

Solomon Ibn Gabirol, *The Fountain of Life*,

* Treatise I, Section 9: On Universal Matter and Universal Form

* Treatise V, Section 43: On Union with the Source of Life

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Solomon Ibn Gabirol,
The Fountain of Life (c. eleventh century)

Treatise I, Section 9 [Universal Matter and Universal Form]

... *Pupil*. I understand about the soul what is possible for me to understand, even though I have not attained the ultimate knowledge which I should have about it. Nevertheless, let us now begin to inquire about universal matter and universal form. I wish, however, that you begin by first enumerating the chapter headings of the subjects about which we must inquire during the investigation in which we are engaged and that you divide the treatises of the investigation in a reasonable manner, in order that I may have everything [readily] at hand.

Solomon Ibn Gabirol, *The Fountain of Life (Fons Vitae)*, trans. A. Hyman, in A. Hyman and J. Walsh (eds), *Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, 2nd edition (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1973)

Master. Since it is our purpose to inquire about universal matter and universal form, we must say that everything composed of matter and form is divided into two [kinds]: composite corporeal substance, and simple spiritual substance. Corporeal substance [in turn] is likewise divided into two [kinds]: corporeal matter which underlies the form of qualities, and spiritual matter which underlies the corporeal form. Because of the latter distinction there must be in this work two treatises, to which we must direct our attention. The first of these is devoted to those matters which must first be set down in order to describe universal matter and universal form, to investigate the science of matter and form existing in sensible substances, and to speak of the corporeal matter which underlies qualities. The second treatise is devoted to a discussion of the spiritual matter which underlies the corporeal form. Now, since the spiritual substance requires proofs through which existence is attributed to it and demonstrations through which [its existence] is ascertained (for the existence of spiritual substance is not self-evident by means of necessary knowledge), there must also be a third treatise devoted to a discussion of proofs for the existence of simple substances. There must, furthermore, be a fourth treatise devoted to the discussion of the inquiry into the knowledge which exists concerning the matter and form of simple substances. When the investigation contained in these four treatises will have been completed, we must then inquire about universal matter and form as they are in themselves. Hence there will be a fifth treatise which is appropriate for the investigation of this subject. Everything which we must investigate concerning matter and form will be contained in the five treatises which we have delineated and this is everything this book contains.

Pupil. Since you have well divided the treatises of our inquiry concerning matter and form, let us begin then to investigate that which we intended to investigate about these two principles.

Master. The existence of universal matter and universal form is known in more than one way.

Pupil. Make clear to me these ways.

Master. The ways by which the existence of universal matter and universal form can be known are, at first thought, two: the universal, general [way], and the particular, specific [way].

Pupil. How can the existence of matter and form be known according to the universal way?

Master. Every object of investigation [the existence of] which we want to know through its characteristics, can only be investigated through those properties which are inseparable from it. When it has been understood that these properties exist and what they are, then the existence of that thing whose properties they are will be known.

Pupil. Give me an example of what you have said concerning this investigation.

Master. If there exists a universal matter of all things, the following properties must belong to it: it must exist in virtue of itself, it must have one essence, it must be a subject underlying diversity, it must give its essence and name to all things.

Pupil. What is the proof that these properties must belong to universal matter and must be united with it?

Master. If universal matter exists, it must have these properties.

Pupil. How is this?

Pupil. It is as you have said. But in what way is this matter different from the things which exist?

Master. It is not possible that the essence of matter should differ from the essence of existing things. However, existing things are made to differ from matter by the forms which come upon matter, that is, by differences which divide matter. Whence the manifest difference among existing things comes to be only through manifest forms and, likewise, the hidden difference among existing things comes to be only through the hidden forms. Thus diversity comes to be only through the forms of existing things. But the hidden essence which receives the forms is the one first universal matter which has no diversity (in itself).

Pupil. Give me an example of this.

Master. Consider golden armbands [and] necklaces of gold⁴ and put them in place of all existing things. You will find them to be different though [their] forms, while you will find the matter which underlies them to be one. And the essence of their matter will not be different from their own essence. From this [example] you can understand that existent things are different through their form, while the matter which underlies them is one and the essence of this matter is not different from the essence of these things.

Pupil. You have done well in making me discover universal matter, for I found its properties in all existing things. Make me discover universal form in a manner similar to this.

Master. Consider in like manner the properties of universal form. They are to inhere in a subject which differs from it, to actualize the essence of that subject in which it inheres, and to confer existence upon this subject. If you will find these properties in the forms of existing things, you will have found the universal form.

Pupil. What argument do you adduce [to show] that these properties belong to the universal form?

Master. The [universal] form must necessarily inhere in a subject, for if it did not inhere in a subject, it would be a subject and in that case form would be matter and it would have the characteristic of matter. To actualize the essence of the subject in which it inheres and to confer existence upon it belongs also to the form, inasmuch as something has the kind of being it has only through the form.

Pupil. Did we not say previously that matter also has existence?

