

Isaac Israeli's 'Philosophy':
An Epistemic-Ontological Understanding of his Description of 'Philosophy' and
its Roots in al-Kindī and the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'

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Dedication

To Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Syed Abrar Hussain Zaidi, and Mohammad H.

Faghfoory Whose Lights Paved the Way

Acknowledgments

The author wishes to first thank Mr. Darrell Blakeway, who has been with me from the very beginning. This would not have been possible without his heroic and endless dedication to my success in this work and its predecessors. The author would like to thank Professor Oliver Leaman for participating in his thesis committee and providing his comments to this thesis. The author also thanks Nicholas Boylston, Rose Deighton, Faheem Chisty, Justin Cancelliere, Professor Jeffrey Anderson, and Professor Waleed el-Ansary, for providing vital comments to this work. Lastly, all of this would not have been possible without the moral and caring support of Marla Kleinman, Farinaz Kavianifar, Mohammad H. Faghfoory and my family.

Abstract

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This study examines the nature of the term 'philosophy' in Isaac Israeli's epistemic-ontological schema. In it we look at primary sources of Israeli's thought, examining how he approached this term and the intellectual sources that had influenced his thought. This study is a contribution to the few, but important works done on this early, yet important Jewish Neoplatonic philosopher and seeks to uncover some of his sources that may have been overlooked with regards to his intellectual thought.

In the first chapter, we review his biographical information and study the sources that he had available. It seeks to bring to light recent scholarship done by those we believe had influenced him and reminds the reader of the wide breadth of information that was available to Isaac Israeli. In the second chapter, we study his three descriptions of philosophy in light of the epistemic-ontological intelligible line of Plato. Here we examine the various sources of his intellectual thought through his examples and his descriptions. In the concluding chapter, we make clear the issues with his thought and allude to the works of later Jewish Neoplatonists who were also influenced by Muslim philosophers.

This work is one of the few that has examined any aspect of this philosopher, and hopes to shed light on the nature of his understanding of the term 'philosophy' and its overall role in his philosophical and cosmological schema.

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List of Transliterations

ء ' -	و w
ب b	ي y
ت t	ة ah; at (construct state)
ث th	ال (article) al- 'l (even before the anteropalatals)
ج j	
ح ḥ	long vowels
ħk خ	ā اِي
d د	ū و
hd ذ	ī يِ
r ر	
z ز	
s س	
ش sh	
ص ṣ	
ض ḍ	
ط ṭ	
ظ ṣ	
ع ʿ	
غ gh	
ف f	
ق q	
ك k	
ل l	
م m	
ن n	
ه h	

Chapter I: Introduction

Throughout the Medieval period¹, particularly the period of the Islamic Golden Age (800 - 1250),² there is considerable evidence of the influence of Islamic intellectual thought upon Jewish scholars and theologians. From biology and chemistry to philosophy and music, there has been a long tradition of Jewish thought arising with Jews in areas dominated by Islamic rulers. This thesis focuses on an early example of this influence during the development of Jewish philosophical thought, addressing the works of Isaac Israeli, a tenth-century Jewish philosopher, and the founder of Jewish Neoplatonism.³

After his immediate intellectual predecessor, and founder of Medieval Jewish philosophy, Sa'adiah Gaon (d. 942),⁴ Israeli served as the second major focal point of Muslim and Jewish intellectual discourse. In the writings of Sa'adiah Gaon, we see the significant influence of the Mu'tazilites⁵ and al-Kindi

¹ For a history of the Medieval period, see the multivolume set of works by Paul Fouracre et al., ed. *The New Cambridge Medieval History*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

² For a history of the Islamic Golden age, see Jonathan Lyons, *The House of Wisdom: How the Arabs Transformed Western Civilization* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2009). For a history of the Islamic translation movements occurring, see Richard Walzer, *Greek Into Arabic: Essays on Islamic Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962) and Dimitri Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture* (London: Routledge Press, 1998).

³ For a thorough treatment on the development and history of Jewish Neoplatonism, see Lenn E. Goodman, ed. *Neoplatonism and Jewish Thought* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992).

⁴ For an introduction to the thought and works of Sa'adiah Gaon, see Daniel H. Frank and Oliver Leaman, *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), chapter four; Eliezer Schweid, *The Classic Jewish Philosophers* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2008), chapter one.

⁵ For an introduction to Mu'tazilite thought, see Harry Austryn Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Kalam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), chapter one.

upon various aspects of his thought.⁶ While Sa'adiah Gaon certainly marked a birth of the relationship between Muslim and Jewish intellectual culture, with Israeli it came to a much fuller fruition. Israeli draws not only from al-Kindī, but also from the thought of the Ikhwān al-Şafa.⁷ Furthermore, like the Muslims, Israeli was grappling with integrating sacred scripture with philosophy in a land that has long been known as the land of prophecy.⁸ By examining Israeli's relationship with al-Kindī⁹ and the Ikhwān al-Şafa, we hope not only to uncover the manner of influence of these Islamic thinkers on Israeli, but also to clarify their use of Greek sources in fashioning their philosophies.

While Jewish philosophy formally started with Sa'adiah Gaon and Isaac Israeli, it continued through the centuries with Samuel HaNagid (d. 1056),¹⁰

⁶ Al-Kindī had a profound and multidimensional influence upon Sa'adiah Gaon, from the field of philosophy and theology to that of music and art. For an example of this see Henry George Farmer, *Sa'adya Gaon on the Influence of Music* (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America, 1943).

⁷ For an introduction to the thought of the Ikhwān al-Şafa see Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrine* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993, part one); Farhad Daftary, *The Isma'ilis. Their history and doctrines* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Ian Richard Netton, *Muslim Neoplatonists. An Introduction to the Thought of the Brethren of Purity*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991).

⁸ We have borrowed this wonderful phrase from the subtitle of one of Seyyed Hossein Nasr's monumental work, *Islamic Philosophy from Its Origin to the Present* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2006).

⁹ For a biography of al-Kindī, see Peter Adamson, *Al-Kindī* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Henry Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy* (London: Kegan Paul International in association with The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 1962), chapter five.

¹⁰ Samuel HaNagid was a poet in Muslim Spain who had held the high role of top general in Granada Army during the period of Moorish rule. For more information on his life and role in the relationship between Jews and Muslims, see Norman Roth, ed., *Medieval Jewish Civilization: An Encyclopedia* (New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 363-366. While the Jews and Muslims did not always agree with each other during the Golden Age of Spain (from 711 to 1147), historians have established that Jews enjoyed an unprecedented degree of justice and respect under Muslim rule as compared to prior and subsequent periods. Reputable scholarship has proven that the relationship between Muslims and Jews was far better during this period than is popularly thought. For more information on this, see Mark R. Cohen, *Under Crescent and Cross: The Jews in the Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); Abdelwahab Meddeb, Benjamin Stora, ed., *A History of Jewish-Muslim Relations: From the Origins to the Present Day* (Princeton: Princeton

Nethan'el al-Fayyūmī (d. 1165)¹¹, Bahya ben Joseph ibn Paquda (b. 1050)¹², Judah Ha-levi (d. 1141)¹³ and Maimonides (d. 1204)¹⁴. Even while Christians, Muslims, and Jews were challenging each other's theological beliefs and the legitimacy of each other's faiths,¹⁵ they were borrowing philosophical thought from each other. Lenn Goodman concludes:

It is often thought that the political conflict between Israel and her Arab neighbors is an expression of deep philosophical differences, as though the conflict represented a difference in underlying axioms. But the historical record reveals a long symbiosis between Jewish and Islamic philosophical ideas, nourished by kindred scriptures and stimulated by a shared intellectual heritage that runs back not only to a cousinage in scriptural texts and ritual practices but also to a shared patrimony in the great philosophical texts and discussions of classical and Hellenistic antiquity. Readers who examine the fruits nurtured by this symbiosis will discover affinities and interactions between Jewish and Islamic philosophy that run as deep as deep philosophical probing will permit. Even in times of persecution, creative interactions continue across

University Press, 2013), part one; Daniel H. Frank, ed., *The Jews of Medieval Islam: Community, Society, and Identity: Proceedings* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995), part one.

¹¹ Nethan'el al-Fayyūmī was a prominent Yemeni Jewish Neoplatonist who was not influenced by the Islamic Neoplatonists, but was an avid believer in the validity of the Prophet Muhammad's message and Islam for the Muslims. For a thorough treatment of his life and works, see Colette Sirat, *A History of Jewish Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 1996), 88-92; Nethan'el al-Fayyūmī, *Bustān al-Ukal*, trans. David Levine (New York: Columbia University Press, 1908).

¹² Bahya ben Joseph ibn Paquda was a Jewish Neoplatonist who wrote one of the most respected books on asceticism and piety. He was heavily influenced by Sa'adiah Gaon along with Muslim mystics and the Ikhwān as-Ṣafa. For more information, see Colette Sirat, *A History of Jewish Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Press Syndicate of the Cambridge University Press, 1996), 81-3.

¹³ Judah Halevi was a Jewish theologian known for his attacks on philosophy in a manner both inspired and similar to al-Ghazālī. He was also influenced by Ibn Bājja. For a biography, see Colette Sirat, *A History of Jewish Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Press Syndicate of the Cambridge University Press, 1996), 113-125.

¹⁴ Maimonides remains one of the most important Jewish theologians and philosophers to this day. Works such as his *Mishneh Torah*, and his *Guide for the Perplexed* are widely read in Jewish circles throughout the world. Equally important, he serves as an apex of Jewish and Muslim philosophers and had reconciled many of them for the Jewish world. For more information on his life, works, and influence, see T. M. Rudavsky, *Maimonides* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

¹⁵ This thesis does *not* argue that the practical relations between the Jews and Muslims were always harmonious. However, it does intend to make clear that a profound and somewhat unexpected relationship between the two monotheistic traditions did blossom. For a survey of this, see Lenn Evan Goodman, *Jewish and Islamic Philosophy: Crosspollinations in the Classic Age* (New Jersey: 1999).

temporal, linguistic, cultural, religious and sectarian boundaries. The commerce of ideas, like that of more worldly goods, persists even in times of war.¹⁶

Goodman makes it clear that there was an intellectual relationship between Muslims and Jews throughout the Medieval period, showing us that even in times of tension and competing religious beliefs and practices between two peoples, there can be a fruitful relationship between scholars that can even amount to friendship.

We have chosen to focus on Isaac Israeli for several reasons. First, he stands as the first focal point of the emergence of Islamic philosophical thought in the Jewish world. With Sa'adiah Gaon, we witness al-Kindī's significant influence upon his thought. However, with Israeli, we see not only al-Kindī's thought but also the philosophy of the Ikhwān as-Ṣafa¹⁷ playing a role in his thought. Secondly, unlike earlier Jewish philosophers during this period, Israeli drew upon various schools of philosophical thought throughout his works. He articulated an epistemology, ontology, and cosmology that were novel to Jewish philosophers during his time. Lastly, he stood firmly on the foundation of the Neoplatonic school of thought. We see this especially in his approach to the word "philosophy" and his cosmology. Accordingly, Israeli deserves special attention in comparison to other early Jewish philosophers, because it reflected the level of maturity during the early mashshā'ī period of Islamic philosophical thought.¹⁸

¹⁶ Lenn Evan Goodman, *Jewish and Islamic Philosophy: Crosspollinations in the Classic Age* (New Jersey: 1999), x.

¹⁷ We shall address this entity and source extensively in the second part of this thesis.

¹⁸ As is explained later, mashshā'ī philosophy does *not* merely translate to Peripatetic or Aristotelian thought. Like during the period of Middle and Neoplatonism, the gulf between Platonism and Peripatetic were not as wide as in modern times. In the Islamic world, mashshā'ī is

To best understand Israeli's intellectual thought, we focus on how he had approached the term 'philosophy.' This term and its use in Jewish intellectual history had a very clearly understood history. It is with Sa'adiah Gaon and Isaac Israeli (more with Israeli) that it is given a use and meaning. Second, Israeli does not see this term as one that can be easily defined, but as a concept with an active role in intellectual history. By viewing the term 'philosophy' this way, he attempts to revive its meaning as a means to an end. Furthermore, examining Israeli's approach to the word "philosophy" gives us the opportunity to understand how the various schools of philosophy did or did not influence Israeli's understanding of this term. With this approach, we can review the definitions of this term from his immediate sources and understand what it meant to his intellectual influences and what kind of impact it had on Israeli. Lastly, with Israeli's approach to this term we can anticipate and better understand how his other philosophical structures, such as his ontology and cosmology, were built.

Finally, we will be illustrating Israeli's use of this term and its application through Plato's intelligible/divided line.¹⁹ We are using this analogy for various reasons. First, it has an almost inviolable place in Greek philosophical thought. It

that which is represented by al-Kindī, al-Fārābī, Ibn Sīnā and those who had followed their thought. In the works of these philosophers, we see a large influence of Plato and Aristotle present that cannot be ignored. The ancient, Hellenic, and Hellenistic philosophers all had their respective places in the mashshā'ī worldview. For more information on this, see Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages* (Delman: Caravan Books, 1969), 9-20.

¹⁹ This analogy or metaphor, recognizing the distinction between the realities of the sensible world and the higher realities of the unseen (intelligible) world, remains as one of the cornerstones of Plato's epistemology and ontology. It, along with his allegory of the cave, has a place in philosophical discourse throughout history that cannot be understated. For it is with both of these analogies that an individual can use philosophy in an active manner to transcend the physical world to higher spiritual and metaphysical realms. For a thorough treatment of this, see Nicholas Denyer, "Sun and Line: The Role of the Good" in the *Cambridge Companion to Plato's Republic*, ed. G. R. F. Ferrari, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 284-310.

is a simple yet powerful metaphor that allows one to understand epistemology or ontology rather easily. Secondly, throughout Israeli's definitions or descriptions, there are repeated references to the movement between various forms of reality in the sensible world to those of the intelligible world that are easily understandable by reference to this metaphor. By distinguishing between the world of the senses or visible world and that of the intelligible or invisible ground of the visible world, Plato challenges us to rise from the sensible world, which is the lowest form of reality, to the metaphysical Forms and finally the Form of the Good (ἡ τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ ἰδέα).²⁰ Plato's intelligible line analogy is indispensable to understanding Israeli's approach to philosophy, since Israeli's work is a continuation of Plato's by way of Neoplatonism.

