

# IBN GABIROL'S THEOLOGY OF DESIRE

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MATTER AND METHOD  
IN JEWISH MEDIEVAL  
NEOPLATONISM

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SARAH PESSIN

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*Matter and Method in Jewish Medieval Neoplatonism*

SARAH PESSIN

University of Denver



CAMBRIDGE  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town,  
Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press  
32 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10013-2473, USA

www.cambridge.org  
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107032217

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First published 2013

Printed in the United States of America

*A catalog record for this publication is available from the British Library.*

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*

Pessin, Sarah.

Ibn Gabirol's theology of desire : matter and method in Jewish medieval Neoplatonism / Sarah  
Pessin, University of Denver.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-107-03221-7 (hardback)

1. Neoplatonism. 2. Jewish philosophy. 3. Philosophy, Medieval. 4. Islamic philosophy.  
5. Ibn Gabirol, 11th cent. Yanbu' al-hayah. I. Title.

B517.P45 2013

181'.06-dc23 2012037619

ISBN 978-1-107-03221-7 Hardback

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## IBN GABIROL'S THEOLOGY OF DESIRE

Drawing on Arabic passages from Ibn Gabirol's original *Fons Vitae* text and highlighting philosophical insights from his Hebrew poetry, Sarah Pessin develops a Theology of Desire at the heart of Ibn Gabirol's eleventh-century cosmo-ontology. She challenges centuries of received scholarship on his work, including his so-called Doctrine of Divine Will. Pessin rejects voluntarist readings of the *Fons Vitae* as opposing divine emanation. She also emphasizes Pseudo-Empedoclean notions of Divine Desire and Grounding Element alongside Ibn Gabirol's use of a particularly Neoplatonic method with apophatic (and what she terms "doubly apophatic") implications. In this way, Pessin reads claims about matter as insights about love, desire, the human relation to goodness, wisdom and God, and the receptive, dependent, and fragile nature of human being. Pessin reenvisions the entire spirit of Ibn Gabirol's philosophy, moving us from a set of doctrines to a fluid inquiry into the nature of God and human being – and the bond between God and human being in desire.

Sarah Pessin is Associate Professor of Philosophy and the Emil and Eva Hecht Chair in Judaic Studies at the University of Denver. She works on Neoplatonisms (Greek, Jewish, Islamic, and Christian), medieval philosophy, modern Jewish philosophy, and comparative philosophies of religion. She has presented and published widely, including contributions to *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Jewish Philosophy*, the *Routledge Companion to Islamic Philosophy*, *The Cambridge History of Medieval Philosophy*, the *Blackwell History of Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, and the *Journal of the History of Philosophy*. Her research interests include the phenomenology of receptivity, the nature of apophatic discourse, methodologies for the study of intercultural texts, and Jewish theologies of exile.

חסד ודעת

*This book is dedicated to my father (זצ"ל) and grandfather (זצ"ל)*



# Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	<i>page xiii</i>
<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 Discovering Ibn Gabirol: The Aims and Goals of This Project	1
1.2 Chapter Guide	4
<b>2. Text in Context</b>	<b>9</b>
2.1 First Unfoldings	9
2.2 Background	11
2.3 Desire and Love: Terminological Preamble I	15
2.3.1 Desire as God-Born and God-Directed	16
2.3.2 Desire as Love	16
2.4 From Divine Will to Divine- <i>Irāda</i> -as-Desire: Terminological Preamble II	20
2.5 From Prime Matter to Grounding Element: Terminological Preamble III	22
2.5.1 Matter Terminology in Ibn Gabirol's Milieu	22
2.5.2 Ibn Gabirol's <i>al-‘unṣur al-awwal</i>	23
<b>3. From Human Being to Discourse on Matter? The Threefold Quest for Wisdom, Goodness, and God – and the Root of Life in Desire</b>	<b>28</b>
3.1 The Epistemological, Ethical, and Theological Context	28
3.1.1 The Epistemological Call	29
3.1.2 The Ethico-Theological Call	31
3.2 Metaphysics of Matter and Desire at the Core of All	32
3.3 Positive Valuations of Matter: A Reversal of Intuitions	36
<b>4. Root Desire and the Pseudo-Empedoclean Grounding Element as Love</b>	<b>41</b>
4.1 Desire at the Core of Being	42

