

interpretation

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HARRY A. WOLFSON AS INTERPRETER OF MEDIEVAL THOUGHT

ARYEH L. MOTZKIN
Harvard University

Harry A. Wolfson, *Studies in the History of Philosophy and Religion*, edited by Isadore Twersky and George H. Williams. 2 vols. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973. 1977. xvii, 626 pp.; xiv, 639 pp.; \$22.00, \$25.00; *idem*, *The Philosophy of the Kalam*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976. xxvi, 779 pp.; \$30.00; *idem*, *Repercussions of the Kalam in Jewish Philosophy*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979. xii, 238 pp.; \$18.00

During the last half century of his life, between 1929 and 1974, Harry Austryn Wolfson was regarded, especially in the United States, as the most important scholar in the field of medieval Jewish studies, and specifically in the area of medieval Jewish theology and philosophy. This reputation rested on a number of important books and a great number of shorter studies. All of them demonstrated Wolfson's vast erudition, his mastery of many languages and his acquaintance with diverse sources, whether written by the great thinkers or by their epigones. When Wolfson embarked on his sixty-six-year career at Harvard, it was taken for granted that for adequate scholarship in medieval Judaica one must know not only the extensive body of writings of medieval Jews but also of their Arabic contemporaries and of their Greek and Roman predecessors. For Wolfson, it meant immersing himself in the works not only of Crescas, Maimonides and Halevi (written mostly in Arabic), but also in the writings of Avicenna, al-Ghazzālī and Averroes; of Aristotle, Plotinus and Thomas Aquinas; of Alexander of Aphrodisias, Themistius and Simplicius. Three names must be mentioned separately: Philo, Spinoza and Plato. Philo and Spinoza were deleted from this list because they were regarded by Wolfson as the Alpha and Omega of medieval philosophy and theology. Philosophy and theology are mentioned together, because Wolfson did not think that they were essentially distinguishable from one another: both treat of the "large questions" of man, God and universe, and both seek a sort of "spirituality," although this last point or theme was only partly developed by Wolfson. Philo was all-important because it was he, asserted Wolfson, who brought about this marriage, stormy as it was to become, between philosophy and theology or between reason and faith, a relationship which Wolfson saw as the central axis around which medieval man's "intellectual" life revolved. Spinoza was all-important, for he was seen as the wrecker of this marriage and thus was the first modern man, although Wolfson as a historian was at least equally impressed by Spinoza's indebtedness to his predecessors and by the continuity which he thought he could demonstrate existed from Philo to Spinoza—

the latter being the last, though heretical, representative of what Wolfson liked to call “Philonic philosophy.”

The third name missing from the list of philosophers reproduced above is that of Plato. It is missing not because Plato was not mentioned by Wolfson, although his book on the *Philosophy of the Kalam* does not cite Plato even once, and this despite the fact that the *mutakallimūn*, and especially the *mu‘tazila*, clearly evince the influence of certain neoplatonists. Moreover, the *mutakallimūn* have been shown to have made use of “Platonic doctrines” (culled mostly from Hellenistic dogmatic literature), possibly as a counterweight to the teachings of the more or less Aristotelian *falāsifa*. One could maintain that Plato is mentioned relatively little by Wolfson (only somewhat more often than, say, Origen) because medieval philosophers, Arab, Jewish or Latin, cite Plato far less than they cite Aristotle. Still it seems to me that this is not a sufficient explanation for the infrequent appearance of Plato in Wolfson’s extensive corpus, and I believe this relative absence of Plato in Wolfson goes a long way toward explaining Wolfson’s interpretation of medieval philosophy.