Lastly, we will not only look at Israeli's Islamic sources, but also some Greek sources that we believe played a role in his philosophical development. Where appropriate I have chosen to supplement Israeli's sources and definitions with sources that he does not cite, but which I expect he had read, given their accessibility to him and wide dissemination at the time. This will facilitate a fuller understanding of his philosophical development.

Survey and Methodology of This Thesis

This study has four chapters. In the first chapter, we provide a biography of Isaac Israeli's life and his intellectual development. It will not be merely

²⁰ The Form of the Good serves as the highest mode of Being in Plato's philosophy. For more information see Nicholas Denyer, "Sun and Line: The Role of the Good" in the *Cambridge Companion to Plato's Republic*, ed. G. R. F. Ferrari, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 284-310.

biographical but will also encompass his cultural and intellectual milieu and allow us to understand how Neoplatonism became such a leading factor in his thought. Furthermore, we will also look into the three primary sources of his philosophy. This examination will introduce the role of Muslim intellectual thought in the life of Jewish philosophers, and its specific influence on Israeli. This then allows us to situate Israeli in a dynamic intellectual milieu filled with the various sources of Greek thought that existed in the Medieval Islamic intellectual ambience.

In the second chapter we examine the philosophical tradition that Israeli inherited. We know that Israeli worked with direct translations of works from the Greek into Arabic as well as the philosophical works of the Ikhwān as-Şafa and al-Kindī. By virtue of this, we are able to situate how he had approached philosophical and cosmological discourse, in particular the term ‘philosophy.’ This, in turn, enables us to understand that Greek philosophical world views, such as Platonism²¹ and the whole of Peripatetic philosophical thought,²² were influential in the early Jewish works, even when they were never explicitly acknowledged.

In the third chapter of this thesis we will explain Israeli’s understanding of the term ‘philosophy.’ We will first look at how he understood and defined sensible objects as a prelude to understanding his methodology for understanding the word ‘philosophy.’ This is the core of our work, and will help us understand

²¹ For a thorough treatment of the history and philosophical development of the school of Platonism, and its later manifestations in the form of Middle and Neoplatonism, see A. H. Armstrong, *The Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967).

²² For a thorough treatment of the history and philosophical development of the Peripatetic school of thought, see Carlo Natali, *Aristotle: His Life and School Hardcover* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

the flavor of his Neoplatonism.²³ We will understand that as an early Jewish mashshā'ī²⁴ philosopher, Israeli followed al-Kindī in framing his thought in Aristotelian terms,²⁵ but also substantiates and explains it in thoroughly Neoplatonic terminology.²⁶ Through a study of how he approaches the topic of objects qua objects we will be able to comprehend his understanding of the word philosophy.²⁷ In our conclusion we summarize Israeli's contributions to Jewish philosophy—the problems he examines and the solutions he reaches to resolve them—but we also expose the gaps in his thinking that are later filled by Neoplatonic philosophers. We describe the state of Jewish philosophy in his time, as well as the direction in which it was going, especially its later incorporation of the school of Neoplatonism. In doing this, we aim to deepen the understanding of the role of Neoplatonism in Medieval philosophy.

²³ For a thorough understanding of Plotinus' philosophy, cosmology, and metaphysics, see A.H. Armstrong, *Plotinus* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1953).

²⁴ We must understand that Peripatetic philosophy (translated as mashshā'ī philosophy) in the Islamic world is seen as a combination of that which was transmitted and translated as Plato's and Aristotle's philosophy to the Muslims. As dealt with in the second part of this thesis, the works that were actually translated were summaries of the dialogues of Plato, translations of many of Aristotle's works, and Neoplatonic treatises. For more information on this, see Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Philosophy from Its Origin to the Present* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2006), 136-150; Dimitri Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1998); Peter Adamson ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 1-52.

²⁵ When we state that Israeli had framed his work in Aristotelian terminology, we are referring to the fact that when he defines or describes a term he begins his discourse with the causes found in Aristotle's physics or metaphysics. When he then addresses the substance of this, he brings in Neoplatonic thought.

²⁶ The significant relationship between Platonic and Aristotelian thought is often overlooked, or misunderstood, outside of Medieval Islamic philosophy. However, we will find that many middle Platonists and Neoplatonists had found little reason to see the gulf between Platonic and Aristotelian thought to be as wide as some scholars do today. For a thorough treatment of this issue, see Lloyd P. Gerson, *Aristotle and Other Platonists* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005).

²⁷ Through our investigation of philosophical discourse in the second section, we will have an example of how this term was used and the ramifications this had in what Israeli had inherited.

Our primary source for this thesis is the seminal work by Alexander Altmann and Samuel Miklos Stern on Isaac Israeli titled *Isaac Israeli: A Neoplatonic Philosopher of the Early Tenth Century*. When mentioning this work in the body of the text, we shall use the phrase ‘our authors’ instead of citing it completely. Among other works consulted for our thesis is an article attributed to Ibn Ḥasdāy²⁸ and Joseph ben Saddīq (d. 1149),²⁹ both of which were close to the life and works of Israeli.

We believe Israeli’s place in the history of Jewish philosophy has been largely neglected because of the attention given to philosophers such as Sa’adiah Gaon³⁰ and Abraham bar Ḥiyya ha-Nasi (d. 1136/45)³¹, who preceded him and followed him respectively. It is our hope that this thesis may lead to a better understanding of Israeli’s place in Jewish philosophy while continuing to build a better understanding of the historic relationship between the two Abrahamic cousins, Judaism and Islam, a relationship that was based on serious philosophical interaction, going well beyond mere sentimentality.

²⁸ This very important source in Israeli’s philosophy shall be dealt with in depth in the third part of this thesis, where we tackle his use of the term ‘philosophy.’

²⁹ Joseph ben Saddīq was a well-known student of Isaac Israeli and a noted Jewish Neoplatonist. He was well known for following the Ikhwān as-Ṣafa in his philosophy. For more information, see Daniel Davies,

Method and Metaphysics in Maimonides' Guide for the Perplexed (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 145.

³⁰ For an introduction to the thought of Sa’adiah Gaon, see Eliezer Schweid, *The Classic Jewish Philosophers* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2008), 3-37.

³¹ Abraham bar Ḥiyya was a well-known Spanish mathematician and philosopher. He is known for translating, along with Plato of Tivoli (d. 1145), many works from Arabic into Latin. Furthermore, he remains responsible for the primacy of the Hebrew language to communicate in both philosophical and scientific arenas. For more information, see Tony Lévy, “The Hebrew Mathematics Culture” in *Science in Medieval Jewish Cultures*, ed. Gad Freudenthal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), chapter eight.

Biography

When speaking about medieval philosophy, it is difficult to forget the famous words of Alfred North Whitehead, “The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato.”³² Sa’adiah Gaon falls in the category of one who had studied the works of the mashshā’ī philosophers, and was most influenced by al-Kindī,³³ and was influenced by Aristotelian³⁴ and Neoplatonic thought³⁵, as well as the Mu’tazilite³⁶ theology. The defense of Greek thought in support of Jewish theology by Sa’adiah Gaon established a basis for the birth of Jewish Neoplatonism in the works of Isaac Israeli (d. 932 CE).

Very little is actually known of Isaac Israeli (d. 955 CE). Much more is told to us through his writings, few being extant, than the biographies. Our authors report various narratives that would give us glimpses of his life, perhaps allowing for an understanding into this early Neoplatonic Jewish philosopher.

³² See Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1979), p. 39.

³³ Al-Kindī influenced Sa’adiah Gaon not only in the world of philosophy but also in the study of music and harmonics. For an extensive treatment of this, see George Henry Farmer, *Sa’adiah Gaon on the Influence of Music* (London: A. Probsthain, 1943).

³⁴ Sa’adiah Gaon’s use of Aristotelian philosophy can best be found in Samuel Rosenblatt’s translation of the *Book of Beliefs and Opinions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 112-16. Here he uses the categories to negate any and all attempts to anthropomorphize God and state that none of these categories can apply to God in any manner. For more information, see Henry Malter, *Saadia Gaon: His Life and Works* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1921), 207.

³⁵ While Neoplatonism is not as influential in Sa’adiah Gaon’s philosophy as with later Jewish philosophers, we see some elements of it in his works. For more information, see James Kern Feibleman, *Religious Platonism* (London: Routledge, 2013), 182.

³⁶ For a treatment of the development and history of the Mu’tazilites and the schools of kalām, see Harry Austryn Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Kalam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976).

Isaac Israeli ben Solomon was born to a Jewish family in Egypt, and spent much of his life in Cairo. In Cairo he had become a skilled doctor, particularly in the field known as optometry where he had become a leading doctor and was chosen to become a leading physician for the founder of the Fatimid Dynasty³⁷, Abu Muhammad Abdallah al-Mahdi Billah (d. 934 CE).³⁸ He corresponded with Sa'adiah Gaon. It is interesting that both Sa'adiah Gaon and Isaac Israeli have both been influenced by al-Kindī. However, Sa'adiah Gaon's philosophy had more stress on Aristotelian philosophy while with Isaac Israeli, we see a much greater impact of Neoplatonic thought in his thought and writing.

Israeli was a prolific writer who wrote over ten extensive works in the fields of medicine and philosophy.³⁹ In medicine, he addressed the Hippocratic fevers⁴⁰, remedies and ailments, urine, and antidotes. In the field of philosophy, he wrote a commentary on the four elements⁴¹, a commentary on the book of Genesis, a treatise on the soul and spirit, logic, and metaphysics. Some of his works remain extant, especially on his philosophy and metaphysics.

³⁷ The Fatimid dynasty (909-1171) was one of the earliest dynasties after the Abbasid dynasty (750-1258). It was an Ismā'īlī Shi'ite dynasty based in Egypt. For more information, see Paul E. Walker, *Exploring An Islamic Empire: Fatimid History and Its Sources* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd. & The Institute of Ismā'īlī Studies, 2002).

³⁸ For more information on the Caliph, see Heinz Halm, *The Empire of the Mahdi: The Rise of the Fatimids* (Leiden: BRILL, 1996).

³⁹ Alexander Altmann and Samuel Miklos Stern, *Isaac Israeli* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), xxv-xxvi.

⁴⁰ The works of Hippocrates, particularly the Hippocratic fevers played a large role for doctors in the Islamic world. For more information on this, see Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Islamic Intellectual Tradition in Persia*, ed. Mehdi Amin Razavi (Surry, Curzon Press, 1996), 72-3. For more information on the Hippocratic fevers, see Hippocrates, *Hippocratic Writings*, ed. G. Lloyd (London: Penguin Books, 2005), 80-2.

⁴¹ The four elements of traditional Greek cosmological doctrines are air, fire, earth, and water. They were first enumerated by Anaximander and later incorporated into Plato's cosmology. For more information on this, see Charles H. Kahn, *Anaximander and the Origins of Greek Cosmology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), 119-166.

For our work, it is important to recall that Israeli was both a doctor and philosopher. In his treatment of the word ‘philosophy’ he constantly addresses both the corporeal and incorporeal parts of man’s existence and therefore we must remember that he placed a great importance upon the body.

We are told that Israeli was given the title of Abu Ya’qub (translated as father of Jacob). However we have no reports of him getting married or having any children. Ibn Juljul (d. 994) narrates the following anecdote regarding this philosopher:

“When he was asked: would you like to have a child? He answered: No, as I have a much better thing in the Book of Fevers — meaning that his memory would survive better through the Book of Fevers than through a child.⁴²

From this short anecdote, we can easily understand Israeli’s priorities. He was one who had renounced all worldly acts for the pursuit of knowledge and practicing it. In his practice of it, we are told that his work was highly respected by everyone, especially the caliph:

And the Mahdī raised him above all his scholars and all his people, and at his command he wrote all his books and composed his treatises. For this very reason he composed them in Arabic, for it was one’s duty to fulfill the command of the ruler.⁴³

We know next to nothing about his last years of his life or death save for the fact that he died in between 932 and 955 CE. Our authors provide various biographies of the last decades of his life. We will not venture into this part of his life due to the shaky historical foundations of these details.⁴⁴ Instead, we will focus on his

⁴² Altmann and Stern, *Isaac Israeli*, xxiv.

⁴³ Altmann and Stern, *Isaac Israeli*, xxvi.

⁴⁴ Altmann and Stern, *Isaac Israeli*, xxviii.

intellectual sources, as a way to better understand how he comprehended the word ‘philosophy.’

Intellectual Sources

Many Greek philosophical works were translated into Arabic right up to the lifetime of Israeli, and to illustrate a more complete picture of his relationship to al-Kindī and mashshā’ī thinkers, it will be necessary to discuss them. With regards to Plato, we know that Muslim philosophers only received summaries of Plato’s dialogues.⁴⁵ This is not belittling those summaries in any manner because many of the dialogues are short, and the works of later Islamic philosophers reflect an understanding that leads us to believe that the summaries were accurate. The Muslims had received the majority of Aristotle’s works in their entirety.⁴⁶ The only missing work was the Politics. However, Plato’s Republic was relied upon as a substitute, as we can see in Ibn Rushd’s (d. 1198)⁴⁷ commentary on the Republic.⁴⁸ Finally, there are two other substantial works that the Muslims had. The first was a short but important work known as the Theology of Aristotle. The second was the Liber de Causis.

⁴⁵ For an introduction to the Greek works received by the Muslims, see Oliver Leaman, *An Introduction to Classical Islamic Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 219-20; Dimitri Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture* (London: Routledge, 1998), 107-21.

⁴⁶ See Henry Corbin, *History Of Islamic Philosophy*, trans. Liadain Sherrard, (London: Routledge, 2014), 16-7.

⁴⁷ Ibn Rushd (latinized into Averroës) was a Spanish Medieval Islamic philosopher. He was seen to be an avid Aristotelian, commenting on many of his discourses. His most celebrated work was the *Incoherence of the Incoherence (Tahāfut al-Tahāfut)*. For a biography and translation of this work, see Averroes, *Tahāfut al-Tahāfut*, trans. Simon Van Den Bergh (Oxford: E.J.W. Gibb Memorial Trust, 2012).

⁴⁸ For a translation of this work, see Ralph Lerner, *Averroes on Plato's "Republic"* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974).