4.2	Love Makes the World Go Round: Some Greek and Arabic Sources	43
4.2.1	Aristotle	43
4.2.2	The <i>Theology of Aristotle</i>	43
4.2.3	Avicenna's " <i>Risālah fi'l-'ishq</i> "	44
4.2.4	Islamic and Jewish Neoplatonized Aristotelianism	45
4.3	A Pseudo-Empedoclean Love Story: Unspecified Being, Matter over Form, and the Kernel of Desire	46
4.4	In the Illuminating Shadow: Ibn Gabirol's Pseudo-Empedoclean Revision of the Neoplatonic Return	51
5.	<b>From Divine Will to Divine <i>Irāda</i>: On the Mistaken Scholarly Rejection of Ibn Gabirol's Emanationism</b>	53
5.0	"Divine Will" and the Mistaken Scholarly Rejection of Ibn Gabirol's Emanationism	53
5.1	Trying to Make Sense of Scholarship on Ibn Gabirol's So-Called Anti-Emanation Voluntarism: The Rejection of Divine Emanation in a Limited Emanation Framework?	54
5.2	Problems with the Limited Emanation Framework Reading: Free Choice, Mediated versus Unmediated Will, and Three Varieties of Voluntarism	56
5.3	Divine Will versus Divine Emanation? Casting More Doubt on the Canonical Voluntarist Reading of Ibn Gabirol	58
5.4	Rethinking Will and Emanation	59
5.4.1	Emanation and Will I: Since When Does "Divine Will" Mean "No Divine Emanation" in a Neoplatonic Context? (Considering Divine Will in Plotinus and the <i>Theology of Aristotle</i> )	60
5.4.2	Emanation and Will II: Is the Term "Will" Leading Some to Mistaken Conclusions? (Considering the Possibility of Augustinian Overtones)	60
5.5	Rethinking "Intermediating between the Extremes": Two Competing Views	61
5.5.1	Intermediation I: Brunner's Horizontal Intuitions, Divine Will in Opposition to Divine Emanation, and an Occasionalist God?	62
5.5.2	Intermediation II: On the Vertical Image of Intermediation in Ibn Gabirol – Toward a New Reading of Divine <i>Irāda</i> as Divine Emanation	64
6.	<b><i>Irādic</i> Unfoldings: Ibn Gabirol's Hylomorphic Emanationism and the Neoplatonic Tripart Analysis</b>	66
6.0	Rereading Ibn Gabirol: Divine <i>Irāda</i> as Emanation and the Theology of Desire	66

