postmodern Jewish Philosophy* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1998).

[6] Ibid., 32.

[7] Ibid., 35.

Already by the time the book was published, it was clear that the loaded term "postmodern" could be an obstacle to understanding what Kepnes, Ochs, and Gibbs were advocating. The term "postmodern" tends to be associated with a range of thinkers, offering critiques of modernity whose purported radicalism is a clue that, at least within this Ochsian framework, their work is better understood as another iteration of modern critique—perhaps a "hypermodernism." Kepnes, Ochs, and Gibbs settled instead on the term *textual reasoning* to refer to their style of Jewish philosophy, at once critical and reparative. "Textual reasoning" refers in the first instance to "the patterns of reasoning that emerge prototypically out of Talmudic/rabbinic practices of rereading or interpreting scripture."[8] By extension, it can refer to forms of Jewish philosophy that draw on traditional patterns of reasoning to delimit antecedent critiques of tradition. While sharing the "modern" sense that a rational critique of tradition is warranted, textual reasoning seeks to draw the rules for critique from the tradition being criticized and to deploy them self-critically for the sake of that tradition's renewal.

II

We might call Crescas a "textual reasoner" to the extent that, without simply rejecting some antecedent "modern" critique of Jewish "tradition," he seeks from the tradition itself rules to sharpen and delimit this critique. There is little question as to what, on this reading, would function as the "modern" target of his critique: the sort of Jewish Aristotelianism exemplified by Maimonides. To understand Crescas as a textual reasoner, then, we must first consider his relation to Maimonides.[9]

Following Crescas's lead, let us focus on Maimonides's two central works: his great law code, the *Mishneh Torah,* and his philosophical *magnum opus*, the *Guide for the Perplexed*. Maimonides frames both as bold, rationally-grounded interventions into the life of a Jewish community

[8] Ibid., 138.

[9] For more on the contrast between Maimonides and Crescas, see the essays in this issue by James Diamond, Alexander Green, and Shalom Tzadik.

facing dire problems. The *Mishneh Torah* responds to the *halakhic* laxity of ordinary Jews and the perplexity of Jewish elites about rabbinic legal tradition, both intensified by persecution: "In our days, severe vicissitudes prevail, and all feel the pressure of hard times. The wisdom of our wise men has disappeared; the understanding of our prudent men is hidden."[10] Maimonides's solution was to produce a law code that would formulate the whole of normative *halakhah* "in pure language and concise style, so that the Oral Torah [may] be entirely methodical in the mouth of everybody, without query and without repartee."[11] The norms of Jewish life could so adequately be expressed in such a form, he believed, that he called his code "*Mishneh Torah*," a repetition of the Torah, and even hoped that a person reading it would acquire "a complete knowledge of the Oral Torah, having no need to read any other book."[12]

Maimonides wrote his second great work, the *Guide for the Perplexed*, to address the perplexity of Jewish elites in the face of Greek wisdom. He imagines a reader drawn to philosophy: "Human reason has attracted him to abide within its sphere; and he finds it difficult to accept as correct the teaching based on the literal interpretation of the Law…Hence he is lost in perplexity and anxiety."[13] Though Maimonides bends Aristotelian science where possible in the direction of Jewish tradition—notably with respect to the creation of the universe from nothing—in general his answer to Jewish perplexity is to show that, if read allegorically, the Torah can be made consistent with Aristotelian science as demonstrated through Aristotelian methods.

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[10] *Mishneh Torah,* Transmission of the Oral Law, 40, ed. and trans. Moses Hyamson (New York: Bloch, 1937-49) (https://www.sefaria.org/Mishneh_Torah%2C_Transmission_of_the_Oral_Law?ven=The_Mishneh_Torah_by_Maimonides._trans._by_Moses_Hyamson,_1937-1949&lang=bi, accessed 12/5/2021).

[11] Ibid., 41.

[12] Ibid., 42.

[13] Moses Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, 2nd. edition, trans. M. Friedlander (New York: Dover, 1956), Introduction, 2.