The Theology of Aristotle is a work used heavily by many Islamic philosophers including al-Kindī, al-Fārābī (d. 950)⁴⁹, and Ibn Sīnā (d. 1037)⁵⁰, and served as a bridge between Neoplatonic and Aristotelian philosophies. This is because this work was incorrectly named and attributed, and was in fact Neoplatonic (not Aristotelian) in substance. The Theology of Aristotle is a summary of the last three *Enneads* of Plotinus⁵¹ as were arranged by his closest student Porphyry (d. 305).⁵² Peter Adamson claims in his work *The Arabic Plotinus* that this work was heavily influenced by the thought of Porphyry⁵³ and contained Aristotelian elements that were not to be found in Plotinus’ philosophy.⁵⁴ The other important work was the *Liber de Causis*.⁵⁵ Like the *Theology of Aristotle*, it was also attributed to Aristotle but was actually a work that was heavily influenced by Proclus’ (d. 485)⁵⁶ *Elements of Theology* and

⁴⁹ For an introduction to al-Fārābī, his works and philosophy, see Majid Fakhry, *Al-Farabi, Founder of Islamic Neoplatonism: His Life, Works and Influence* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2002).

⁵⁰ For an introduction to Ibn Sīnā, his works and philosophy, see Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages* (Delmar: Caravan Books, 1964), 9-52.

⁵¹ The *Enneads* were Plotinus’ only surviving work and was transcribed and systematized by his primary student, Porphyry. It is comprised of six groups of nine tractates that deal with virtue, ethics, the nature of love, time and space, the soul, and cosmology. It served as the greatest revival of Plato’s philosophy. For his *Enneads*, his biography, see A.H. Armstrong, *Plotinus* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988)

⁵² Porphyry was Plotinus’ most important student and had not only systematized the *Enneads* but also wrote the *Isagoge*, which served as a Neoplatonic introduction to Aristotle’s books on logic. For more information on his life and works, see Jonathan Barnes, *Porphyry’s Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

⁵³ For more information on the transmission of Plotinus’ works into Arabic, see Peter Adamson, *The Arabic Plotinus* (London: Gerald Duckworth and Co. Ltd., 2002).

⁵⁴ An example of this is the concept of entelécheia (entelechy), which concerns the completion and finality of a form or a concept.

⁵⁵ For an introduction, history, and translation of this work, see Bernardo Carlos Bazan, *Book of Causes: Liber De Causis*, ed. Dennis J. Brand (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1984); Richard Taylor, “A Critical Analysis of the Structure of the *Kalām fī mahd al-Khair* (*Liber de Causis*)” in *Neoplatonism and Islamic Thought*, ed. Parviz Morewedge (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), 11-40.

⁵⁶ Proclus is often titled ‘The Successor’ and serves as the last great pole of Neoplatonism in Ancient times. He had written extensive commentaries to most of Plato’s dialogues and was

other Neoplatonic works such as the *Enneads*. These four sets of works served as perhaps the most important sources for the development of philosophy in the Islamic world. They also played an important role in Israeli's understanding of the word 'philosophy,' and served as a foundation for his cosmological doctrines as well. Israeli relied on these sources from the Islamic world as well as other works of early Islamic philosophers.

His most important explicit source was the first Islamic philosopher, al-Kindī. We are not sure if he was a direct student of al-Kindī or if he had simply read his works.⁵⁷ Regardless, the role al-Kindī played in building Israeli's philosophical framework was significant. In Israeli's *Book of Definitions*, we often see exact reiterations of the definitions used by al-Kindī. Therefore we cannot overstate the importance of this source. In our author's work, we often see them tracing the definitions of al-Kindī's term to a set of Alexandrian commentators. When we mention the Alexandrian commentators, we are referring to commentaries written by students of the Greek philosophical schools during the Hellenistic age. They can be works attributed to Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, Proclus, et. al. In our particular discourse, where we are interested in Israeli's understanding of the term 'philosophy,' they source six definitions that al-Kindī had inherited from the Alexandrian commentators. They are provided below:

The first two ('the knowledge of beings' and 'the knowledge of divine and human affairs') are said to be taken from the subject of philosophy and are attributed (quite wrongly) to Pythagoras. The next two ('being mindful of death' and 'assimilation to God as far as is possible for man') are said to

greatly received in the Medieval world. For more information, see E.R. Dodds, *The Elements of Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2004).

⁵⁷ Altmann and Stern, *Isaac Israeli*, xxix.

be taken from the aim of philosophy and are (correctly) attributed to Plato. The fifth ('art of arts and science of sciences') is said to be taken from the pre-eminence of philosophy and is (correctly) attributed to Aristotle. The last ('love of wisdom') is said to be taken from the etymology of philosophy and is again attributed to Pythagoras.⁵⁸

Al-Kindī uses each of these definitions and Israeli subsequently uses them. In our exposition of the three descriptions we shall cite them again. Of course, there are moments when Israeli does not use al-Kindī's definitions, and therefore there is not an Alexandrian source to quote. That brings us to our next source.

We, along with our authors, believe that the eight-century group, the Ikhwān as-Ṣafa⁵⁹ also played an important role in Israeli's thought.⁶⁰ Our authors make this clear in the parallels in use of Greek sources between Israeli and the Ikhwān as-Ṣafa and also in the similarities of approaches to philosophy. In his article on the Ikhwān as-Ṣafa, Abbas Hamdani writes extensively on the influence of the Ikhwān as-Ṣafa upon Israeli. Here he states:

The last two chapters of Stern's work ('The Role of Philosophy' and 'The Role of Prophecy') are replete with quotations from the Rasā'il Ikhwān as-Ṣafa, showing the similarity of Isaac Israeli's thought to that of the Ikhwān. Both define philosophy as knowing oneself (man is a microcosm of the universe, which is the macrocosm). Both use the terms 'ikhtirā' and 'ibdā' as synonyms for 'origination'; both define corporeal substance (jism muṭlaq) in the same way; both have in common with al-Kindī the three stages of the soul's ascent (tathīr, ināra, and ilhām); both have the same concept of the ascent of the soul to higher existence (heaven) or the descent of the soul into base matter (hell); both consider the souls of

⁵⁸ Alexander Altmann and Samuel Miklos Stern, *Isaac Israeli* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 29.

⁵⁹ The Ikhwān as-Ṣafa was an eighth century Ismā'īlī Shiite group of intellectuals that had operated in complete secrecy. Not much is known about them, or any of its members. However, what does remain is their encyclopedic *Epistles* (Rasā'il) which covered many topics from medicine to their cosmological doctrine. They were heavily influenced by Neoplatonic thought and were known to draw from various mystical pre-Islamic sources such as the Neo-Pythagoreans and those who were the heirs of Hermeticism. For more information on them, see Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993).

⁶⁰ Altmann and Stern, *Isaac Israeli*, 197-99.

philosophers similar to the souls of the prophets. Both consider philosophy as 'assimilation' to the Creator, and so on.⁶¹

With this said, we believe that Israeli must have been influenced to some extent by the Ikhwān as-Ṣafa. Furthermore, we should make clear that we see a poignant difference between Israeli's interest in the Ikhwān as-Ṣafa as compared to other philosophers of his time. We understand the Ikhwan as-Safa as mystical philosophers, interested in philosophy more as a spiritual path than mere rational arguments. As Seyyed Hossein Nasr writes regarding the Ikhwān as-Ṣafa:

While certain scholars have thought the purpose of the Ikhwān to have been the reversal of the contemporary political situation by the restoration of a philosophical system capable of serving as a basis for life, the majority of those who have studied their doctrines believe that their aim was to combine religion and philosophy. The Ikhwan themselves, in fact, often speak of the virtues of philosophy as a way of finding the Truth and their desire to combine it with the Divine law, or nāmūs, of the prophets. Their aim, however, is not that of an Ibn Rushd or even a Thomas Aquinas, because here again the Ikhwan give a connotation to the word "philosophy" which differs greatly from the rationalistic, syllogistic meaning given to it by the Aristotelians. Instead, they identify philosophy with ḥikmah, in opposition to the great number of early Muslim writers who use philosophy as being almost synonymous with purely human wisdom and ḥikmah as a wisdom which has its ultimate source in the Revelations given to the ancient prophets. Philosophy for the Ikhwan is "the similitude as much as possible of man with God." It is "the means which again draws the elite of men or the angels on earth near to the Creator Most High." Its use is the "acquisition of the specific virtue of the human race, that of bringing to actualization all the sciences which man possesses potentially . . . By philosophy man realizes the virtual characteristics of his race. He attains the form of humanity and progresses in the hierarchy of beings until in crossing the straight way (bridge) and the correct path he becomes an angel... " One may easily see that there is a more intimate connection between this conception of philosophy and the Pythagorean-Socratic aim of the purification of the soul of man than there is with Peripatetic logic.⁶²

⁶¹ Abbas Hamdani, "The Ikhwān as-Ṣafa" in *Fortresses of the Intellect*, ed. Omar Ali-de-Unzaga (London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2011), 196-7.

⁶² Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Introduction to the Study of Islamic Cosmological Doctrines* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964), 32-3.

We believe that Israeli shares this interest in spiritual wayfaring with the Ikhwān as-Ṣafa, and was influenced by them in such a manner that would identify him first as a mystical philosopher over an analytical or rational one.

Finally, the third source of Israeli's philosophy is a famous text known as "Ibn Ḥasdāy's Neoplatonist." There is much doubt about the provenance of this text, and no genuine consensus as to who wrote it. In his article, "Ibn Ḥasdāy's Neoplatonist", S.M. Stern makes the assertion that this work existed before both Israeli and Ibn Ḥasdāy, and that both were influenced by this work, contrary to the assertion of that Israeli composed it himself.⁶³ While the role of Ibn Ḥasdāy's text on Israeli's thinking is not clear, it certainly appears to have had an impact on his writings. The actual source of the document is beyond the purview of this study.

By identifying the likely sources affecting Israeli's thinking, we are better able to understand Israeli's use of the term 'philosophy.'

Overview of the Term 'Philosophy'

By grasping Israeli's description of philosophy, we can begin to better understand the nature and bases of the thought of this individual who was truly multifaceted in thought. Israeli used a tripartite method to describe philosophy.⁶⁴

In his first description, he goes back to its roots and the founder of the word in

⁶³ Samuel Miklos Stern, "Ibn Ḥasdāy's Neoplatonist," *Oriens* 13/14 (1960/61), 62.

⁶⁴ We believe that Israeli's use of the tripartite method in describing philosophy is not surprising. Being influenced by sources that follow in the line of Pythagoras, Plato, and the like must have had an impact on his approach to philosophical discourse. Numbers played an ontological role in Pythagorean thought, and remained a cornerstone in Israeli's cosmological structure, as we constantly see in his surviving works. For an exposition of the roots of this manner of thinking, see Dominic J. O'Meara, *Pythagoras Revived: Mathematics and Philosophy in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 131-6.

Pythagoras, and describes the meaning of its name in the most literal way. In the second description, he uses the word as if it were a verb and uses it to describe the relationship between an individual and his Creator. By doing this he establishes an identity between man and God that leads to his Neoplatonist cosmological schema. Finally, he closes this discourse by stating that philosophy is “man’s knowledge of himself.”⁶⁵ In stating this, he summarizes the previous two descriptions in a quasi-theological manner, describing the word philosophy as that which describes the famous maxim in the Book of Job as “from my flesh I can perceive God.”⁶⁶ We shall look at all three of these descriptions in depth to help us understand philosophy, as both a term and a tool to understand the relationship between man and God.

Before we delve into his first use of this term, it should be recalled that Israeli insisted on describing the word philosophy instead of defining it. In this part of the treatise, he begins with the following:

When the philosophers understood this and it became clear to them that definition can be composed only from genera and substantial differentiae, and found for philosophy no genus from which its definition could be composed, they made a subtle investigation according to their superior deliberation and cogitation and described it by three descriptions.⁶⁷

When Israeli refers to the ‘philosophers,’ he is not merely quoting Aristotle but the commentators that brought the students of Peripatetic thought and Neoplatonism together, such as Porphyry, Iamblichus, and the other major

⁶⁵ Altmann and Stern, *Isaac Israeli*, 27.

⁶⁶ This famous and complex statement found in the Book of Job has always had various physical and metaphysical ramifications. We believe that this statement lies close to Israeli’s understanding of ascending the sensible world to higher states of reality. For more information, see Elizabeth Claire Prophet, *Inner Faces of God* (Livingston Press: Summit University Press, 1992), 93-5

⁶⁷ Altmann and Stern, *Isaac Israeli*, 10-11.

Neoplatonic writers.⁶⁸ Furthermore, our authors state that this distinction between definition and description was the result of the influence of Stoic writings⁶⁹ and the works of Galen on Israeli.⁷⁰ This was not the first time a philosopher during this period of Islamic philosophical discourse appears to have been influenced by the writings of Stoic philosophers, as we see with the Ethics of al-Kindī.⁷¹ Nonetheless, we can infer several conclusions from this introduction.

Israeli begins his introduction with an Aristotelian definition that he takes from Aristotle's *Organon*. He denies a genus and therefore a differentiae (differentia) for the word 'philosophy.' A genus can be defined as a category of objects. Therefore the objects would also represent that respective category. A differentiae is that which falls under a genus. Using an analogy in another subject, an example of a genus would be animals whereas differentiae would be a human. Since Israeli does not believe that the term 'philosophy' is part of a greater family of terms, he rejects the notion that it can be a genus. Using this analogy, philosophy cannot be composed of anything but itself because of its unitary nature and therefore must be described. Our authors comment on this with the following:

⁶⁸ The Neoplatonists played a seminal role in reconciling differences between the Platonic and Peripatetic schools of thought. For example, Plotinus' most revered student, Porphyry, wrote the most important commentary on Aristotle's logic known as the *Isagoge*. For more information on the relations between the two schools during the Neoplatonic era, see A. C. Lloyd, *The Anatomy of Neoplatonism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 28-33.

⁶⁹ Altmann and Stern, *Isaac Israeli*, 10-11.

⁷⁰ For an introduction to Galen's philosophy and his relationship to the Stoics, see Christopher Gill, "Galen and the Stoics: Mortal Enemies or Blood Brothers?", *Phronesis* 52, no. 1, Anniversary Papers: The Southern Association for Ancient Philosophy at 50 (2007), pp. 88-120, published by: BRILL Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4182825>.

⁷¹ For more information, see Peter Adamson and Peter Pormann, *The Philosophical Works of al-Kindī* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 254.