Master. We said that matter has existence only when we had conferred upon it a spiritual form. In itself, however, matter does not have the kind of existence it has when a form is joined to it, the latter kind of existence being existence in actuality. Otherwise, when we say that matter has existence, we have in mind that it has existence only in potentiality.

Pupil. I have investigated these properties and find them to accompany all the forms of existing things. But from whence can I say that there exists a universal form from which is derived the existence and perfection of all forms?

Master. Refrain from this question now and do not hurry so much, for the answer to it will follow later. . . .

Treatise V, Section 43 [Union with the Source of Life]

Pupil. You previously compared creation to the flow of water from its source, and the reflection of the form in a mirror. Does it resemble anything else?

Master. Creation is likened to the word which a man pronounces. For when a man pronounces a word, its form and its meaning is impressed upon the ear and the intellect of the hearer. According to this simile it is said that the Creator (may He be praised and

exalted) pronounced a word, and its meaning was impressed upon the essence of matter, and matter retains it, i.e., the created form is impressed in matter and marked in it.

Pupil. Expound upon this simile and adapt it to the other one.

Master. Sound is similar to universal matter in that sound is a universal matter that sustains all particular sounds, which include tones, movements [i.e., vowels] and stops; and the manifest form is like the form of the word that is heard, and is divided into particular forms which subsist in singular particular materials. By particular forms I mean particular movements, and by particular materials, I mean tones. But the hidden form is the meaning which the word signifies.

Pupil. What is creation compared to?

Master. Speech. With the articulation of the word, when spoken, the matter which sustains the manifest form of the word, as well as its invisible form, i.e., its meaning, possesses being. Both forms exist together.

Pupil. Do the parable and its interpretation agree in any way?

Master. They agree in that each of them heeds an agent for their being and their existence.

Pupil. All the preceding has made evident to me that nothing besides matter and form exists in everything created. I now understand universal matter and universal form. I have discovered that movement is a force that flows from will, and that will is a divine force that permeates everything and extends over everything, as light in air and the soul in the body and the intellect in the soul. Now, then, teach me what I must presently investigate.

Master. You shouldn't think that the science of matter and form can suffice for everything that you need. Be patient and not overhasty. You must always consider the essence of each of them, i.e., universal matter and universal form, in abstraction from each other, and you must reflect upon the manner in which form emanates and infuses absolute matter, and the manner in which it proceeds to all substances according to their rank. Your intellect should distinguish most clearly matter from form, form from will, and will from movement. For if you do this, your soul will be purified, and your intellect will be enlightened and will penetrate to the world of intellect. You will intellectually cognize universal matter and form, and matter with all its forms will be to you as a book laid out before your eyes. You will gaze with your intellect at all its depictions, and you will apprehend with your intellect all its figures. Then you will have hope in your capacity to apprehend all that is above this.

Pupil. What is above this?

Master. The purpose for which everything exists as it does, i.e., the knowledge of the world of the Divinity, which is the maximum totality. Whatever is below this is insignificant in comparison.

Pupil. What is the way to achieve this most worthy knowledge?

Master. To achieve this knowledge there are two ways. The first is through the knowledge of the will in so far as it flows into all matter and form. The second is through the knowledge of the will in so far as it encompasses matter and form, which is the most exalted power, and which is not commingled with anything material or formal. However, you will only be able to ascend to the knowledge of the power that is not commingled with anything material or formal, by conjoining with the power in so far as it is commingled with matter and form, and by ascending by means of this power level after level, until you reach its principle and its root.

Pupil. What is the select fruit of this study?

Master. The escape from death and the conjunction with the source of life.

Pupil. What helps to achieve this worthy hope?

Master. First, to separate yourself from all sensible things, to become immersed with all your mind in the intelligibles, and to attach yourself, in your entirety, to the One who bestows the good. For when you do this, He will gaze upon you, and He will be generous with you, as befits him. Amen.

Notes to Section 12

- 1 The classic study of Israeli, with extensive translations and commentary, is A. Altmann and S.M. Stern, *Isaac Israeli: A Neoplatonic Philosopher of the Early Tenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958).
- 2 The text of §1 is no doubt corrupt – the ‘vital spirit’ of the physicians, which was identified with the ‘natural warmth’ of Aristotle, is always said to have its seat in both cavities of the heart.
- 3 The text seems slightly corrupt, probably owing to some mistranslation. With the help of the parallel passage of Ibn Chasdai’s *Neoplatonist*, the original can be approximately reconstructed as follows: ‘The philosophers compared this to a man who left his country and stayed abroad for some time. When he was near achieving his desire [to meet again] his children and relatives, having spent a long time on his way and being filled with desire to reach his home, he was deprived of it and remained naked in heat and cold, and hungry.’
- 4 In *Shem Tov b. Joseph Falaquera’s* Hebrew translation: a nosering, an armband and a seal-ring made of gold.
- 5 This passage may be rendered more freely: Since it is necessary that the form of spirituality is above the form of corporeity, and since it is necessary that the latter form inheres in a subject other than it, which gives it its description (and since corporeal substances are similar to spiritual substances inasmuch as they have emanated from them), it follows that spiritual substance is composed of matter and form in the same way as corporeal substance.