Crescas's *Light of the Lord* is the first half of an unfinished project intended to answer both of Maimonides's central works.[14] *Light of the Lord* deals with normative Jewish beliefs in response to Maimonides's *Guide*, just as its companion piece, his alternative to the *Mishneh Torah*, would have focused on Jewish law. While he never produced this second book, we can adumbrate his criticism of the *Mishneh Torah* in light of his introduction to *Light of the Lord* (which is an introduction to the unfinished two-volume work).

According to Crescas, the commandments of the Torah must encompass all *possible* cases and circumstances, a domain which is infinite:[15]

> Since the great part of the commandments are in the category of the possible, a category broader than the sea, and since knowledge cannot encompass their details which are infinite in number, it appears that, were a single detail of those mentioned there [i.e. in the *Mishneh Torah*] to change, we could not reach a sure determination. Indeed, just as there is no comparison between a finite number and an infinite, so, too, there is no comparison between what is grasped of the finite details that are recorded there, and what is not grasped of the infinite details that are not recorded there.[16]

The infinite content of the Torah could not possibly be expressed in a finite list of commands. No determinate rule, however precisely formulated, can determine its own application in every possible context (this is why legal traditions invariably give rise to traditions of commentary). If the Torah is to guide Jewish life reliably, it must be more than a list of commandments: it must also include the "exponential expansion" of the commandments

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[14] For introductions to Crescas's work, see Harry Wolfson, *Crescas' Critique of Aristotle* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1929), Eliezer Schweid, *The Religious Philosophy of Hasdai Crescas* (Jerusalem: Mekor, 1970) [Hebrew], and Warren Zev Harvey, *Physics and Metaphysics in Hasdai Crescas* (Amsterdam: J. C. Gieben, 1998).

[15] On the infinity of the Torah, see Ari Ackerman, "Hasdai Crescas and his Circle on the Infinite and Expanding Torah," *Jewish Studies Internet Journal* 11 (2012): 217-33.

[16] *Light*, Introduction, 21.

using "its orally transmitted signs and exegetical techniques."[17] When the Torah's commands are read in light of these rabbinic rules of reasoning—which exist not on a page but in the community's practice—the community can acquire definite legal knowledge, which for Crescas involves three things: "grasping the commandments easily; attaining precision with respect to them; and remembering and preserving them."[18] By omitting "the disputes of the Geonim as well as their names," failing to "cite the textual sources that are the roots of [legal] issues," and "not fully [citing] the reasons for things or their general principles," [19] Maimonides undermines the community's grasp of rabbinic methods of reasoning, and hence the community's ability to be guided by the infinite Torah in ever new situations. Crescas's work, by contrast, would have made explicit the Talmudic debates and *halakhic* principles from which his rulings emerge.

It is important to emphasize that, for Crescas, the infinity of the Torah's wisdom does not make the Torah indeterminate in such a way as to give rise to *halakhic* uncertainty or unserious intellectual play. The finite form of Maimonides's *Mishneh Torah* reflects something like this worry about the indeterminacy of the infinite. As Maimonides argues later in the *Guide*, in order to provide perfect guidance, the laws of the Torah cannot take into account unique or exceptional circumstances:

> If the Law depended on the varying conditions of man, it would be imperfect in its totality, each precept being left indefinite. For this reason it would not be right to make the fundamental principles of the Law dependent on a certain time or a certain place; on the contrary, the statutes and the judgments must be definite, unconditional, and general.[20]

From Crescas's point of view, however, this statement must have seemed like an admission of precisely the opposite. If definite and general

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[17] Ibid., 19.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid., 21.

[20] *Guide*, III.xxxiv, 328.

commands cannot include *all* possible circumstances, then surely this is a sign of their *imperfection.* The perfection of the Torah consists in its capacity to determine *every* case reliably, and this cannot be displayed in a finite list of commands, but only in the way such commands are taken up into the infinite *activity* of *halakhic* thinking. But if this is right, then Maimonides's hope of producing a repetition of the Torah in the form of a code is not only futile but actually counterproductive.