Definition declares the 'nature and substantiality' of a thing, whereas 'description' (rasm) indicates the 'quality' or 'property.' A definition giving the quality instead of the quiddity is rejected by Israeli. A 'description' may be given by indicating the 'property' of the thing. Thus Israeli describes philosophy by its properties. This usage is in accord with the ancient authorities. Aristotle had distinguished between the essence and the property of a thing. Definition was 'a formula designating the essence', but 'the property of a thing ought not to show the essence.'⁷²

Israeli simply does not believe that a term or an act such as philosophy can be defined due to the fact that we cannot truly know the nature of such an exalted discipline. As we will see in his three descriptions, this is a term that he views as that which brings man to God. It is a vehicle that is beyond the books of logic of Aristotle.

Israeli is a mystical philosopher. He finds himself in the company of Pythagoras, Plato, and Plotinus, and is therefore deeply interested in being able to understand the world as a reflection of its Creator. Israeli, being a Neoplatonist, views the term 'philosophy' in a symbolic manner, in the same way as Shahāb ad-Dīn Yahya ibn Habash Suhrawardī (d. 1191),⁷³ who once said "The words of the ancients are symbolic and not open to refutation. The criticisms made of the literal sense of their words fail to address their real intention, for a symbol cannot be refuted."⁷⁴ As Israeli claims that we cannot define the term philosophy by including it in a category of like things, he claims that we can only at best describe it.

⁷² Altmann and Stern, *Isaac Israeli*, 11.

⁷³ Suhrawardī, titled both as the Master of Illumination (Shaykh al-Isḥrāq) and the Murdered Shaykh (Shaykh al-Maqṭūl), was the founder of the school of Illumination of Islamic philosophy. He is known for seeing the states of Being as levels of Light. For more information, see Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages* (Delmar: Caravan Books, 1997), 52-83.

⁷⁴ John Walbridge and Hossein Ziai, *The Philosophy of Illumination* (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1999), 3.

In looking at the three descriptions, we see the theme of Plato's "Allegory of the Divided Line" in how he describes and explicates the 'term' philosophy. He begins by giving us a close to literal meaning of the term, and then addresses how one should see the Creator in light of that meaning. Just as Plato described the Divided Line, Israeli began by describing the term 'philosophy' in light of the sensible world and then leads us to transcend its most rudimentary descriptions until we reach the point at which the descriptions reflect as close to an understanding of the Supreme Good as possible. Israeli wants us to remove ourselves from the cave of literalism and definitions and ascend to that which ultimately cannot be described.

Chapter II: The First Description

We shall look at Israeli's most rudimentary of descriptions, where we see a simple historical contextualization of the term 'philosophy' that is heavily pregnant with meaning. We shall look at this term's historical sources and attempt to understand the trajectory from which Israeli was describing philosophy in the later discourses. We will first look at the direct text, then trace it to al-Kindī and the Greek sources that set him on a different course than al-Kindī.

Israeli begins stating that "philosophy is that one derived from its name."⁷⁵ In beginning with this, Israeli approaches the term 'philosophy' in the most literal of manners, and situates it in its historical meaning, and one which is derived

⁷⁵ Altmann and Stern, *Isaac Israeli*, 24.

from the scholars he holds in great esteem. He then comments on this description with the following:

The description taken from its name is as follows: Philosophy is the love of wisdom. This is deduced from the name of 'philosopher': philosopher is composed of *phila* and *sophia*, and in Greek *phila* means lover and *sophia* wisdom; thus it is clear that 'philosopher' means 'the lover of wisdom', and if 'philosopher' means the 'lover of wisdom', 'philosophy' must mean 'love of wisdom'.⁷⁶

Our authors state that this was taken from al-Kindī's first definition, who states in his Definitions and Descriptions of Things that philosophy is "From the derivation of its name, which is 'love of wisdom' because 'philosopher' is composed of *fila*, i.e. 'lover' and *sofa*, i.e., 'wisdom'."⁷⁷ This, in turn, was taken from the sixth Alexandrian commentary⁷⁸ that our authors provide with this particular definition. Here the Alexandrian commentators addressed how Pythagoras used the words *philó* and *sophos*, to form the phrase "loving wisdom" or "friend of wisdom."⁷⁹ In looking at the first statement in Israeli's description, we understand a subtle difference between him and al-Kindī that must have derived from a difference in sources and interpretation. In Israeli's description, we see that he does not equate philosophy with wisdom but states that the description of philosophy is loving wisdom and aspiring towards it. This, like the distinction between definition and description, has major ramifications that we will elaborate

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Altmann and Stern, *Isaac Israeli*, 28.

⁷⁸ When we mention the Alexandrian commentators, we are referring to commentaries written by students of the Greek philosophical schools during the Hellenic and Hellenistic age. They can be works attributed to Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, Proclus, et.al. For more information, see Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Science: An Illustrated Study* (London: World of Islam Festival Publishing Company Ltd., 1976), 8-9.

⁷⁹ Christoph Riedweg, *Pythagoras: His Life, Teaching, and Influence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 90-1.

on. First, it is best to say a word about ‘wisdom’ in Israeli’s thought before speaking about the relationship between the lover and ‘wisdom’ itself.

In his description of wisdom, Israeli states that wisdom can be “described by two descriptions, one taken from its property, the other from its effects.”⁸⁰ This statement opens up the cosmological doctrine of Israeli’s philosophy and enables us to see wisdom as a state and stage from which a form of Being presents itself.

In the case of its property, Israeli describes wisdom as

the true knowledge of the first, enduring, and everlasting things. By 'first and everlasting things' is meant the understanding of things which are eternal by their nature, such as the species, which are the end and the complement of generation, the genera, which are superior to them, the genera of the genera-until to one reaches the truly first genus which is created from the power of the Creator without mediator.⁸¹

This description is taken from al-Kindī’s sixth definition of philosophy, where he states that “its definition by its subject is: Philosophy is the knowledge of the eternal, universal things, of their essence, their quiddity, and their causes, according to man's capacity.”⁸² Al-Kindī’s sixth definition of philosophy was more useful in Israeli’s first description of wisdom for two reasons: it speaks of the place of the Intellect in Israeli’s cosmology and the relationship between the one who wishes to know and the Intellect by which one can ascend to knowing the Known.

While we do not know the roots of this statement, our authors believe this to have been taken from the book of Nicomachus’ texts which was narrated through the text of Rabī’ ibn Yahyā’s stating that wisdom is “true knowledge of

⁸⁰ Altmann and Stern, *Isaac Israeli*, 31.

⁸¹ Altmann and Stern, *Isaac Israeli*, 32.

⁸² Altmann and Stern, *Isaac Israeli*, 28.

everlasting things.”⁸³ When we look at the passage from which our authors found this reference, we understand why Israeli had turned to the Neoplatonists’ understanding of wisdom and philosophy and the relationship between the two:

But the most pure and un-adulterated character, is that of the man who gives himself to the contemplation of the most beautiful things, and whom it is proper to call a philosopher. He adds, that the survey of all heaven, and of the stars that revolve in it, is indeed beautiful, when the order of them is considered. For they derive this beauty and order by the participation of the first and the intelligible essence. But that first essence is the nature of number and reasons [i.e. productive principles,] which pervades through all things, and according to which all these [celestial bodies] are elegantly arranged, and fitly adorned. And wisdom indeed, truly so called, is a certain science which is conversant with the first beautiful objects, and these divine, undecaying, and possessing an invariable sameness of subsistence; by the participation of which other things also may be called beautiful. But philosophy is the appetite of a thing of this kind. The attention therefore to erudition is likewise beautiful, which Pythagoras extended, in order to effect the correction of mankind.⁸⁴

For Israeli, wisdom is that which Intellect (νοῦς) uses to arrange the universe in the way it is, and thus becomes that tool that one who wishes to become a philosopher must learn to use, and with which he can ascend the ladder towards the One.⁸⁵ In stating that the everlasting things are created by the power of the Creator without mediator, he is referring to the hypostasis of the Intellect. In Plotinus’ cosmology, this is where the eternal Forms live, and where man should strive to move towards. When looking at Israeli’s cosmology, we come to the conclusion, based on our authors’ seminal work, that wisdom lives in the Intellect and vice-versa;⁸⁶ furthermore the first product of the Intellect is the wisdom that

⁸³ Altmann and Stern, *Isaac Israeli*, 35.

⁸⁴ Thomas Taylor, *Life of Pythagoras* (London: J.M. Watkins), 29.

⁸⁵ For an understanding of ‘the upward way’ from the sensible world to the One, see Altmann and Stern, *Isaac Israeli*, 185-196.

⁸⁶ Altmann and Stern, *Isaac Israeli*, 154.

resides in this hypostasis. In this description we see the resemblance to the Intellect of Plotinus' cosmology, for it is in this hypostasis where the everlasting things live, and are generated. It is from here where the material world, which is not permanent, is generated.

In his second description of wisdom, he does something much different. As our authors have stated, the nature of Israeli's second description is an exposition of how wisdom operates in the intellectual faculty of man. Here, Israeli states that "Having come to the end of our explanation concerning the quiddity of philosophy and wisdom, we proceed to explain the quiddity of the intellect, which is the substratum to them both, as one cannot be a philosopher or a sage if one does not possess intellect."⁸⁷ Here Israeli makes clear that without intellect, one cannot hope to aspire to acquire wisdom or hope to become a philosopher. In saying this, Israeli makes clear the ability for the intellectual faculty and its capabilities to ascend to higher realms of cognition. By looking at the Alexandrian sources, our authors realized that Israeli was interested mainly in the epistemic-ontological understanding of the word 'philosophy.' For Israeli, the knowledge and understanding of beings qua Being remained his highest priority, and he made that task easier by describing the term 'philosophy' in its most rudimentary fashion through taking it from Pythagorean sources.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ Altmann and Stern, *Isaac Israeli*, 35.

⁸⁸ The only direct work of Pythagoras that was available to philosophers in the Islamic world was the Golden Verses. However, other works by Pythagoreans were available to them. For more information on this, see Johan Carl Thom, *The Pythagorean Golden Verses: With Introduction and Commentary* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995), 28-9.

We also believe there was a second source from which Israeli was inspired to elucidate this description of wisdom. This was the Ikhwān as-Şafa. Our authors state the following regarding the Ikhwān as-Şafa's approach to the term 'philosophy':

The Epistles of the Ikhwan enjoin those 'who love science and wisdom' to shun the pleasures of this world so as to strengthen their capacity for 'the contemplation of things Divine'. One has to see Israeli's description of philosophy as 'love of wisdom' against this Neoplatonic background in order to appreciate its pregnant meaning.⁸⁹

It is difficult for us not to see the parallels between Israeli's understanding of the term philosophy in just this rudimentary introduction and the overtly harsh approach that the Ikhwān as-Şafa had towards those who want to aspire towards wisdom. By stating, in a descriptive manner, that philosophy is both the form of a verb and a noun, he reminds us that it is both an act and a vehicle. In Israeli's thought, we can never truly become philosophers, as Pythagoras believed, but we can only love or be an intimate friend of wisdom.

Israeli's Neoplatonic approach to the first description of philosophy is clearly influenced by the translations of Neoplatonic treatises and their philosophers. His works begin to show us how the works of al-Kindī and the Ikhwān as-Şafa must have also influenced both his works and approach. Now that we have established the most rudimentary and basic description of the term 'philosophy,' we are now ready to ascend to higher levels of understanding it. In his description of 'philosophy,' we see the true materialization of Israeli's mashshā'ī philosophical perspective, in the sense that he begins to describe this

⁸⁹ Altmann and Stern, *Isaac Israeli*, 197.

term in a Peripatetic manner and completes it with Neoplatonic thought. Like his teacher, al-Kindī, we see that Israeli uses the four physical/metaphysical causes of Aristotle to describe various properties of the term ‘philosophy.’ However, he then departs from his teacher and elaborates upon each of these causes in a Neoplatonic manner that is not similarly used by al-Kindī.

Second Description

Overview

Before considering each individual cause, each of which serves as a various property of the term ‘philosophy,’ it is necessary to first look at the overview of this description that Israeli provides:

The description of philosophy taken from its property is as follows: Philosophy is the assimilation to the works of the Creator, may He be exalted, according to human capacity. By the words 'assimilation to the works of the Creator' is meant the understanding of the truth of things, viz. acquiring true knowledge of them and doing what corresponds to the truth; by the words 'understanding the truth of things' is meant understanding them from their four natural causes, which are the (1) material, (2) formal, (3) efficient, and (4) final causes.⁹⁰

It is important for us to source this initial definition in the works of al-Kindī’s *On the Definitions and Descriptions of Things*. As we see below, Israeli borrows al-Kindī’s second, third, and parts of his fifth definitions in this description of philosophy. Here are the passages from al-Kindī’s work:

(2) They also defined it from its effect, saying: Philosophy is assimilation to the actions of God according to the power of man, meaning by this that man should have perfect virtue.

(3) They also defined it from its effect, saying: Being mindful of death. Death in their view is twofold: natural, i.e. the soul's

⁹⁰ Altmann and Stern, *Isaac Israeli*, 24.

ceasing to make use of the body—and, secondly, the killing of desires; it is the second which they meant here, because the killing of desires is the way to virtue. For this reason, many of the most eminent philosophers said: Pleasure is evil. As the soul has two uses, the one sensual, the other intellectual, it follows that what people call pleasure happens by sense-perception, because if one busies oneself with sensual pleasures, one necessarily ceases to employ one's intellect.

(5) They also defined it saying: Philosophy is man's knowing himself. This is a saying of noble scope and great profundity. I give an example. Things are corporeal or non-corporeal; the non-corporeal things are either substances or accidents; man consists of body, soul, and accidents; soul is a substance, not a body; therefore, if man knows himself, he knows body with its accidents, the first accident, and the substance which is not a body; as he knows all these, he knows everything. For this reason the philosophers called man a microcosm.⁹¹

Al-Kindī had taken these definitions from the third and fourth Alexandrian commentators who had written that philosophy is “being mindful of death and assimilation to God as far as is possible for man.”⁹² Our authors state that these commentators had taken these two definitions from a work correctly attributed to Plato.⁹³ The entirety of the fifth definition of al-Kindī does not occur in the Alexandrian commentaries, and might therefore have been derived from another external source.

Finally, Israeli approaches each of these causes by dichotomizing each one into corporeal (bodily) and incorporeal (spiritual) entities. In doing that, he handles each one differently and uses different examples to expound their nature. We see that both al-Kindī and the Ikhwān as-Şafa did this, and therefore conclude that they may have shared a common intellectual source. However, in the use of examples, we again find the same mystical approach that we have seen in the first

⁹¹ Altmann and Stern, *Isaac Israeli*, 28

⁹² Altmann and Stern, *Isaac Israeli*, 29

⁹³ *Ibid.*

description. We should also know that Israeli dichotomized the third description in the same manner as the second.