6.1	The Vertical Imagery of Matter and Form in the Theology of Desire: On the Correct Interpretation of the Divine <i>Irāda</i> 's "Connecting" Intermediation	67
6.2	"Intermediary between the Extremes" as Joining, and Joining as the Vertical Emanation Counterpart of Neoplatonic Return	69
6.3	Rethinking "Matter+Form Composition" and the Intermediation of Divine <i>Irāda</i> as the Downward Procession of Emanation	72
6.4	"Matter," "Matter+Form," and "Form": Ibn Gabirol's Tripart Hylomorphic Method and Neoplatonic Tripart Analysis	74
6.5	The Theology of Desire Revisited: Ibn Gabirol's Revised Great Chain of Being and Neoplatonic Tripart Analysis	77
6.6	The <i>Irādic</i> /Erotic Unfolding: Love at the Root of Being	87
6.7	Ibn Gabirol's Cosmo-Ontology (Initial Conclusions): Great Chain of Being + Pseudo-Empedocles + Neoplatonic Tripart Analysis	87
7.	<b>Matter Revisited</b>	91
7.1	Matter as River	91
7.2	Matter as Born of God's Essence	92
7.3	Matter as Foundation and Divine Throne	93
7.4	Matter as Essence and Unifier: Layers of Matter, <i>Genus Generalissimum</i> , Sustainer of Diversity, and Giver of Name	94
7.4.1	Layers of Matter	95
7.4.2	Essence	97
7.4.3	Genus, <i>Genus Generalissimum</i> , and Name-Giver	98
7.4.4	Unifier	99
7.5	Matter as the Preexistent <i>Per Se Existens</i> : Contra Gundissalinus, Contra Schlanger	100
7.5.1	Gundissalinus' Erasure of "Matter Per Se": Obscuring Matter as <i>Per Se Existens</i> from the Arabic Text to the Latin Translation	102
7.5.2	Schlanger's Erasure of "Matter Per Se": Losing Pseudo-Empedocles to Philo?	104
7.6	Revisiting "Universal Hylomorphism" and a Call to Charitable Reading: On the Limiting Lenses of Augustine and Aquinas	106
7.7	Creation as the Splitting of the Nothing	113
7.8	Call to Selfhood	116
8.	<b>Neoplatonic Cosmo-Ontology as Apophatic Response and as Prescription for Human Living (Methodological Reappraisal I)</b>	118
8.0	Moving to Questions of Method: An Overview	118



8.1	Emanation Reconsidered: From “Doctrine” to Apophatic Response (on the Paradox of Divine Unity and the Neoplatonic Tripart Analysis)	119
8.2	Ibn Gabirol’s Neoplatonic Tripart Analysis: Making Sense of the “Triune” Theology of Divine Essence, Divine <i>Irāda</i> , and Divine Wisdom	123
8.2.1	Divine Essence: God as Apophatically Seen from the Perspective of Remaining	125
8.2.2	Divine <i>Irāda</i> : God as Apophatically Seen from the Perspective of Procession	125
8.2.3	Divine Wisdom (or Word): God as Apophatically Seen from the Perspective of Reversion	128
8.2.4	From Confusion to Tripart Apophasis: Conclusions	130
8.3	On the “Doubly Apophatic”: Neoplatonic Cosmo-Ontology as Dual Discourse on God and Human Being	131
8.4	From Apophasis to Human Prescription	133
8.5	Dependence, Receptivity, and Fragility: Orientations for Human Being (from Descriptions of Matter to Prescriptions for Living, and Experiencing the Self Qua Matter)	135
8.5.1	From Layers of Matter to Human Dependence	136
8.5.2	From Matter to Human Receptivity and Fragility	136
9.	<b>Transcendental Grounding, Mythopoetic and Symbolic Transformation, and the Creation of New Worlds with Words (Methodological Reappraisal II)</b>	140
9.1	On What Not to Do: Failures in Methodological Approaches to Neoplatonic Cosmo-Ontology (or, Finding Invisible Kansas)	141
9.2	Map Is Not Territory: A Double Insight for Interpreting Neoplatonic Cosmo-Ontology (or, There Is No Invisible Kansas)	147
9.3	On Human Being: Neoplatonic Cosmo-Ontology as Transcendental Grounding	149
9.4	Human Being, Human Transformation: Perspectives on Imagination, Myth, Exegesis, Sound-Meaning, Meditation, and Beyond	150
9.5	Writing as Creation: Cosmo-Ontology as Creating Worlds with Words	156
10.	<b>Embroidering the Hidden</b>	160
10.1	Embroidering the Hidden I: Rethinking Creation	162
10.2	Embroidering the Hidden II: Rethinking Metaphysics (Creation of Worlds with Words): A Closing Word on Cosmo-Ontology	162