When we turn to the body of *Light of the Lord,* where Crescas develops his critique of Maimonidean speculative philosophy, here too his objections tend to turn on the failure of the philosophers to reason rightly about the infinite. Let me briefly cite three examples.[21] First, Crescas calls into question the Aristotelian denial of the possibility of the existence of an actual infinity (and by implication, the finite Aristotelian cosmos). Aristotelian assumptions—such as the claim that every body must be encompassed by a limiting surface—prove, indeed, to be question-begging. Crescas shows instead that it is conceivable that bodies exist in an infinite continuous vacuum. In so doing, Crescas develops a concept of space that would prove decisive for the development of early modern physics.[22]

Second, Crescas argues that God's knowledge (like his Torah) must be infinite, and hence that God can know not only the forms or universal causes of things but also every concrete particular as such:[23] "No absurdity arises from His knowing an infinite number of things if we posit His knowledge as infinite."[24] A philosophical theology open to God's infinity proves to be more consistent with reason while doing better justice to the plain sense of traditional Jewish texts.

Finally, Crescas reframes the problem of theological language as the problem of attempting to measure the infinite God using finite human

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[21] A fourth example is Crescas's theory of time, examined in detail in this issue by Tamar Rudavsky.

[22] See especially *Light* I.2.1, 74-77 and Wolfson, *Crescas' Critique,* 114-127.

[23] See *Light* II.1.3, 128-141.

[24] *Light* II.1.3, 139.

concepts.[25] The issue is not that our concepts are wholly equivocal when applied to God, as Maimonides had argued, but rather that whatever likeness might exist between us and God cannot be *measured:*

> [T]he likeness between Him and His creatures has no measure, inasmuch as there is no relation and measure between the infinite and the finite…But it would seem that a likeness that has no measure is not impossible.[26]

Insofar as one can still speak of a likeness between God and his creatures, theological language need not be restricted to negative predications about God's essence and descriptions of God's acts in creation, as Maimonides taught. Rather, finite human language can express what Crescas calls God's "essential attributes," divine attributes that are inseparable from God's essence and infinite in their excellence.[27] (One might compare this to Coleridge's famous distinction between *comprehending* and *apprehending* the divine).[28] Once again, the positive language of Jewish texts and liturgy actually speaks *more truly* about God than one is able to do within the restrictive limits of Aristotelian philosophy.

It is no coincidence that Crescas's objections so often turn on the infinite, for finitude was central to the predominant Greek conception of rationality. Greek philosophers generally thought of concepts as grasping the *form* of a being, and form in turn as the principle that determines its nature by imposing *limit.* When Greek philosophers thought about the infinite, they imagined it as a kind of irrational chaos, like Aristotle's prime matter, or, at best, like the generative divine infinity of Plotinus' One, whose infinity nevertheless leaves it in principle beyond the reach of concepts. The finitude of reason was particularly central to the Aristotelian understanding of scientific philosophy, with its emphasis on

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[25] See *Light* I.3.3, 104-113.

[26] *Light* I.3.3, 106.

[27] Ibid., 108.

[28] See, for example, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Opus Maximum,* Collected Works, vol. 15, ed. Thomas McFarland and Nicholas Halmi (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), fragment 2, 211.

clear definitions and demonstrative argumentation; and it was central to the powerful synthesis of neo-Platonism and Aristotelianism that, under the name of "philosophy," provoked perplexity among generations of medieval Jews, Christians, and Muslims.

Crescas's work takes on a skeptical character when its target is the reductive pretensions of finite reason. In the spirit of Ghazali and other religious skeptics, he argues that much of what the philosophers insist is necessary and evident is at best only plausible and contestable. He thus develops what we might call, to emphasize its "postmodern" character, a *critique of Aristotelian reason*. He shows that finite reason as construed by the philosophers does not abide even by its own rules in its treatment of infinity. Where finite reason approaches the infinite, it is in danger of too quickly dismissing the distinctive properties of the infinite as impossible or irrational.