While we are able to mostly trace, empirically, the sources that affected Israeli's description of the term 'philosophy', we are also aware that there were sources that must have affected his thinking that caused the divergence we see with al-Kindī. Neither our authors nor recent scholarship have not been able to find any other major influences upon Israeli⁹⁴, but we nonetheless conclude that they must have caused him to take a more Neoplatonic approach to the term 'philosophy' as compared to al-Kindī's approach. The divergence between the two mashshā'ī thinkers is wider than initially thought, and ought to be examined with the works available from his lifetime and what we have now. It should be understood that when explaining each of these causes, Israeli incorporates part of al-Kindī's fifth definition, quoted above. By explaining each cause through its corporeal and incorporeal modes he is able to cover all parts of what this term means in this particular description. We shall look at each of these causes and their components in depth, hoping to bring to light the nature of this important description.

Material Cause

The first cause that Israeli covers is the material cause. This cause is usually the first and most basic of the Aristotelian causes to be addressed and pertains primarily to the substance(s) that composes the final product in mind. In

⁹⁴ See bibliography for recent works done on Isaac Israeli.

chapter three of book two of his physics, Aristotle gives us a summary of the four causes. For the material cause, he states the following: “In one sense, then, that out of which a thing comes to be and which persists, is called 'cause', e.g. the bronze of the statue, the silver of the bowl, and the genera of which the bronze and the silver are species.”⁹⁵ In his metaphysics, regarding this cause, Aristotle further states that "Cause means that from which, as immanent material, a thing comes into being, e.g. the bronze is the cause of the statue and the silver of the saucer, and so are the classes which include these.”⁹⁶ In both of these definitions, the material cause serves as the basic component from which an object comes into existence. It is the primal material from which others things are produced. Israeli utilizes this definition in the first part of his description as he is describes the components of man.

The material cause can be either spiritual or corporeal. A case of a spiritual material cause is that of the genera which are divided into their species and are the substratum for their forms which complete their speciality, as for instance 'living being', which is the genus of man and horse and other species, and is the substratum for their forms which constitute their essence. A case of a corporeal material cause is silver, which is the matter of the dirham and the ring and the substratum for their forms, or gold, which is the matter of the dīnār and the bracelet and the substratum for their forms.⁹⁷

In looking at this description in light of this Aristotelian cause, we are able to understand various things. First, as Israeli had said in his overview of this description, in order to understand the term ‘philosophy,’ we must have a thorough understanding of the various objects that exists in the world both corporeally and incorporeally. In order to do this we must be able to recognize

⁹⁵ Richard McKeon, *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: Random House, 1941), 240.

⁹⁶ Richard McKeon, *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: Random House, 1941), 752.

⁹⁷ Altmann and Stern, *Isaac Israeli*, 24.

the materials that build them and that which will create what we see in its finality. For Israeli, as he will conclude in the third description, philosophy is the stream from which all other sciences flow and therefore one must be able to understand the materials that build objects. In beginning with this cause, Israeli begins to build the relationship between the sensible world and the components of its existence and its relations to higher levels of reality.

For Israeli, knowing the components of that which creates an object not only enumerates the relations between the created object and its components, but also allows us to understand the realms from which those components derive. In bringing out the corporeal and incorporeal nature of objects, he states that all that exists not only fits into hierarchies of genus and species (and so forth) but also that knowing both in their hierarchical place allows for a greater ability for one to assimilate to the Creator.

Let us close this description with a return to the place of this particular cause in the scheme of this description as well as its relation to the epistemic-ontological intelligible line of Plato that we are working with. This cause forces us to recognize the lowly place that philosophical discourse is trying to take us away from. Israeli makes clear that the sensible world is not a place to be admired, nor is it intelligible, except for the belief that it exists as a shadow. In order to become a “lover of wisdom” one has to not only recognize the lowly world they were placed in, but also actively denounce it for higher realities. With this said, in light of the intelligible line of Plato, it is clear that we have not ascended from the sensible world and only see the manifestations of higher parts

of that line. We now have recognized the material world, and understood the first of Aristotle's physical/metaphysical causes in light of the intelligible line and are able to move on to the formal cause.

Formal Cause

The second cause that Israeli uses in this part of the description is the formal cause. This is again an Aristotelian cause, that is, defined in the physics/metaphysics of Aristotle. This cause plays a particularly important role in Aristotelian thought, as it is that which determines the form that the object will ultimately become from the materials used. When we say form, we are not speaking about anything less than the final product of the object in mind. Aristotle states in his physics that the formal cause is "the form or the archetype, i.e. the statement of the essence, and its genera, are called 'causes' (e.g. of the octave the relation of 2:1, and generally number), and the parts in the definition."⁹⁸ In his metaphysics, he confirms this with an almost exact definition stating that, "The form or pattern, i.e. the definition of the essence, and the classes which include this (e.g. the ratio 2:1 and number in general are causes of the octave), and the parts included in the definition."

In Israeli's understanding and application we see major ramifications philosophically in our understanding of beings qua Being that ought to be elaborated. In this passage, regarding this cause, he states:

The formal cause can also be either spiritual or corporeal. A case of a spiritual formal cause is that of the substantial forms

⁹⁸ Richard McKeon, *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: Random House, 1941), 240.

which are predicated of the genus and constitute the essence of the species. For instance rationality, which is predicated of the living being and thus constitutes the essence of man, and the faculty of neighing, which is predicated of the living being and thus constitutes the essence of the horse. A case of the corporeal formal cause is the form of the brick, the sandal, the bell, and suchlike.⁹⁹

In this particular cause, we see Israeli again bringing together the genus-species relations from the Aristotelian categories with the division of corporeality and incorporeality. In doing this, he builds a dichotomy that allows us to understand the composition of man. In this particular cause, the substantial Forms are that which constitute the essence of species, and therefore their spirits. In the case of the corporeal element, it is the form of a brick, a sandal or any sensible object that composes the materialization of that particular form. In looking at man, we see that he is composed of corporeal and incorporeal elements and therefore one can see how both of these parts need to be understood for what they are.

Through this cause, we are witnessing the coming together of two different realms: the material and the formal. In this cause, we are forced to not only look at the formal cause of the material object at hand, but also contemplate the root from which it comes. As we had stated in the first description of philosophy, for Israeli, the world of Forms lives in the Intellect and it is through contemplation that one can understand the nature of the objects that are created in the world. It is through this cosmological schema we are to understand this cause. For Israeli, we are reminded that the Aristotelian causes are another explanation of Plotinus' cosmology, and through these descriptions we are able to understand the relations between the Creator, philosophy, and man.

⁹⁹ Altmann and Stern, *Isaac Israeli*, 24.

In relation to the epistemic-ontological intelligible line of Plato, in combination with the next cause, we observe that we are now moving to higher steps of the ladder where we are now able to recognize the Forms beyond mere opinion but for what they are. The individual is no longer just seeing shadows or building thoughts, but able to see the origins of these material objects and the artisan who can build objects using the Forms in mind. Between this cause and the next, we are able to understand Israeli's interest in using the individual's intellect and understanding of the templates from which existence manifests itself. Here, we are brought closer to the nature of 'wisdom' in the first description and able to see the Forms that coexist in the Intellect. With the next cause, we will understand the artisan that brings this to fruition.

Efficient Cause

The third Aristotelian cause is the efficient cause. This cause, in combination with the formal is that which produces the object in itself. It remains an important cause in understanding how an object comes into being since it is concerned with the enumeration of how the object comes into being via action and movement. Aristotle, in his *Physics*, writes that this cause is "the primary source of the change or coming to rest; e.g. the man who gave advice is a cause, the father is cause of the child, and generally what makes of what is made and what causes change of what is changed,"¹⁰⁰ and supplements it in his *Metaphysics* with "That from which the change or the resting from change first begins; e.g. the

¹⁰⁰ Richard McKeon, *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: Random House, 1941), 241.

adviser is a cause of the action, and the father a cause of the child, and in general the maker a cause of the thing made and the change-producing of the changing.”¹⁰¹ In this cause, we are looking at the event where the arranger takes the formal cause and uses that which we call the material cause to produce the object.

In Israeli’s use of this cause for this particular description, we again find that he splits it into incorporeal and corporeal dimensions. With regards to this cause, he states the following:

The efficient cause can also be either spiritual or corporeal. A case of the spiritual efficient cause is the power of the sphere which was appointed by the Creator, may He be exalted, in nature, and ordained in it over the effects which take place in the corporeal microcosm, viz. coming-to-be and growth and decrease, newness and oldness, health and illness, and other natural actions. A case of a corporeal efficient cause is the craft of the goldsmith in making a ring, the form of a picture made on the wall, and the work of the builder of a house.¹⁰²

In this particular cause, Israeli states much that deserves to be unpacked. In his usual fashion, he has us first look at the incorporeal or spiritual efficient cause. In this specific example, he relates the sphere, that is, the realm of the stars, and the superlunar worlds to that of the microcosm, i.e. man. In doing this, he states that the sphere has a direct effect in the life and nature of man. By using this as his example, he begins to show us how he will bring his descriptions full circle in the last cause and third description. However, this specific example deserves to be understood for what it is, before we move to the corporeal nature of this cause. Israeli inherited the idea of the sphere from the mashshā’ī philosopher al-Kindī,

¹⁰¹ Richard McKeon, *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: Random House, 1941), 752.

¹⁰² Altmann and Stern, *Isaac Israeli*, 25.

who states that this element and the stars that are contained in this sphere has a governing effect on the sublunar world,¹⁰³ and the Ikhwān as-Ṣafa where in their 16-20 Epistles they address, in various chapters, the place of the sphere and the stars in relationship to the world.¹⁰⁴

In al-Kindī's treatise "The Prostration of the Outermost Body,"¹⁰⁵ we see evidence that Israeli had most definitely borrowed this concept of the sphere from al-Kindī. In his cosmology, al-Kindī equates the ether with quintessence and states that this element constitutes the material of the heavens.¹⁰⁶ Of this heavenly characteristic of ether, al-Kindī says the following: "Another reason for this is that the sky is the abode of the spiritual beings who have intelligent, pure and unadulterated intellects and are stable in their nature."¹⁰⁷ Furthermore, amongst the other characteristics ether shares with the other elements, it also has "intellectual action."¹⁰⁸ The quintessence is that which constitutes and is ever present in the heavens, giving life and intellect to this sphere. It is "discerning and alive" and a body that governs the world below it. However, al-Kindī complicates this explanation by providing a quotation from the Qur'ān from the fifty-fifth chapter (al-Raḥmān), "and the stars and the trees bow themselves."¹⁰⁹ In his commentary on this verse, he states that the heavens [stars] not only prostrate themselves to God, but also obey and surrender themselves to Him.¹¹⁰ In doing

¹⁰³ Adamson and Pormann, *The Philosophical Works of al-Kindī*, 187-194

¹⁰⁴ Baffioni, *Epistles on the Brethren of Purity: On the Natural Sciences*, 133-285.

¹⁰⁵ Adamson and Pormann, *The Philosophical Works of al-Kindī*, 173-87

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 192.

¹⁰⁷ Adamson and Pormann, *The Philosophical Works of al-Kindī*, 201.

¹⁰⁸ Adamson and Pormann, *The Philosophical Works of al-Kindī*, 202.

¹⁰⁹ Adamson and Pormann, *The Philosophical Works of al-Kindī*, 173.

¹¹⁰ Adamson and Pormann, *The Philosophical Works of al-Kindī*, 175.

this, he emphasizes the fact that although the heavens, composed of quintessence (ether), constitute a rational being, by being the proximate cause,¹¹¹ they act only in accordance with the will of God. By doing this, he composes a cosmology that intricately links man with God from the sublunar through the superlunar realms. In briefly looking at this part of al-Kindī's cosmology, we are able to see how this influenced Israeli's use of this example in his own description of this cause.

In this example, we see a parallel in language from the Ikhwān as-Ṣafa to that Israeli uses in the second half of this example, where they say

Know, my brother, that by saying 'world' the wise men mean the heavens, the Earth [al-araḍīn], and all the creatures of them, and I called it a 'macroanthropos' [p. 25] because they think that it is a body with all its spheres, the strata of its heavens, the elements of its matrices and of the begotten beings [that come from the matrices], and they think that it has a soul, whose faculties are diffused in all parts of its body as the faculties of the soul of a single man are diffused in all parts of his body. So, we want to recall in this epistle the form of the world, and to describe how its body is composed, as the composition of the human body is described in the Book of Anatomy.¹¹²

While Israeli does not quote them directly, we are of the belief, like our authors, that he was nonetheless influenced by their thought. In this translation, we see how the Ikhwān as-Ṣafa drew parallels between the realm of spheres and man as a microcosm. In Israeli's cosmology, we see the same occurring.¹¹³ However, in this example, it is important for us to note the important manner in which the realm of sphere plays a role in the daily life of the microcosm, in particular. By Israeli's emphasis on the corporeal element, he states that this effect on the

¹¹¹ Adamson and Pormann, *The Philosophical Works of al-Kindī*, 153-173.

¹¹² Carmela Baffioni, ed., *Epistles on the Brethren of Purity: On the Natural Sciences* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 135.

¹¹³ For an understanding of Israeli's cosmology and how he understood the effects of the realm of the sphere upon man, see Altmann and Stern, *Isaac Israeli*, 165-171.

sensible world from the realm of the spheres is quite real and not to be questioned. This has important ramifications for our understanding of the next cause and the final description, which we shall elaborate there.

In this example we see how two of Israeli's two most important sources made it into what he wrote and played a major role in his understanding of the relationship between man and the cosmos. By using this as an example¹¹⁴ of the spiritually efficient cause, we not only can see the implications of how the stars themselves affect man, but also how other celestial entities (angels, numbers, etc.)¹¹⁵ would have a direct effect on the life of man.

In the next use of the corporeal efficient cause, Israeli gives us a more rudimentary understanding of it. In it, he addresses the role of the artisan or the crafter that brings that physical object into existence. In the examples he uses, they are that which have no greater ramifications than that of the point he is making. In this particular use of this cause, we see not only the physical becoming of an object, but also that which is using a Form and materials from the previous two causes to create the object in mind. This cause, in many ways, brings the corporeal and incorporeal worlds together to present the final cause, just as the artisan must bring in an element from the higher world of intelligibles and use the materials present to bring the object to materialization. There is no need to elaborate further on this particular part of this cause, as it simply references that which is bringing the final cause into fruition.