<i>Appendix. Matter as God-Born Cradle of Life: A Sampling of Matter Imagery in Ibn Gabirol's Milieu</i>	165
A1 Ibn Gabirol's Neoplatonic Hylomorphism: Plato's Participation Revised	165
A2 Plato and Pythagoreanism: From Timaeon Receptacle as Chaos to Nicomachus' Receptacle as Divine Ground and Source	166
A3 Ibn Gabirol's Neoplatonic Hylomorphism: Aristotelian Substance Revised (and the Possibility of a Pseudo-Empedocles-Aristotle link)	168
A4 Matter in Aristotle	170
A5 Plotinus and Intelligible Matter	172
A6 Proclus' <i>Elements of Theology</i> , the <i>Kalām fī mahd al-khair</i> , and the <i>Liber De Causis</i>	173
A7 First Matter: "Ibn Ḥasday's Neoplatonist," Isaac Israeli, and the <i>Longer Theology of Aristotle</i>	175
A8 The Ismā'īlī Context: <i>Kūnī</i> and <i>Qadar</i>	178
A9 Matter in the <i>Ikhwān</i> Tradition	180
A10 Mu'tazilites: <i>al-Ma'dūm</i> as a Something	182
A11 Subtle Material Prophetic Intermediaries: Saadya's "2nd Air," Judah HaLevi's <i>amr ilāhī</i>	182
A12 Islamic and Jewish Pseudo-Empedoclean Trends	183
A13 Suhrawardi: Love versus Dominance, Love as Humility	185
A14 Kernels and Shells	185
A15 "From One Must Come Two" as "From One Must Come One" (Considering Ibn Gabirol in the Context of Greek Limit/Limitlessness Philosophies)	186
<i>Notes</i>	189
<i>Bibliography</i>	233
I. Ibn Gabirol Texts	233
1. <i>Fons Vitae</i> : Original Eleventh-Century Arabic Text	233
2. <i>Fons Vitae</i> : Twelfth-Century Latin Translation (and Translations of the Latin Translation)	233
3. <i>Fons Vitae</i> : Thirteenth-Century Hebrew Translation (and Translations of the Hebrew Translation)	234
4. <i>The Choice of Pearls (Mivḥar ha-Penīnīm)</i>	234
5. <i>Book of the Improvement of the Moral Qualities of the Soul</i>	235
6. Hebrew Poetry Editions	235
II. Ancient and Medieval Texts (other than Ibn Gabirol)	235
III. Main Bibliography (contains materials from Bibliography Section I, selected materials from Bibliography Section II, as well as Secondary Sources)	241

<i>Index</i>	263
1. <i>Index of Concepts (Partial List)</i>	263
2. <i>Index of Source References (Partial List)</i>	265
3. <i>References to Ibn Gabirol's Poetry, Liturgy, and Aphorisms</i>	266
4. <i>Index of Names, Ancient-Medieval (Partial List)</i>	266
5. <i>Index of Names, Modern-Contemporary (Partial List)</i>	267
6. <i>Index of Figures</i>	269

## List of Figures

3.1	Plotinus' Cosmo-Ontology	<i>page</i> 33
3.2	Jewish Neoplatonic Modification of Plotinian Cosmo-Ontology	34
3.3	Ibn Gabirol's Revised Neoplatonic Cosmo-Ontology	34
3.4	Reversing Intuitions: Matter's Purity, Form's Divisions	37
3.5	Matter over Form: Desire Precedes Existence	38
3.6	On the "Divine Essence–Matter" Link	38
4.1	Comparing the Hierarchies of Plotinus and Ibn Gabirol	48
4.2	Ps. Empedoclean Love as Kernel and Strife as Shell	51
5.1	Brunner's "Horizontal Joining" of Matter to Form in the <i>Fons Vitae</i>	63
6.1	Ibn Gabirol's Hylomorphic Great Chain of Being	78
9.1	Ibn Gabirol's "Cosmic Map"	148