However exactly we construe the relation in Crescas's work between reason and revelation, it is clear that his engagement with Torah expands his sense for what is *thinkable*, what is possible for *reason*.[29] Though Crescas can sometimes speak like a traditionalist, he is a rich and creative philosophical thinker whose work is full of tightly crafted argumentation. Eliezer Schweid called attention to the paradox that, "If Crescas's philosophy was innovative to the point of being revolutionary,…his innovation in philosophy stemmed from his conservatism in religious thought." [30] In this respect we might contrast Crescas with a true traditionalist like Judah Halevi, who tends simply to reassert Jewish wisdom and language over and against Greek philosophy as a rival. For Crescas, by contrast, recourse to tradition leads to new ways of reasoning that are somehow *both* more expansive than those of the philosophers *and* more delimited by Jewish tradition.[31]

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[29] For more on Crescas's philosophical reading of scripture, see the essays in this volume by Roslyn Weiss and James Diamond.

[30] Eliezer Schweid, *The Classic Jewish Philosophers: From Saadia Through the Renaissance,* trans. Leonard Levin (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 357.

[31] For a contrast with another sort of traditionalist, Shimon ben Zemah Duran, see Seth Kadish's essay in this issue.

III

Crescas's critique of Aristotelian reason can be a resource for postmodern philosophers because it tends to complicate characteristic modern binaries, particularly those between philosophy and religion, reason and revelation. (This is to be expected, since it is characteristic of *finite* reason to produce binaries by distinguishing by negation.) Crescas takes for granted that the Torah embodies divine wisdom. But as we have seen, he does not identify this wisdom merely with the content of the finite sentences of the Bible or authoritative rabbinic writings, but also with the *rules of reasoning and interpretation* by which the Torah's wisdom is infinitely unfolded and applied. If the content of revelation is unfolded through practices of human reasoning, and if human reasoning—particularly Jewish reasoning—is reshaped by the encounter with God's Torah, then there can be no ultimate conflict between revelation and reason. The infinite wisdom of the Torah is neither separable from, nor reducible to, human reasoning. As an inquiry into this infinite wisdom, Crescas's work is at one and the same time a "philosophical" exercise of human reason and a "theological" explication of divine revelation.

We can better understand this by attending to the structure of Crescas's *Light of the Lord*. As we have seen, *Light of the Lord* deals with the *beliefs* required by the Torah, as the first half of a projected two volume work whose sequel would have dealt with the corresponding *deeds.* It is divided, in turn, into four books, each determined by the logical relation of their respective contents to the divine Torah.

Books 1 and 2 examine those beliefs without which a divine Torah cannot be conceived. In book 1, Crescas examines what he calls the "the root and first principle of the totality of the Torah's beliefs and of the commandments,"[32] namely, its relation to *God* as the giver of the Torah, with the threefold beliefs that God *exists,* that he is *one,* and that he is neither a *body* nor any *power* of a body. The bulk of this book is devoted to rehearsing arguments for twenty-five Maimonidean propositions (given in the *Guide*), which are the premises for Maimonides's proofs for God's

[32] *Light,* Preface, 29.

existence, and submitting most of these arguments to trenchant criticism.[33] For Crescas, belief in God is so foundational to the intelligibility of the Torah that, paradoxically, one cannot simply number belief in God among the many positive commandments of the Torah (as Maimonides had argued). Belief in God cannot be commanded because it is the condition for the possibility of any divine command as such: "commandments are relational and no commandment can be conceived without a certain commander."[34]

Book 2 deals with what Crescas calls the "cornerstones" of the Torah, those beliefs without which the notion of a divine law cannot be conceived.

> When we inquired into them, we found that there were six cornerstones: (1) God's knowledge of [particular] existents; (2) His providence with respect to them; (3) His power; (4) prophecy; (5) [free] choice; and (6) end [i.e. a purpose for the Torah.] For since the Torah was an act of will, issuing from the commander who is the agent, to the commanded who are the acted-upon, it follows necessarily that the agent is one who knows, who wills, and one who is powerful; and that those who are acted upon exercise will and make choices and are not necessitated or compelled. Since the agent's act acts upon those who are acted upon, it is inevitable that there be some relationship between them[, namely, prophecy]…And since every act…is aimed at a specific end, it is inescapable that this perfect act is aimed at an important end.[35]

Each section of this book begins by examining *dicta* of the Torah, sometimes aided by rational speculation, and then answers possible objections.