Wolfson’s forte was a comparative study of a concept or doctrine as it appears in the works of several philosophers, sometimes two or three Jewish philosophers, but as often as not in a set of Greek, Arab, Jewish and Latin philosophers. Wolfson’s ultimate purpose was to show that these doctrines formed part of a “system,” a coherent and all-embracing teaching of each philosopher taken separately. But Wolfson also constantly endeavored to establish his unified field theory, that is, his conviction that medieval philosophy — “from Philo to Spinoza” — formed one grand system, all of whose fundamental characteristics may be culled from Philo’s writings. Now, whether or not such a “system” or even “systems” are indeed found in the various Greek, Arabic, and Jewish philosophers, Plato erected an almost insurmountable barrier against anyone who would attempt to unearth a systematic teaching beneath the argument and the action of his dialogues. To be sure, such attempts have been made time and again, but Wolfson knew intuitively that Plato, who presented philosophy as a search and a way of life more than as a body of doctrine, would not yield the appropriate materials for the kind of doctrinal research Wolfson engaged in. The scholastics preferred Aristotle to Plato for much the same reason, and Wolfson was nothing if not a grand scholastic, to the manner born. Aristotle’s sobriety was far more to his taste than Plato’s Socratic irony. His studies centered on epistemology, ontology and theology, and the distinction between natural and revealed theology was of little consequence to him. Theoretical philosophy unmitigated by political or practical philosophy does tend to obscure that distinction, as does viewing philosophy as a science rather than a way of life. Wolfson was intrigued neither by political philosophy nor by ethics nor by the two logical arts which are also political arts: poetics and rhetoric.

Wolfson’s earlier books have endured. His edition and interpretation of Crescas, *Crescas’ Critique of Aristotle*, single-handedly raised Crescas to the status of the second most important medieval Jewish philosopher, and clearly

demonstrated his originality and philosophic significance, after he had long been eclipsed by his far more popular disciple, Albo. His study of Spinoza, *The Philosophy of Spinoza*, still contains much useful information. And of course his book on Philo will surely remain the standard work on that enigmatic figure. It is certainly to be regretted that Wolfson completed only the first volume of his projected larger work on the *Philosophy of the Church Fathers*.

Professors Isadore Twersky and George H. Williams, both of whom had studied under Wolfson for many years, have earned our gratitude for having persuaded Harvard University Press to publish fifty-five of Wolfson's studies comprising over 1250 pages in two thick volumes. These studies range over six decades, beginning with Wolfson's paper, "Maimonides and Halevi, A Study in Typical Jewish Attitudes toward Greek Philosophy in the Middle Ages," published in 1912 when he was 25, to his paper, "Answers to Criticism of My Discussion of the Ineffability of God," published in the last year of his life, 1974, when he was 87. The volumes contain such well-known studies as "The Plurality of Immovable Movers in Aristotle, Averroes and St. Thomas," "Avicenna, Algazali and Averroes on Divine Attributes," "The Internal Senses in Latin, Arabic and Hebrew Philosophic Texts," "The Amphibolous Terms in Aristotle, Arabic Philosophy and Maimonides," "The Double Faith Theory in Saadia, Averroes and St. Thomas," "Halevi and Maimonides on Design, Chance and Necessity," "Crescas on the Problem of Divine Attributes" — a short book in itself, and many other studies on the problem of divine attributes (which he once told me he thought to be the central and most rewarding area of study in medieval Jewish philosophy, and Kaufmann's *Geschichte der Attributenlehre* to be the most fundamental work in medieval philosophy) in Albinus, Plotinus, Maimonides, Gersonides and St. Thomas. And there are more than forty other studies of his. One may take issue with some of them, but they all make worthwhile reading and study.

Wolfson's two Kalam books should be taken together, and indeed *Repercussions*, published last year and five years after his death, may be seen as an appendix to his much larger work on the Kalam, a study on which he worked intermittently for decades. The Kalam, a name given to a number of schools of Islamic dogmatic theology, was for a number of reasons vehemently attacked by Maimonides, who believed it to be precisely the kind of pseudo-philosophical polemics destructive both to the true philosophic enterprise and to the well-being of the religious community. The most important work on the Kalam previous to Wolfson's book was Shlomo Pines' *Beiträge zur islamischen Atomenlehre* (Belin, 1936), an epoch-making book (whose translation into English is nearing completion). Wolfson takes issue with Pines' contention that the Kalam owes much to Indian thought. Indian thought however was outside Wolfson's purview, and indeed his argument against this understanding of the Kalam is not very convincing. But there is no doubt that the Kalam owes more to Christian apologetics, and here Wolfson's discussion is far more complete. Wolfson treats extensively the Kalam's theories of attributes, creation, atomism, causality and predestination and free will. In

Repercussions, Wolfson deals with much the same problems, but of course in the context of Jewish philosophy, although Maimonides' discussion of the Kalam occupies Wolfson no less in the Kalam book.

Students of medieval Jewish philosophy are indebted to Harvard University Press for the meticulous care it bestowed on these thought-provoking and very useful volumes written by one of the most erudite historians and influential teachers of our time.