## Introduction

### 1.1 DISCOVERING IBN GABIROL: THE AIMS AND GOALS OF THIS PROJECT

*Ibn Gabirol's Theology of Desire* is a new approach to the *Fons Vitae* and to the Jewish medieval Neoplatonism of an often misunderstood eleventh-century thinker. My project's main goal is to convey the living, philosophically and theologically vibrant voice of a thinker whose teachings have been rendered mute by the histories of philosophy and theology in two ways: (1) Ibn Gabirol's *Fons Vitae* has been overlaid by centuries of Augustinian and Kabbalistic readings and Aristotelian and Thomistic critiques, making it hard to hear what Ibn Gabirol is himself trying to say. (2) Under the weight of a particular set of scholastic lenses, the *Fons Vitae* has been boiled down to and recorded into the history of ideas in terms of two rather narrow ideas: The Doctrine of Divine Will and The Doctrine of Universal Hylomorphism. In addition to at best misrepresenting Ibn Gabirol (as a misreader of Aristotle, as I explain in Chapter 7) and at worst getting Ibn Gabirol wrong (as I argue in Chapter 5 is the case for scholarly treatments of his so-called Doctrine of Divine Will), this calcified canonization has also helped readers fail to engage Ibn Gabirol in broader and deeper terms. The history of ideas has all but missed the expansive spiritual-ethical vision of this Neoplatonic theologian-poet-philosopher.

I put this project forth as a first corrective step. Toward the goal of conveying Ibn Gabirol's teachings and underlying spirit, I advance a number of theses. I argue for reading Ibn Gabirol in terms of a Theology of Desire, which apophatically envisions God's entry into the world of being in terms of a Divine Desire that gives rise, first and foremost, to desire at the core of being – and, as such, at the core of all beings, including human beings. I show, furthermore, how this God-born desire is manifest for Ibn Gabirol in a principle of pure matter that permeates the entirety of existence. I trace the

Pseudo-Empedoclean roots of this pure matter and explain how this matter, which I call Grounding Element, refigures the Great Chain of Being from a downpouring of light to a complex downpouring of a “shadowed light” (with the further sense of “shadow” as a most positive image, beckoning to the hiddenness of God’s own hidden Essence).<sup>1</sup> For Ibn Gabirol, God’s entry into the world is marked not only by a flow of being, but by a concomitant God-born (and God-directed) Desire-to-Be, Desire-to-Know, and Desire-for-Goodness manifest in the folds of matter. In this way, Ibn Gabirol’s universe is shown to be a pulsing dual field of shadows and lights in which, born of God’s own Desire, matter (not form) – and, as such, shadow (not light) – emerges as the highest, most essential aspect of reality. Arisen from God’s own Essence, matter emerges as the ground of being and as that which most fully manifests (in an utterly hidden way) God’s own desire to move from His ownmost sameness to an embrace of other.

In this light, I show that one of the main goals of Ibn Gabirol’s project is to understand (or, as I explain, to apophatically engage) the mystery of God and the mystery in particular of the entry of a unified One into the diversities of being. In this context, I argue that the *Fons Vitae* is best understood as an attempt to understand God, but also human being. In the course of the project, I explain how Ibn Gabirol’s entire endeavor of cosmo-ontology – including his talk of God and including his talk of cosmic layers and a Grounding Element – is a complex apophatic (and, as I explain, “doubly apophatic”) reflection on God that itself immediately gives way to a prescriptive vision for human being. In this way, I show how the *Fons Vitae*’s descriptive investigation of “cosmic layers of matter” at once reveals a subtly apophatic encounter with God and a subtly prescriptive investigation of human life, as I show how Ibn Gabirol’s teaching of the “rootedness of all things (including human being) in matter” is a teaching about the importance of a human subject experiencing herself “qua matter” – that is, qua dependent, receptive, and fragile desirer after wisdom, goodness, and God. In his cosmo-ontological investigation of a strange material Grounding Element and a cosmos filled with “layers of matter,” Ibn Gabirol is shown to explore the very core of human life and the virtues that ground us.

In the spirit of this ethical point, I begin my study by emphasizing the *Fons Vitae*’s overarching concern with the ends of human being. My study in this way frames Ibn Gabirol in ethical terms: I begin by laying out Ibn Gabirol’s sense of the ends of human being in terms of a tripart quest for wisdom, goodness, and God, and I arrive eventually at the insight that “living qua matter” – namely in a spirit of a dependency, receptivity, and fragility born of desire – is, for Ibn Gabirol, the very orientation that sets us on our tripart

quest. It is this set of teachings that I show to be at the heart of the *Fons Vitae* notion that “all being, and even human being, is rooted in matter,” and it is this set of teachings that I show to be at the heart of Ibn Gabirol’s Theology of Desire.