Following Shalom Rosenberg, we might call his method in these first two books an attempt to provide a "transcendental deduction for the

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[33] See Wolfson, *Crescas' Critique of Aristotle.*

[34] *Light,* Preface, 26.

[35] *Light,* II, 120.

concept Torah,"[36] an inquiry into the conditions for the possibility of the Torah. Perhaps it is reminiscent of the transcendental method of Hermann Cohen, for whom philosophizing begins with some putatively rational social practice—science, law, etc.—and seeks the conditions of its intelligibility. This kind of transcendental reasoning is particularly appropriate when finite human reason must come *after* an existing rational practice that human reason cannot construct from the ground up by its own resources. For Crescas, the infinite wisdom of the Torah dwelling in the life of the Jewish community is just such a practice.[37]

Book 3 focuses on beliefs whose denial constitutes heresy, but without which the Torah would still be possible. While the beliefs considered in books 1 and 2 turn only on the general *concept* of divine law, those examined in book 3 depend on the particular content of *this* Torah—beliefs like the creation of the universe from nothing, the resurrection of the dead, reward and punishment,[38] the superiority of Moses's prophecy, and the coming of the Messiah.

Finally, book 4 examines "opinions that recommend themselves to reason"[39] or "the beliefs and views of the tradition, toward which the intellect inclines."[40] This book contains a grab-bag of questions to which no answer is binding on Jews (though Crescas himself takes a stand on them). Neither scripture, rabbinic tradition, nor reason offers anything more than a "plausible" argument on one side or the other. It turns out that these are mainly the kinds of issues debated by the philosophers—for example, whether the universe might last forever; whether the spheres are

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[36] Qtd. Menachem Kellner, *Dogma in Medieval Jewish Thought: From Maimonides to Abravanel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 127. I am grateful to Jason Rubenstein for pointing me to this passage.

[37] We might also, therefore, think of Crescas as anticipating American pragmatism. For more on Crescas as a proto-pragmatist, see the essays by Zev Harvey and Peter Ochs in this issue.

[38] For a detailed examination of reward and punishment, see Igor De Souza's contribution to this issue.

[39] *Light,* Preface, 29.

[40] *Light,* IV, 331.

living creatures; the relation between intellect, intellection, and what is intellected; and the knowability of God's essence.

The organization of *Light of the Lord* is suggestive for contemporary thinkers because it is so difficult to map onto familiar binaries like philosophy or religion, reason or revelation, universal or particular. For example, while book 1 is occupied almost entirely with philosophical argumentation, its primary thrust is skeptical. (Finite) reason is not useless, but on its own it leads only to imperfect knowledge, not least of the ultimate object of knowledge, God: "there is no way to grasp these root-principles perfectly other than via prophecy."[41] By the same token, the imperfection of finite reason means that where the Torah provides no definitive guidance—particularly with regard to the issues discussed in book 4—human reason alone can offer only *plausible* arguments, not demonstrative arguments leading to scientific knowledge. We might be tempted to call these books philosophical, but to the extent that reason alone produces only probable arguments, philosophy's *raison d'etre* is drastically undermined, at least as conceived by orthodox Aristotelians. In any case, even in these "philosophical" sections, Crescas does not hesitate to appeal to the words of the Torah to establish a point.

Book 3, which turns on the particular content of the Torah, looks like what we might want to call a Jewish *theology,* or better, a definition of core Jewish *doctrines,* in the sense of beliefs constitutive of a particular community's identity. But Jewish theology or doctrine would surely be incomplete without a discussion of God's unity (book 1) or of providence and prophecy (discussed in book 2). The concept of beliefs whose denial does not contradict the idea of a divine law, but which is nevertheless required by *this* Torah, is considerably narrower than most modern notions of theology or doctrine.