¹¹⁴ Baffioni, *Epistles on the Brethren of Purity: On the Natural Sciences*, 25.

¹¹⁵ Baffioni, *Epistles on the Brethren of Purity: On the Natural Sciences*, 279.

The efficient cause has played a major role in philosophical thought to this day, however Israeli's use of this cause is two-fold. First, to show how that incorporeal elements of the geo-centric worldview affect the microcosm, and how man plays a role in bringing forth objects. This cause brings us closer to the third part of Plato's epistemic-ontological intelligible line as it does not only cause us to contemplate the realm of sphere which is a higher space in reality but also causes us to bring the Forms from higher realms to create the final object. With this cause and the formal cause, the student of philosophy is able to recognize the Forms and use them in a respectable manner in the sensible world while at the same climb up and recognize higher realms of reality. We see a great reliance upon the intelligible world, where higher levels of reality exist and play a larger role in man. In light of this description, this cause is that which brings together the properties of what we contemplate philosophically and also allows us to look at the properties from the object's final state. In the final cause, the last of Aristotle's four causes, we shall look at various aspects of the term 'philosophy' and how it is applied.

Final Cause

We finally come to the last of the Aristotelian causes, the final cause. This cause remains the most significant of the four as it is concerned with the end goal of the object created. The first three causes are centered around the materials creating the object, the form in mind that it is to be created out of, and the entity building the object. However, with these causes already complete, we now must

ask what is the goal of it? In his *Physics* and *Metaphysics*, Aristotle states the following regarding this cause:

In the sense of end or 'that for the sake of which' a thing is done, e.g. health is the cause of walking about. ('Why is he walking about?' we say. 'To be healthy', and, having said that, we think we have assigned the cause.) The same is true also of all the intermediate steps which are brought about through the action of something else as means towards the end, e.g. reduction of flesh, purging, drugs, or surgical instruments are means towards health. All these things are 'for the sake of the end, though they differ from one another in that some are activities, others instruments.'¹¹⁶

This cause is primarily concerned with the rationale and logic behind the existence of objects. When we look at objects, we often ask “why does it exist?” and “what is the purpose of it?” This cause seeks to resolve this. In Israeli’s use of this cause for this particular description of the term ‘philosophy,’ he states much regarding the relationship between the Creator, man and the term ‘philosophy.’ This is Israeli’s longest explanation for the four causes, and there is much to be said. Like the previous causes, he splits this into incorporeal and corporeal.

In the case of the corporeal final cause, Israeli gives a quick and concise definition that follows much of the definition of Aristotle’s final cause. He writes “A case of a corporeal final cause is the form of a house and its completion which is necessary in order to make it suitable for habitation and protection, and so the form of a ring in order that it should have a seal and be suitable for sealing.”¹¹⁷ In the case of both of these examples, we are interested in the rationale of its existence and how its existence shall benefit man in the sensible world. However,

¹¹⁶ Richard McKeon, *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: Random House, 1941), 752.

¹¹⁷ Altmann and Stern, *Isaac Israeli*, 25.

in his use of this cause for the incorporeal world, we see a greater elaboration. We shall analyze this cause in steps to gain a complete understanding.

Let us first return to the fact that the first three causes in light of Israeli's second description of philosophy (understanding the term 'philosophy from its properties) were both a form of stage-setting and also a manner of making us understand the purpose of philosophy, that is to recognize the sensible world and its place in an epistemic-ontological schema. As he will confirm in the next description, the microcosm (i.e. man) is a motif of the macrocosm (the universe), and therefore understanding objects qua philosophy and objects qua Being are the most important goals of the philosopher. Therefore, with each of the previous three causes mastered, we are now ready to move to the spiritual nature of the final cause. As in previous descriptions and causes, we will not only state his use of this cause in this light but also the origins of his examples and so on. In this cause, Israeli first states

A case of a spiritual final cause is the union of soul and body to the end that the truths of the subject of science may become clear to man; that he may distinguish between good and evil, between what is laudable and what is not; that he may do what corresponds to truth, in justice and rectitude; that he may sanctify, praise, and exalt the Creator, and recognize His dominion; that he may avoid beastly and unclean actions in order thereby to obtain the reward of his Creator, blessed be He, which is the union with the upper soul, and the illumination by the light of intellect and by the beauty and splendor of wisdom.¹¹⁸

In using this example as that which would represent the spiritual final cause, Israeli is making abundantly clear the goals of philosophy, and he who wishes to become a philosopher. For Israeli, it is not only the coming together of the

¹¹⁸ Altmann and Stern, *Isaac Israeli*, 25-6.

physical body with its spiritual substance, but the recognition of it. In this introduction, Israeli not only begins with the need to be as “good as possible,”¹¹⁹ but also have a strong dedication to justice.¹²⁰ The introduction that Israeli provides to this aspect of the final cause is reminiscent of the works of Plato and Plotinus. Much of what is espoused in Plato’s Republic is present in this passage, and

Wherefore my counsel is that we hold fast ever to the heavenly way and follow after justice and virtue always, considering that the soul is immortal and able to endure every sort of good and every sort of evil. Thus shall we live dear to one another and to the gods, both while remaining here and when, like conquerors in the games who go round to gather gifts, we receive our reward. And it shall be well with us both in this life and in the pilgrimage of a thousand years which we have been describing.¹²¹

In this passage, Socrates makes clear the place of justice and virtue, as espoused in previous books of the Republic and the reward one receives for doing so. Like Israeli, Socrates makes abundantly clear the capabilities and potentialities of the soul, and that it is a substance that can handle much, but also be accountable for its decisions in life, and in death. Socrates makes clear that we live in a world of rewards and retribution, similar to Israeli’s description, and that the Creator shall reward us for doing good. In the first part of Israeli’s sentence (quoted above), he alludes to a need for a psychology that will allow the individual to go past bodily pleasures and desires, and transcend the sensible to ascend to higher realms. However, in the last part of his sentence, Israeli brings in his cosmological doctrine, and utilizes the Neoplatonic emanation scheme to address the rewards

¹¹⁹ Altmann and Stern, *Isaac Israeli*, 198.

¹²⁰ Altmann and Stern, *Isaac Israeli*, 140.

¹²¹ Benjamin Jowett, *The Dialogues of Plato*, (New York: Random House, 1937), 878-9.

wrought for living a just and good life. This cause is Israeli's most important, and therefore is the longest of all. He continues to unpack this introduction. In the following paragraph, Israeli states the following:

When attaining this rank, he becomes spiritual, and will be joined in union to the light which is created, without mediator, by the power of God, and will become one that exalts and praises the Creator forever and in all eternity. This then will be his paradise and the goodness of his reward, and the bliss of his rest, his perfect rank and unsullied beauty.¹²²

Coated in flowery language, Israeli's main goal is to expound the place of spiritual union with the highest hypostases of his cosmology. Due to a lack of clarity and a lack of resources, we are unsure of Israeli's position on the ability to be in union with the Creator. In his cosmological schema, Israeli takes both Plato's and Plotinus's position on the inability to define the nature of the Supreme Good (τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ) or the One, and therefore stops with describing the Intellect and does not go further.¹²³ However, this does not imply that he does not believe that unity or assimilation with the Creator is not possible.

In the third paragraph, Israeli gives us the most practical approach to becoming a philosopher. Here we see the most profound acknowledgement of Plato's thought in this description, which has several ramifications of its own. In this paragraph, Israeli states the following:

For this reason Plato said that philosophy is a zeal, a striving, an effort, and concern for death. Says Isaac: This is a description of great profundity and elevated meaning. For in saying 'concern for death' the sage meant it to be understood in the sense of the killing of beastly desires and lusts, for in their mortification and avoidance is the highest rank, the supernal splendor and the entry into the realm of truth. And by vivifying beastly desires and lusts and by strengthening them,

¹²² Altmann and Stern, *Isaac Israeli*, 26.

¹²³ Arne A. Wylle, *The Planetary Mind* (Colorado: Macmurry & Beck Inc., 1996), 173-4.

men of intellect are drawn away from that which is due to God in the way of obedience, purity, and attention to prayer at the prescribed hours. The saying of the philosopher means this, and intellect testifies to its truth.¹²⁴

Let us first start by stating that this statement was taken by Israeli from al-Kindī's third definition of philosophy, which was taken from the Alexandrian commentators who our authors quote as saying the following: "The next two 'being mindful of death' and 'assimilation to God as far as is possible for man' are said to be taken from the aim of philosophy and are correctly attributed to Plato."¹²⁵ This chain of sources proves several very important points. First, that Platonism played a much larger role in the mashshā'ī than is generally understood. While most tend to see mashshā'ī philosophy as a translation of Peripatetic thought, it is much more than that. In this final cause, the use of Plato shows us that the goal of philosophy is to renounce the material world for the intelligible world. After looking at a few passages from Plato's philosophy that correspond to the points that Israeli is making here, we will be able to understand why Israeli, and other philosophers during this period, held him in such high regard.

Plato's *Phaedo* remains the most clear and important dialogue when it comes to his definition of philosophy. In this dialogue, Socrates says the following regarding the relationship between philosophy and death:

And are we to suppose that the soul, which is invisible, in passing to the true Hades, which like her is invisible, and pure, and noble, and on her way to the good and wise God, whither, if God will, my soul is also soon to go—that the soul, I repeat, if this be her nature and origin, is blown away and perishes immediately on quitting the body as the many say? That can

¹²⁴ Altmann and Stern, *Isaac Israeli*, 26.

¹²⁵ Altmann and Stern, *Isaac Israeli*, 29.

never be, dear Simmias and Cebes. The truth rather is that the soul which is pure at departing draws after her no bodily taint, having never voluntarily had connection with the body, which she is ever avoiding, herself gathered into herself (for such abstraction has been the study of her life). And what does this mean but that she has been a true disciple of philosophy and has practiced how to die easily? And is not philosophy the practice of death? Certainly.¹²⁶

In this short passage, Plato defines philosophy as that “which is the practice of death.” In doing this, he is not referring to the physical, inevitable death that every subject must enter, but a voluntary death. A death in which one chooses to renounce the sensible world for the sake of higher realms of reality. This is a recurring theme in the Platonic corpus, most vividly shown through the allegory of the cave,¹²⁷ where the world is presented as a shadow; and until one chooses to leave the cave and look at the Sun,¹²⁸ one does not know of the darkness he lives in. In renouncing the body, the soul is dying to the world. While this is not a permanent death, it is a conscious choice of the individual to finally see the world for what it is. With regards to this death, Plato makes clear the importance for this to occur and says:

And what is that which is termed death, but this very separation and release of the soul from the body? And the true philosophers, and they only, study and are eager to release the soul. Is not the separation and release of the soul from the body their especial study? And as I was saying at first, there would be a ridiculous contradiction in men studying to live as nearly as they can in a state of death, and yet repining when death comes. Then, Simmias, as the true philosophers are ever studying death, to them, of all men, death is the least terrible. Look at the matter in this way: how inconsistent of them to have been always enemies of the body, and wanting to have the soul alone, and when this is granted to them, to be trembling and repining; instead of rejoicing at their departing to that place where, when they arrive, they hope to gain that

¹²⁶ Benjamin Jowett, *The Works of Plato* (New York: Tudor Publishing Company, 1945), 219.

¹²⁷ Jowett, *The Works of Plato*, 287-293.

¹²⁸ Jowett, *The Works of Plato*, 258-9.

which in life they loved (and this was wisdom), and at the same time to be rid of the company of their enemy.¹²⁹

In the third line of this paragraph quoted on p.39, Israeli elaborates on the need to kill “beastly desires” that would allow one to enter the realm of truth. In his Republic, Plato provides a psychology that gives us an understanding of Israeli’s command to rise above such desires. It is worth considering each part of the psyche according to Plato, where each of the three faculties of the soul known as the reason, appetite, and spirit¹³⁰ are manifested, and play a specific part in one’s life. The faculties of the soul are distinct and can work either in conjunction with or against each other. If they work in conjunction, and the faculty of reason is able to possess and rule the other two faculties with virtue, a soul can finally focus on what its goal should be: to attain knowledge. Then one can finally elevate oneself into a state of balance and inner peace; otherwise an imbalance results which leads to a form of corruption. It is not surprising that both Plato and Israeli end their statements on psychology in a similar manner, as we see that Israeli was so heavily influenced by Plato. Nonetheless, it is with this balancing of the body through the faculty of the soul that one can finally ascend to higher stations of wisdom. Israeli closes this paragraph by introducing the next element of that which defines a philosopher, that is, the theological element. In this closing clause of the statement along with invoking the need for prayer, we see a religious presence akin to the works of other mashshā’ī philosophers such as al-Kindī and the Ikhwān as-Şafa.

¹²⁹ Jowett, *The Works of Plato*, 199.

¹³⁰ Jowett, *The Works of Plato*, 146-150.

We now turn to the most theological part of this part of the cause, where Israeli brings in the need for God's elect and chosen people. In this paragraph, Israeli states the following:

He said: God has intellectual precepts which He reveals to the elect among His creatures, meaning thereby the prophets and messengers and the true teachers who guide His creatures towards the truth, and who prescribe justice and rectitude and the acceptance of things permissible; the pursuit of goodness, loving-kindness, and mildness, the shunning of evil, injustice, and injury; and the refusal of things unlawful. He who does not attach himself to the intellectual precepts which God has revealed to the elect among his creatures, his priests, and teachers, and perseveres in his own injustice, sinfulness, coarseness, and in the evil of his ways, will be rendered unclean by his impurities, and they will weigh him down and prevent him from ascending to the world of truth.¹³¹

It is first important to recall that two streams of knowledge are meeting in Israeli's understanding of the term 'philosophy.' The first is theological, coming from the Bible (the Torah and the Talmud), and serves as a foundation for his thinking. The second is Greek philosophy as coming through the hands of thinkers and translators in the Islamic world. In this particular case, we see the preeminent place of the Prophets in his philosophical thought and the need to look to them for guidance. In the works of al-Kindī, we see a great place of prophecy and prophetic dreams in his "On the Quiddity of Sleep and Dreams",¹³² and in al-Fārābī's *Virtuous City*, he states and defines the place of the Prophet in relation to other rulers and the people.¹³³ We see similar things occur with other philosophers in the Islamic world such as Ibn Sīnā and so forth. While we cannot understate the importance of prophecy in relation to the term 'philosophy', we also find that our

¹³¹ Altmann and Stern, *Isaac Israeli*, 26-7

¹³² Adamson and Pormann, *The Philosophical Works of al-Kindī*, 124-127.