In addition to laying out this ethical framework, my project provides a thoroughgoing reappraisal of Ibn Gabirol’s entire philosophical theology. In Chapter 8, I explain the particularly tripart nature of Ibn Gabirol’s Neoplatonic apophysis in way of making sense of his “triune” sense of God. In Chapter 5, I argue vigorously against traditions of scholars (including Wiesheipl, Gilson, and Husik) who have presented Ibn Gabirol’s Divine Will as a theological teaching that opposes emanation. In fact, so misdirected is this most popular reading that I completely reject the use of the term “Divine Will” in my study; referring to the term at play in the original Arabic text, I speak instead of the Divine *Irāda* (which I translate as Divine Desire) and I show how – *pace* the received scholarship – this divine reality not only does not oppose emanation, but actually demarcates the very downward flow of emanation itself. My new emanationist reading of the Divine *Irāda* allows me to highlight the role of the Neoplatonic Tripart Analysis at the core of Ibn Gabirol’s thinking about reality (in tripart terms of “matter,” “matter+form,” and “form”), as it at once leads me to a thoroughlygoing emanationist rereading of the *Fons Vitae*’s metaphysics of matter, which I present in Chapter 7. My analysis in Chapter 7 includes a treatment of matter as Divine Throne, a rejection of Schlanger’s treatment of matter’s status as “*per se* existent,” a critique of the popular summary of Ibn Gabirol’s metaphysics of matter in terms of a “Doctrine of Universal Hylomorphism,” and a set of reflections on Ibn Gabirol’s description of creation (in his *Keter Malkhūt* poem) in terms of God’s “splitting open the nothing.”

In all of the aforementioned ways, and by pointing in Chapter 8 to how the term “doctrine” obscures the apophatic nature of Ibn Gabirol’s teachings, my project asks us to thoroughly rethink the history of philosophy’s standard picture of Ibn Gabirol in terms of a “Doctrine of Divine Will” and a “Doctrine of Universal Hylomorphism.” Approaching the *Fons Vitae* in terms of these two doctrines at worst gets Ibn Gabirol’s main teachings wrong, and at best highlights aspects of his view that obscure his ethical-spiritual Theology of Desire, including his emanationist Divine *Irāda*, his Pseudo-Empedoclean material Grounding Element, his commitment to the Neoplatonic Tripart Analysis, and his apophatic investigation of God’s own entry into being that, together with all of these cosmo-ontological details, reveals a prescriptive encounter with human being “*qua* matter” as a call to human desire, dependence, receptivity, and fragility.

In addition to providing a thorough rereading of the *Fons Vitae* philosophy, my project also makes a methodological contribution. As such, this project can be seen in two parts: in Chapters 2–7, I explore the details and content of key claims in the *Fons Vitae*; in Chapters 8–9, I turn to a methodological set of considerations about what Neoplatonic cosmo-ontology – in all of its talk of cosmic thises and thats – is actually up to. Along these lines, in Chapter 8 I explore the uniquely apophatic (and what I call the “doubly apophatic”) nature of Neoplatonic cosmo-ontology, and in Chapter 9 I suggest how we might see cosmo-ontological texts as “transformative” writing; there I explore my own transcendental-phenomenological suggestion, as well as a range of mythopoetic and symbolic approaches. In Chapter 9, I also overtly address various pitfalls that can set us back in our approach to texts of Neoplatonic cosmo-ontology, such as approaching its talk of levels and layers as some kind of outdated science or odd cosmic cartography. I additionally highlight how such pitfalls have arguably led to a number of misdirected readings of the actual details of the *Fons Vitae* in the history of philosophy. Following on these considerations of the “transformational” nature of Neoplatonic cosmo-ontology, I also draw our attention to Ibn Gabirol’s own identification of writing with creation.