Book 2 is perhaps the most difficult to place. It is hard to see how the contents of book 2 could be philosophical in the Aristotelian sense, since to determine those beliefs without which the Torah is inconceivable presupposes belief in the divine Torah itself, a commitment which is

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[41] *Light,* I, 31.

neither evident to reason nor rationally demonstrable therefrom.[42] Yet because Crescas begins with the *concept* of a Torah in abstraction from its particular contents, he is operating at a level more general than that of Jewish tradition. Presumably his arguments implicate any community committed to a revealed law, including Muslims and Christians. (In this respect, book 2 is reminiscent of Scriptural Reasoning, TR's sister practice of shared text study between Jews, Christians, and Muslims.) What shall we call this kind of inquiry—a kind of transcendental scriptural philosophy? An inquiry into the grammar of Abrahamic theology? In any case, it does not fit well within conventional notions of "philosophy" or "religion" defined from the perspective of finite reason.

IV

We may, then, read Crescas as an antecedent to "postmodern" Jewish philosophy, or to the project of Textual Reasoning, because he draws on the logic of traditional texts to delimit and to refine the Maimonidean critique of Jewish tradition. In his attempts to think through the infinite wisdom of God and of the Torah, Crescas organizes his thinking in ways that tend to undermine binaries that remain part of our own "modern" inheritance—binaries that, often enough, can be traced to the continued (though often subterranean) influence of Aristotle on Western thought.

Mine is, to be sure, only one possible—and contestable—interpretation of Crescas. But I hope it will provide a useful vantage point from which readers sympathetic to the project of Textual Reasoning can approach the rich engagements with Crescas that we are honored to include in this issue.

This issue begins with a pair of essays focused on Crescas as a philosophical interpreter of the Torah. In "Hasdai Crescas's Philosophical Biblical Exegesis," Roslyn Weiss guides us into the complexity of Crescas's Biblical exegesis. Despite his distaste for allegory, Crescas is not unwilling to adopt a figurative reading if the literal meaning is clearly objectionable and if a figurative reading remains consistent with the rabbinic principle

[42] For an opposing view, see Shalom Tzadik's essay in this issue.

that the Torah speaks in the language of men. Weiss then argues that attending to Crescas's biblical exegesis can shed light on his apparently untraditional determinism, particularly his perplexing distinction between "necessity in respect of itself" and "necessity in respect of causes." Watching Crescas at work as an exegete, Weiss argues, suggests that his objection is not to philosophic reflection *per se* but to the Greek *flavor* of exegesis displayed by his Aristotelian rivals.

In "The Inexhaustible Metaphor of Light: Illuminating the Fault Lines Between Crescas and Maimonides," Jim Diamond teases out the issues at stake between Maimonides and Crescas by comparing their interpretations of the scriptural metaphor of light in a variety of contexts: the light of the Torah, the image (*tzelem*) of God, the illumination of Abraham, the menorah as a sign of Israel's election, and the soul as a refraction of the light of the *Shekinah.* Whereas Maimonides tends to refer "light" to the intellect as the point of union between God and humanity, for Crescas "light" refers to the revealed light of the Torah which, as a "light unto our path," illuminates human deeds. From this vantage point, the difference between these thinkers is stark indeed: "what is sight for Maimonides is blindness for Crescas."

The next three essays examine Crescas as a philosopher and a critic of medieval Aristotelianism. In "Four Critiques of Crescas against Maimonides and the Relationship of Intellect and Practice in Religion," Alexander Green considers four areas in which Crescas criticizes Maimonides: Maimonides's view that belief in God is commanded in the Torah, his omission of legal debates from the *Mishneh Torah,* his apophatic refusal to ascribe positive attributes to God, and his identification of the Torah's secret traditions with philosophy. Underlying each, Green shows, is their different understandings of the relation between intellect and practice. If Maimonides regards practice as a vehicle to intellectual perfection, for Crescas, right understanding is a means towards practical obedience of the commandments, which are given for the happiness of the soul.