¹³³ Richard Walzer, *On the Perfect State* (Chicago: Kazi Publications, Inc., 1998), chapter 15

authors dedicate a chapter to the role of prophecy in Israeli's thought,¹³⁴ and therefore refer to their writing on it. We now move to the final paragraph in this cause, which recapitulates Israeli's use of the final cause in this term.

Israeli states the following in the final paragraph:

He will not attain the light of intellect and the beauty of wisdom, but remain contained under the sphere, sorrowful, in pain without measure, revolving with the revolution of the sphere in the great fire and the torturing flame. This will be his hell and the fire of his torture which God has prepared for the wicked and sinners who rebel against the precepts of the intellect.¹³⁵

In his closing statements on the second description of philosophy, Israeli states that the seeker of wisdom has two choices: leave the cave so eloquently described by Plato, and begin striving towards the sun or stay in it and rot. Israeli provides salvation through the widest range of sages, from theologians and philosophers to prophets and teachers, and he does not nullify any source explicitly but makes clear that God is present everywhere, so long as one takes the necessary measures to see Him. In looking at the following passage from Plotinus, we are able to better understand what Israeli is ultimately trying to get us to do. In a passage from the *Enneads*, Plotinus urges us to do the following:

Withdraw into yourself and look. And if you do not find yourself beautiful yet, act as does the creator of a statue that is to be made beautiful: he cuts away here, he smooths there, he makes this line lighter, this other purer, until a lovely face has grown upon his work. So do you also: cut away all that is excessive, straighten all that is crooked, bring light to all that is overcast, labor to make all one glow of beauty and never cease chiseling your statue, until there shall shine out on you from it the godlike splendor of virtue, until you shall see the perfect goodness surely established in the stainless shrine. When you know that you have become this perfect work, when you are self-gathered in the purity of your being, nothing

¹³⁴ For more information on the chapter on prophecy in Israeli's thought, see 209-219.

¹³⁵ Altmann and Stern, *Isaac Israeli*, 26.

now remaining that can shatter that inner unity, nothing from without clinging to the authentic man, when you find yourself wholly true to your essential nature, wholly that only veritable Light which is not measured by space, not narrowed to any circumscribed form nor again diffused as a thing void of term, but ever immeasurable as something greater than all measure and more than all quantity—when you perceive that you have grown to this, you are now become very vision: now call up all your confidence, strike forward yet a step—you need a guide no longer—strain, and see.¹³⁶

In this passage, Plotinus reiterates the Platonic need to not be interested in the material or sensible world, but to push oneself to be as virtuous as possible. Like Israeli, he wants us to look for that inner light and carve the best soul possible that can then ascend to higher realms of reality. Finally, Israeli uses the allegory of “heaven” and “hell” to describe the final destination of he who seeks Wisdom, but makes adamantly clear that those two destinations are in the here and now and should not be looked for only after death.

We now conclude our lengthy exposition into Israeli’s understanding of the final cause. It is with this cause that we are able to come as close as possible to ascending to the highest rung of the Platonic ladder, and able to have the possibility to see the Good (τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ). Although there remains debate as to whether Israeli believes the philosopher can ascend to stages higher than the Intellect or not, we nonetheless recognize the fact that through this hypostasis there remains the possibility of this in the Neoplatonic philosophy he subscribes to. In the previous three causes, we were able to recognize both the Forms and matter, and bring them together. However, here we have dealt with various elements of the nature of the philosopher, and how to ultimately become one. In

¹³⁶ Stephen MacKenna, *The Enneads* (London: Faber & Faber, 1962), 41.

his last description of ‘philosophy,’ Israeli evaluates the philosopher in light of his relationship to the universe.

Third Description

In his first description of philosophy, Israeli gave us the most literal of meaning of this term, deeming it as “loving wisdom.” However, in his second description, he looked at the properties of philosophy, describing it in a manner that allowed us to see what a philosopher is. Finally, in his third description, he summarizes his thoughts on the term philosophy and completes his description by allowing us to understand the relationship between man and God. This last description is a short albeit complicated one, and deserves special attention in light of his first two descriptions.

Because of the nature of this description and its close parallel to al-Kindī’s definition, we will first look at both in light of each other and then unpack Israeli’s description in light of both al-Kindī and other sources. Israeli’s third description of ‘philosophy’ is thus stated:

The description of philosophy from its effect is as follows: Philosophy is man's knowledge of himself. This also is a description of great profundity and elevated intelligence, for the following reason. Man, if he acquires a true knowledge of himself, viz. of his own spirituality and corporeality, comprises the knowledge of everything, viz. of the spiritual and corporeal substance, as in man are joined substance and accident. Substance is twofold, spiritual and corporeal; spiritual, as for instance soul and intellect; corporeal, as for instance the long and broad and deep body. Accident is also twofold, spiritual and corporeal; spiritual, as for instance mildness, knowledge, and similar spiritual accidents which are predicated of the soul; corporeal, as for instance blackness, whiteness, yellowness, redness, thickness, variety, and the other corporeal accidents which are predicated of the body. This being so, it is clear that man, if he knows himself in both his spirituality and corporeality, comprises the knowledge of all, and knows both the spiritual and the corporeal substance,

and also knows the first substance which is created from the power of the Creator without mediator, which is appropriated to serve as substratum for diversity; as well as the first generic accident, which is divided into quantity, quality, and relation, together with the remaining six compound accidents which derive from the composition of substance with the three accidents. If man comprises all these, he comprises the knowledge of everything and is worthy to be called a philosopher.¹³⁷

This lengthy third description was mostly borrowed from al-Kindī, in his fifth definition of philosophy in the “On the Definitions and Descriptions of Things,” where he states the following:

They also defined it saying: Philosophy is man's knowing himself. This is a saying of noble scope and great profundity. I give an example. Things are corporeal or non-corporeal; the non-corporeal things are either substances or accidents; man consists of body, soul, and accidents; soul is a substance, not a body; therefore, if man knows himself, he knows body with its accidents, the first accident, and the substance which is not a body; as he knows all these, he knows everything. For this reason the philosophers called man a microcosm.¹³⁸

In turn, this was taken from the Alexandrian commentators where they had said that philosophy was the 'art of arts and science of sciences' and is (correctly) attributed to Aristotle. Our authors state that the definition of ‘Knowing Thyself’ in al-Kindī was taken from a lost Alexandrian commentary.¹³⁹ In both Israeli’s and al-Kindī’s approach to addressing this part of the term ‘philosophy,’ we see some similarity between the middle areas of the two authors’ enumerations of man coming to know himself. However, there are differences that follow, which we have noted.

We have taken the middle part of Israeli’s description and turned it into a chart in order for us to understand how he sees the microcosm as a reflection of

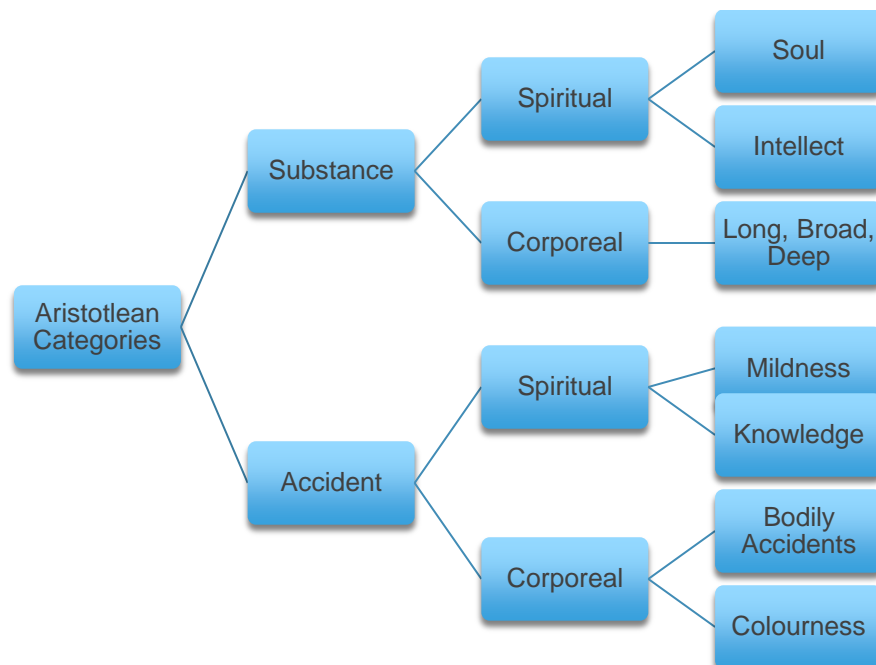
¹³⁷ Altmann and Stern, *Isaac Israeli*, 27.

¹³⁸ Altmann and Stern, *Isaac Israeli*, 28.

¹³⁹ Altmann and Stern, *Isaac Israeli*, 29.

the macrocosm. Furthermore, this chart helps us understand how he took his influence from al-Kindī in the above passage and integrated that into his own schema of the microcosm. Israeli borrows this structure, to a degree, and imposes upon it various other sources that we claim influence his understanding of the microcosm and its relations to the macrocosm, and God.

The Microcosm According to Israeli



In the case of Israeli, we see that he subsumes all under the Aristotelian categories. This has precedent in the development of Jewish philosophy as we see that in Sa’adiah Gaon’s *Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, he uses the categories to affirm God’s dissimilarity with the world¹⁴⁰ (tanzīh),¹⁴¹ while he places different

¹⁴⁰ Samuel Rosenblatt, *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1976), 114.

¹⁴¹ The dominance of the Mu’tazilite’s *Tanzih* (God’s incomparability with anything else) combined with the use of the categories provided an impenetrable barrier to man’s ability to

aspects of the world and human relations with it under the categories. In looking at these two passages, and the chart derived from Israeli's passage, we propose three sources and thoughts with regards to Israeli's understanding of man (and therefore the microcosm). First, the influence of al-Kindī upon Israeli's structure is evidently present, as he takes the corporeal nature of man to be represented by the body and places it as an accident and sees the spiritual nature of man to be the soul as al-Kindī does. While Israeli's structure is far more detailed than al-Kindī's structure, thanks to other sources, it nonetheless takes a certain flavor from al-Kindī that should not be overlooked. Secondly, we see a strong influence of the Ikhwān as-Ṣafa upon Israeli here, which is reminiscent of previous descriptions. In chapters seven through ten of the tenth Epistle on Logic of the Ikhwān as-Ṣafa,¹⁴² we see that they begin their treatise with the Aristotelian categories and use them to describe that macroanthropos (macrocosm),¹⁴³ that they later state is represented in the microanthropos (microcosm).¹⁴⁴ In the first chapter of the eleventh Epistle, the Ikhwān as-Ṣafa address the categories in a similar manner as Israeli, calling them both by the same terms and placing them under the realm of accidents.¹⁴⁵ We thirdly see an influence deriving from the Aristotelian-Mu'tazilite Jewish philosopher Sa'adiah Gaon, who was the first Jewish

anthropomorphize God's essence in Sa'adiah Gaon's philosophical theology. Therefore, while everything that God has created can fall under the genus of a primary or a secondary substance, God Himself is *not* a substance but is far greater—the One who created all substances that exist. For more information on this, see Samuel Rosenblatt, *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1976).

¹⁴² Carmela Baffioni, *Epistles on the Brethren of Purity: On Logic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 75-82.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 88-90.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

philosopher also heavily influenced by al-Kindī. We are of the opinion that Israeli may have borrowed the use of Sa'adiah Gaon's negative theology, that denied God any sensible attributes (through the use of substance and the nine accidents found in Aristotle's categories) and applied them in a manner that emphasized God's dissimilarity to man. The latter two sources, as our authors have stated, had definitely influenced Israeli, but we have nothing more than the philosophical differences he had with al-Kindī to prove it. While this is the lesser of two important issues in this description, it paves the way to understanding the first and last statements in this description.

In his third description, Israeli begins with the following statement:

The description of philosophy from its effect is as follows:
Philosophy is man's knowledge of himself. This also is a description of great profundity and elevated intelligence, for the following reason.¹⁴⁶

and closes with the following statement

If man comprises all these, he comprises the knowledge of everything and is worthy to be called a philosopher.¹⁴⁷

We find similar statements in the works of both al-Kindī and the Alexandrian commentators as we have already quoted above. However, based on the nature of the previous descriptions and the philosophical positions that he has taken, we believe that this statement needs to be further examined. Some questions that we ought to answer here: what is "everything" in Israeli's philosophical thought? How are the microcosm, macrocosm, and God related in this description? In answering these questions we will look at the various sources of his thought, the

¹⁴⁶ Altmann and Stern, *Isaac Israeli*, 27.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

historical sources of this statement and the theological-philosophical nature of this statement and the ramifications it has upon Israeli's thought.

The entirety of the third description serves as a recapitulation and grand conclusion for Israeli's thought on the term 'philosophy.' With this said, we have an epistemic-ontological approach to this term that is tied together with his statements of 'knowing himself' and 'knowing everything,' both corporeally and incorporeally, and therefore conclude that when Israeli speaks about himself he is referring to the microcosm while the statements on everything refer to the macrocosm. This leads us to believe that there is merely a difference in semantics between him and al-Kindī. Israeli's closing in this third paragraph brings together Pythagoras' and Plato's definitions of philosophy in a harmonic manner, emphasizing the humility and the renunciation necessary to know all that we do. With that said, however, there is still one element of this description that we ought to tackle: the extent that we can know the Creator in light of knowing the macrocosm. To be able to handle this, we have to look not only at the sources that informed Israeli directly, but also the history of the phrase 'Know Thyself' which Israeli is being most influenced by.