The first full-length treatment in English of the philosophy of the *Fons Vitae*, my study aims to reveal Ibn Gabirol’s Theology of Desire while recovering his proper place within the history of philosophy and theology as a Jewish Neoplatonist with a uniquely Pseudo-Empedoclean voice.

## 1.2 CHAPTER GUIDE

Reading the *Fons Vitae* within its own Arabic Neoplatonic and Pseudo-Empedoclean contexts and in conversation with Ibn Gabirol’s Hebrew poetry, I exposit Ibn Gabirol’s teachings on the Divine Essence, Divine *Irāda*, matter, and form in terms of what I call a Theology of Desire – a theological, ethical, and existential picture of Ibn Gabirol insufficiently explored in popular classifications of his thinking.

Toward this goal, in Chapter 2, I provide an overview of Ibn Gabirol’s context and some details about the *Fons Vitae*, as well as a critical starting preamble about the use of the terms “desire” and “love” at play in this study and at the core of the Theology of Desire. I then offer two additional critical points of terminology: I explain why I replace the more common term “Divine Will” with the term “Divine *Irāda*” (as “Divine Desire”) in my study, and I explain why I replace the term “prime matter” with the term “Grounding Element.” As I explain, my terminological shifts from “Divine Will” and “prime



matter” to “Divine *Irāda*” (as “Divine Desire”) and “Grounding Element” directly help us leave behind a range of unhelpful (and often misleading) starting caricatures of Ibn Gabirol, in this way allowing us easier entry into the subtle folds of his Theology of Desire.

Further orienting us toward Ibn Gabirol’s Theology of Desire in Chapter 3, I highlight the epistemological, ethical, and theological spirit of Ibn Gabirol’s project. In his strong identification of human being in terms of a desire for “something of the goodness of God” (itself a trifold desire for wisdom, goodness, and God), Ibn Gabirol reveals the central role of desire in his project, as he also reveals his core teaching about the grounding of human being in matter (a point explained in fuller detail in Chapter 8). Starting with a focus on the human tripart quest in Chapter 3 helps us better appreciate Ibn Gabirol’s overarching concern for human being, which in turn allows us to approach the cosmo-ontological details of his project with a better sense of direction: Because Ibn Gabirol is driven by a sense of the human’s desire for something of the goodness of God, we ought approach his cosmo-ontological project in that light. With this in mind, we will be able to better understand Ibn Gabirol’s teaching of “the root of all things (including human being) in matter” as a teaching about “the root of all things (including human being) in desire” – itself an emphasis on human being’s groundedness in her desire after wisdom, goodness, and God. For, as we will see, it is precisely matter that stands as the marker of this critical God-born and God-directed desire at the root of all things, including at the root of the human spirit. By emphasizing the God-born and God-directed desire at the core of all things – in and through the activity of Divine *Irāda* and the Grounding Element, as we will see in greater detail in Chapters 4–7 – we will be able to see the prescriptive sense of human being’s root in a desire for wisdom and goodness, as we will also be able to better understand the special significance of matter in Ibn Gabirol’s worldview. In this light, we will consider, in Chapter 3, how matter (the kind of pure grounding matter that Ibn Gabirol has in mind) emerges in a decidedly positive light in the *Fons Vitae* and how Ibn Gabirol in this way reverses some of our more standard negative intuitions about matter across a range of Pythagorean, Platonic, Aristotelian, and Neoplatonic contexts.

In Chapter 4, I explore desire at the root of Ibn Gabirol’s cosmos, and its role in grounding human beings, the fabric of reality, and even God. Following this theme through, I explore Ibn Gabirol’s Pseudo-Empedoclean heritage, and I show how an appreciation of that heritage can further help us see in his technical claims about matter an exploration of the presence of love-desire at the foundation of being. In this chapter I also explore Greek and Islamic contexts for Ibn Gabirol’s sense that “love makes the world go round” in