In "Philosophy and Religion in R. Crescas's *Light of the Lord*," Shalom Tzadik challenges the view that Crescas is a "traditionalist" who uses

philosophy merely to buttress predetermined religious opinions. Although Crescas, unlike Maimonides, argued that scripture revealed truths that philosophy itself cannot attain and defended the possibility of miracles, his more "traditional" reading of the Torah itself follows from metaphysical commitments about the nature of God derived through philosophical inquiry. Crescas may therefore serve as a model for modern Jewish philosophers interested in showing that there need be no contradiction between philosophical inquiry and religious commitment.

In "Hasdai Crescas and Simeon ben Zemah Duran on Tradition versus Rational Inquiry," Seth (Avi) Kadish contrasts Crescas's philosophy with that of his younger contemporary and critic, Simeon ben Zemah Duran. The latter tends to take an apologetic approach, working through contemporary philosophical/scientific opinions on a given subject in encyclopedic detail and then arguing that these are consistent with, or sometimes inferior to, the teachings of the rabbinic sages. Crescas, by contrast, tends to understand rational inquiry and traditional wisdom as making more limited claims, referring each to its own respective domain. If Duran anticipates contemporary apologetic literature, Crescas is the best precedent for the sorts of constructive engagement between tradition and modern thinking that one finds in Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz and especially Rabbi Dr. Jonathan Sacks. If Sacks himself invokes Maimonides rather than Crescas, this is because the subversive implications of Maimonides's thought, so apparent to Crescas, have largely been forgotten in traditional circles.

The next group of essays contains constructive attempts to think through particular issues in conversation with Crescas. In "'I Feel Love': Hasdai Crescas on Reward and Punishment," Igor De Souza examines the notions of reward and punishment in Crescas's thought, notions that tend to imply a personal and activist conception of God difficult for medieval rationalists to accommodate. Crescas proposes a novel *naturalistic* account of reward and punishment in terms of the emotional states of joy or alienation that necessarily accompany the intention to carry out right or wrong actions. By shifting the emphasis from the sphere of actions to the "interior" sphere of beliefs and intentions, Crescas is able to integrate

traditional texts with the philosophical notion of cause and effect in a way that addresses the circumstances of *conversos* and helped them maintain their religious attachment to Judaism.

In "R. Hasdai Crescas and the Concept of Motivation in Modern Psychology and the Philosophy of Education," Esti Eisenmann reads Crescas in light of contemporary theories of motivation in the philosophy of education. Whereas Jewish rationalists tended to place the will between the appetitive and intellectual faculties and to assume that our appetites are the primary source of weakness of will, Crescas puts the will at the center of the soul and understands will as a concurrence of the appetitive and *imaginative* faculties. Anticipating modern educational theory, Crescas understands that while the intellect can help guide a person's actions, the motive force of human life comes from feeling and the affective search for meaning.

In "Crescas on Time, Space, and Infinity," Tamar Rudavsky examines Crescas's innovative philosophy of time, which was integral to the new perspectives on physics he sketched in his critique of Aristotelianism. Whereas Aristotle viewed time as the quantitative measure of the motion of persistent things, Crescas dissociates time from motion by arguing that time is the measure of *rest* as well, leading him to the more idealist view (with echoes of Plotinus and Augustine) that time is a product of our mental activity. She then shows how Crescas's theory faces problems similar to those with which the modern philosophers McTaggart and Husserl wrestled: how to account for the persistence of things in time without appealing to some form of Aristotelian essentialism.

The last two essays turn their attention to the history of scholarly interpretations of Crescas. In "Medieval Jewish Philosophy and Authentic Jewish Piety: Yitzhak Baer and Julius Guttmann on Hasdai Crescas's Philosophy," Ari Ackerman compares the treatments of Crescas by Yitzhak Baer and Julius Guttmann, both leading German-Jewish scholars who immigrated to Palestine in the 1930s as faculty members at Hebrew University. Whereas Baer reads Crescas as an anti-rationalist defender of authentic Jewish piety, Guttmann interprets Crescas as a philosopher attempting in a novel way to harmonize biblical religion (particularly its

voluntarism) with Greek philosophy (particularly its determinism). Despite their differences, both thinkers struggle to come to terms with Crescas's thought because they presuppose binaries (between reason and faith or between Jewish and Greek streams of thought) that Crescas's work undermines. By challenging the terms of medieval philosophy, Crescas invites historians to reconsider their own analytic categories as well.