The famous Delphic maxim 'Know Thyself'¹⁴⁸ is essential to an understanding of the relationship between Israeli and the Greek philosophers. This dictum was first found on the Temple of Apollo in Greece and was used six times by Plato in his dialogues in several different contexts. Furthermore, it was used in different contexts that shed light on how the mashshā'ī philosophers were

¹⁴⁸ For an account of the traditional interpretations of the Delphic command, see E.G. Wilkins, "Know Thyself" in *Greek and Latin Literature* (New York: Garland, 1979).

influenced by it. While we know that many of the dialogues of Plato were not translated into Arabic, we do know that they had received summaries of many of these dialogues.¹⁴⁹ These quotations serve as an expanded form of those summaries. In Plato's *Phaedrus*, he uses the Delphic maxim in the following manner:

I must first know myself, as the Delphian inscription says; to be curious about that which is not my concern, while I am still in ignorance of my own self, would be ridiculous. And therefore I bid farewell to all this; the common opinion is enough for me. For, as I was saying, I want to know not about this, but about myself: am I a monster more complicated and swollen with passion than the serpent Typho, or a creature of a gentler and simpler sort, to whom Nature has given a diviner and lowlier destiny?¹⁵⁰

Here we see an echo of part of Israeli's second description in Plato's use in the *Phaedrus*. Plato's insisted that knowing ourselves, both our souls and our bodies completely, is a prerequisite for philosophical discourse. As in the final cause of Israeli's second description, Plato states the importance of realizing the low state of the ego, and balancing all parts of the psyche; otherwise we shall become submissive to this lower part of our being. The only way to do this is to know who we are. We can see why Israeli and Plato agree on this, as we find something very close to it in the Talmud. Our authors tell us that in Judaism, there are several references to the superiority of the soul to the body, and the need for the former to die to the body and the world. The first one is found in the Babylonian Talmud:

Alexander the Great is alleged to have asked the 'Scholars of the South', 'What should a man do in order to live?' They are said to have replied, 'He should mortify himself.' He then

¹⁴⁹ For more information on the works of Plato translated from Greek into Arabic, see Franz Rosenthal "On the Knowledge of Plato's Philosophy in the Islamic world" in *Greek Philosophy in the Arab World* (London: Variorum, 1990), 387-422.

¹⁵⁰ Jowett, *The Dialogues of Plato*, 427.

asked, 'What should a man do in order to die?', to which question the answer was given, 'He should vivify himself', i.e. indulge in bodily pleasures. The same idea is epitomized in a passage in the minor tractate *Derekh Eref* which is missing in the extant texts but preserved in a quotation by Jonah Gerondi, 'If it be thy will not to die, die thou before thou diest.'¹⁵¹

This passage from the Talmud taken from our authors' book, not only reinforces a theological connection to Israeli's philosophical thought but also reinforces a theological relationship between Muslim and Jewish philosophical thinking. The well-known ḥadith,¹⁵² "die before you die,"¹⁵³ of the Prophet Muhammad shares the exact meaning with regards to this Talmudic statement stated above. It is a cornerstone of the Ṣūfīs and mystical philosophers that allows them to see the light in renouncing the body and its pleasures in the hope of re-uniting the soul with its Creator while alive.¹⁵⁴ Plato, in his *first Alcibiades*, further supplements this where he writes:

Then he who enjoins a knowledge of oneself bids us become acquainted with the soul. And anybody who gets to know something belonging to the body knows the things that are his, but not himself. And if the soul too, my dear Alcibiades, is to know herself, she must surely look at a soul, and especially at that region of it which occurs the virtue of a soul - wisdom, and at any other part of a soul which resembles this? And can we find any part of the soul that we can call more divine than this, which is the seat of knowledge? [...] Then this part of her resembles God, and whoever looks at this, and comes to know

¹⁵¹ Altmann and Stern, *Isaac Israeli*, 202.

¹⁵² The ḥadīth are statements of the Prophet Muhammad collected in various books. For more information, see Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam* (Chicago: ABC International Group, 2000), 69-83; Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *A Textbook of Hadith Studies* (Leicestershire: The Islamic Foundation, 2009).

¹⁵³ Todd Lawson, ed., *Reason and Inspiration in Islam* (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 2005), 516.

¹⁵⁴ For more information on the use of this ḥadīth in these two worlds of Islam, see Todd Lawson, ed., *Reason and Inspiration in Islam* (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 2005), 516; John Renard, *All the King's Falcons: Rumi on Prophets and Revelation* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), 117; Vincent J. Cornell *Voices of Islam* (Westport: Praeger Publishing, 2007), chapter 13.

all that is divine, will thereby gain the best Knowledge of Himself.¹⁵⁵

In this passage we see a grand relationship between the works of Plato and the tradition Israeli inherited and channeled into the world of Islamic philosophical thought through the translation movement. The emphasis upon the soul over all parts of existence, especially the body, is one that becomes evidently clear and is echoed in both Islamic and Jewish philosophical and Jewish theological thought. It is clear that Plato, in his dialogues believed that by knowing oneself completely, as Israeli is transmitting through various sources, that one also knows all. The famous Neoplatonic commentator, Proclus¹⁵⁶, had commented on that very passage with the following:

The principal end of the dialogue is to lead us to the knowledge of ourselves, and to show that our essence consists in forms and reason, that it produces all sciences from itself, and knows in itself everything divine, and the forms of nature. For the soul does not possess an outside knowledge of things, nor, like an unwritten tablet, does it externally receive the images of divine ideas. Now, therefore, Alcibiades begins to know himself and also to know that he is converted to himself; and knowing his own energy and knowledge, he becomes one with the thing known. This mode of conversion, therefore, leads the soul to the contemplation of its essence, hence it is necessary, that the soul should first receive a knowledge of herself; in the second place, that she should consider the powers which she is allotted; and, in the third place, how she is impelled to ascend from things more imperfect as far as to first causes.¹⁵⁷

Just as we have been arguing that Israeli's philosophy is centered around the epistemology and ontology of the intelligible line, we see that Proclus is making the same argument with Plato's dialogues. Furthermore, we see this more in

¹⁵⁵ Jowett, *The Dialogues of Plato*, 312.

¹⁵⁶ For an introduction to Proclus and his works, see L. J. Rosan, *The Philosophy of Proclus – the Final Phase of Ancient Thought* (Michigan: Porcupine Press, 1985).

¹⁵⁷ Thomas Taylor, *Know Thyself: Plato's First Alcibiades with Commentary from Proclus* (London: Prometheus Trust, 2011), 503-504.

Israeli than in al-Kindī where Israeli’s descriptions of the need to exert oneself in the most stringent of manners reflects more of a Neoplatonic context than that of al-Kindī’s rigid Peripatetic framework. In al-Kindī’s definition of philosophy he calls man a ‘microcosm.’¹⁵⁸ This term has been used over the centuries in conjunction with the term ‘macrocosm.’ The microcosm had always represented man while the macrocosm represents the universe. In the second chapter of the sixteenth Epistle of the Ikhwān as-Ṣafa, entitled “the world is a macroanthropos (macrocosm),” they draw parallels to different parts of the universe to man stating “whose faculties [the heavens, earth, and all creatures of earth] are diffused in all parts of its body as the faculties of the soul of a single man are diffused in all parts of his body,”¹⁵⁹ and in the ninth chapter of the twentieth Epistle titled “On the Quiddity of Nature and the Quality of its Products,” they write “the body of the world in its entirety can be explained as the body of a single man.”¹⁶⁰ In both of these quotes, we see an intimate relationship between the individual [the microcosm] and the universe (and all it contains) quite similar to Israeli’s thought on the term ‘philosophy’ and his cosmology. We know, from the works provided by the Ikhwān as-Ṣafa and commentaries¹⁶¹ that they inherited this thought from the works of Platonists, which Israeli adheres to, and see a striking similarity between the microcosm and the macrocosm that ought to be fully understood.

¹⁵⁸ Altmann and Stern, *Isaac Israeli*, 28.

¹⁵⁹ Carmela Baffioni, ed., *Epistles of the Brethren of Purity: On the Natural Sciences* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 135.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 305.

¹⁶¹ Baffioni, *Epistles on the Brethren of Purity: On the Natural Sciences*, 22-3

We conclude from this investigation of the Greek aspects of Israeli's description of philosophy that Israeli's understanding of the statement "Know Thyself" is that the microcosm is a reflection of the macrocosm, but only when the human subject fully realizes that he is a reflection of the totality of reality. This requires much humility and knowledge that serves as method and doctrine, first supplemented by religious rites that allow the individual to situate himself in the Prophetic ambience followed by those traditions that were imported and inherited and then utilized to understand the universe for what it is.

We will conclude this section with stating that in his third description of 'philosophy,' Israeli brings his understanding of the term 'philosophy' to a complete close. In this description, we have seen a summary of the first and second and a concluding statement of the place of the philosopher through the eyes of the Creator. In doing this, Israeli has confirmed the ascension of the individual from the lowest part of Plato's intelligible line to its highest part where the existence of the Supreme Good lies. While we still do not know the full extent of Israeli's understanding of the relationship between the Creator and wisdom, there are several thoughts we shall essay on the matter. Suffice it to say, that with this third description, we have a complete covering of his epistemic-ontological understanding of the term 'philosophy.'

Chapter III: Conclusion

It is without doubt that Isaac Israeli was an individual who had not only understood the physical world, as a physician, but was a subscriber to the intelligible as well. In this thesis, we looked at only one particular term from his

Book of Definitions out of the almost sixty, from which many are copied word-for-word from al-Kindī, but whose implicit substances and meaning was drawn out of other mystical sources. In the other four surviving works, all compiled in a single volume by our authors, we see the influence of this Muslim Neoplatonic group upon Israeli throughout, framed in the Aristotelian thought of al-Kindī as we saw with the term ‘philosophy’ in this work.

By focusing on this aspect of Israeli’s philosophy, we are able to see how some of the largest influences and sources of Islamic philosophical discourse played a role in the shaping of Israeli’s understanding of the term ‘philosophy.’ Furthermore, we have not only investigated his understanding of this term, but also ventured into parts of his cosmology in order to understand what he meant by ‘wisdom’ and its relationship to the term ‘philosophy’ and man’s ascension towards God. While we are not clear whether Israeli believed in the possibility of annihilation or assimilation in God, as some Platonists, Islamic philosophers, Ṣūfīs, and later Jewish philosophers believed possible, we have understood that he was, at best, ambiguous on this point. Nonetheless, the rest of his cosmological doctrine remains intact, and we are able to piece it together from the books that we have. It is through understanding how he uses the term ‘philosophy’ that we are capable of entering into his world-view so extensively.

This work has aimed to expose two issues. First, the great influence of the Ikhwān as-Ṣafa upon Isaac Israeli, which is very much overlooked. The influence of these thinkers has been mostly overlooked due to historical constrictions. Many believe that due to the fact that the Epistles of the Ikhwān as-Ṣafa were not

compiled until the tenth century (CE), that their thoughts were not circulating until then. However, this remains disputed, as was shown in the sources section of our thesis. With this said, we hope that our use of their Epistles as our authors have used often, will have helped bring greater exposure of their influence upon Israeli.

Secondly, the nature of Israeli's Platonism cannot be understated. While our authors recognize the Neoplatonic nature of Israeli's thought, through a thorough investigation and understanding of the particular term 'philosophy,' we have come to realize that due to this significant influence of Platonic thought, Israeli's epistemic-ontological approach to this term comes through the analogy of the intelligible line time and again. Despite the fact that Israeli never used this analogy explicitly, it has served as a useful key to understanding and dissecting Israeli's use of this term, and plays a major role in our work in seeing how each of his descriptions and their parts correspond to the various levels of the line. For Israeli, the universe is an inverted tree. The sensible world serves as a manifestation of intelligible Forms, and that, which provides life from the intelligible world. The roots live in the intelligible world that contain the Platonic Forms and all that any Platonist aspires to reach. It is through this diagram and the intelligible line that Israeli builds his epistemic-ontological understanding of this term, and therefore his cosmology. It is through this lens that we approach his thought as well.

Let us close this thesis with a few observations. This is the second Jewish philosopher of the Medieval age, coming after Sa'adiah Gaon. Both were heavily

influenced by their Muslim counterparts, and both were influenced by al-Kindī. This paved the way to a relationship between the Muslim and Jewish intellectual worlds that continued on for centuries. We see this in the works Nathenel ben Fayyumī, Ibn Gabirol, Judah HaLevi, to Maimonides. All of these different individuals subscribed to different philosophical schools, but also followed their Muslim counterparts in their methodology and philosophical or theological doctrines. This is not to claim, once again, that divergences did not occur. While individuals like Nethan'el al-Fayyumi had accepted the Prophethood of Muhammad for the Muslims,¹⁶² many earlier and later Jewish philosophers also wrote polemical works against the Muslims or their religion. This is shown in some of the poetry of Ibn Gabirol, defensive works of Maimonides, and so-forth. However, we see these polemics as secondary to this leading influence of common endeavors and motivated by nothing more than the times they were living in. The philosophical thought of Israeli is one that is nothing more than an early twig in the development of Jewish philosophy. He is not a major philosopher, but nonetheless an important one. Furthermore, while he planted the seeds for development of a Jewish Neoplatonism, he did not carry the project much beyond the planting.

With Israeli, we have an introduction to the various Neoplatonic hypostases and their place in Jewish thought, but the connection between the Creator and the other hypostases is at best disjointed. This leaves a problem in understanding man's relationship to his Creator, which we have chosen not to try

¹⁶² Frank Talmage, "Nethanel ben al-Fayyumi" in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, ed. Michael Berenbaum et. al. (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), 92-93.

to resolve. Furthermore, his approach to matter and its relationship to the Creator is also not clearly articulated. This was handled and resolved by Ibn Gabirol.¹⁶³ Nonetheless, we have to give credit to Israeli for bringing together several streams of philosophy in a manner that is, to the untrained eye, surprising. With him we see the meeting of Platonism through the works of the Ikhwān as-Şafa with the Aristotelian framework provided by al-Kindī.

This work hopes to shed greater light on the fact that Jews and Muslims had both operated in what Seyyed Hossein Nasr deems “Philosophy in the Land of Prophecy,” with both civilizations close theologically and historically from the birth of their philosophical thought in the Medieval period. We hope that this work will spearhead a new stream of thought that will focus on the impact of the Ikhwān as-Şafa and al-Kindī upon other parts of Israeli’s philosophy, and his cosmological doctrine, and therefore become influential in investigating other great early Jewish thinkers and their influences in the Islamic world. It is through works such as these that we may be able to move beyond the mere sentimental approach that has hijacked the intellectual relationship between these two Abrahamic cousins and caused such a great rift between them that they can barely recognize each other for who they are and the great possibilities between them.

¹⁶³ For more information on how Ibn Gabirol handled this subtle issue, see Sarah Pessin, *Ibn Gabirol's Theology of Desire: Embroidering the Hidden in Jewish Medieval Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

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