We conclude with an essay by Zev Harvey on Harry Wolfson, whose magisterial *Crescas' Critique of Aristotle* remains one of the most important modern scholarly works on Jewish philosophy. In "Wolfson's Pragmatic Crescas," Harvey argues that Wolfson was drawn to Crescas because he anticipated American pragmatism's logical exposition of the "practical spirit." Wolfson's interest in pragmatism leads him to discern in Crescas anticipations of Bergson's distinction between time as "pure duration" and the "mixed time" of physical science, even as it opens him to mystical dimensions in Crescas's thought. Turning to a famous textual difficulty in *Light* I.2.1, Harvey shows that while Wolfson's proposed textual emendation is almost certainly wrong, the esoteric interpretation Wolfson develops in order to justify it remains a powerful piece of Kabbalistic teaching. "What [Wolfson] lost as a historian he regains as an original religious thinker."

In an afterward reflecting on the essays collected in this volume, Peter Ochs's "Innovation in Crescas's *Light of the Lord*" asks how the *innovative* character of Crescas's reasoning can inspire new directions for Textual Reasoning and contemporary Jewish thought. Philosophically innovative thinking is difficult to theorize because, like a Kuhnian paradigm shift, it involves introducing changes to the conditions for reasoning and conducting inquiry. In dialogue with the contributors to this volume, Ochs sketches a method of *abductive* reading, a sort of philosophic *derash,* that he deploys to discern and test Crescas's philosophic innovations. Ochs first identifies some unexpected *analogy* in Crescas's thought, in this case the analogy between Torah study and physics; second, he identifies signs that these analogues may be mutually influencing correlatives; and finally, he seeks the enabling conditions of this correlativity in the infinity of God and the desire of the inquirer. The result is an unanticipated

conclusion about the relationship between science and Torah study: "God's spoken word is a partner to the renewal of science and the created world is a partner to the renewal of Torah study."

This issue also includes reviews of three exciting new studies of Jewish thought. Dianna Lynn Roberts Zauderer's *Metaphor and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Thought: Moses ibn Ezra, Judah Halevi, Moses Maimonides, and Shem Tov Falaquera* (reviewed by Alexander Green) argues that the poetic imagination was central both to the intellectual work and the religious striving of medieval Jewish philosophers. Tracing the influence of ancient literary theory on medieval thought, she shows how even thinkers inclined to be skeptical of the imagination, such as Maimonides, have a more complex view of the imagination than generally understood. In *Hermann Cohen and the Crisis of Liberalism: The Enchantment of the Public Sphere* (reviewed by Sam S.B. Shonkoff), Paul Nahme draws on Hermann Cohen to analyze the "dialectic of enchantment," in which attempts to secularize and disenchant liberal society tend to arouse more destructive forms of enchantment in response. Cohen envisions a "reenchanted" liberalism that recovers the spiritual transcendence of *ideas* accessible through democratic forms of reasoning—a vision, Nahme argues, capable of answering some of the more trenchant contemporary critiques of liberalism. Finally, in her *Nature and Norm: Judaism, Christianity, and the Theopolitical Problem* (reviewed by Mark Randall James), Randi Rashkover argues that the persistent influence of the fact/value divide on modern Jewish and Christian thinkers afflicts modern Jewish and Christian thought with a fundamental arbitrariness. She calls these traditions to overcome the fact/value divide by exercising the philosophical authority to engage in immanent critique of their own norms and practices, for the sake of the life of their communities.

We hope that this issue of the *Journal of Textual Reasoning* will provoke readers to a new appreciation for Hasdai Crescas and open new avenues for contemporary Jewish thinking.