

Chapter 2. Misinterpreting Ibn Gabirol?

Questions, Doubts, and Remarks on a Problematic Latin Translation

Solomon Ibn Gabirol's *Fons vitae* is one of the most intriguing texts of the Middle Ages. Its doctrines provided medieval Latin philosophers with intricate theories based on Ibn Gabirol's examination of hypostatic layers of reality. As other contributions to this volume have shown, the *Fons vitae* expounds a vertical examination of reality which, starting from corporeal beings, reaches the highest principles of caused existence — prime matter and the first form.¹ Ibn Gabirol's discussion, however, is often marked by apparent inconsistencies, perilous doctrinal outcomes, and a few contradictions. These theoretical tensions started an interpretative fragmentation concerning both the meaning and applicability of Ibn Gabirol's doctrines, which was particularly vivid during the thirteenth century.

Hundreds of years later, the meaning of Ibn Gabirol's work is still debated and fragmented into a plurality of interpretations. This exegetic richness is mostly bound to the limited textual resources (and the many doubts surrounding them) that scholars have at their disposal in examining the *Fons vitae*. While the original Arabic text is lost, Ibn Gabirol's writing is extant through three different and partial versions: the Judeo-Arabic fragments of the original text, the Latin translation of the entire work, and a Hebrew epitome realized in the thirteenth century. The fragments of the original Arabic text are both few in number and partial but constitute an invaluable source to grasp the original scope of Ibn Gabirol's writing.² The Hebrew epitome by Shem Tov Ibn Falaquera summarizes some of the theoretical cores and arguments proposed by Ibn Gabirol.³ However,

¹ See the chapters by Pessin and Cavaleiro de Macedo in this volume.

² See Fenton, 'Gleanings from Mōseh Ibn 'Ezra'; and Pines, 'Sefer 'Arūgāt ha-Bōsem'.

³ On Falaquera's translation, see Dal Bo's dedicated chapter in this volume.

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in accordance with the stylistic nature of an epitome, the text was subject to a profound degree of reshaping and summarizing. Finally, the Latin version of the *Fons vitae*, translated into Latin by Dominicus Gundissalinus and John of Spain in the second half of the twelfth century, displays some serious problems of consistency when contrasted with both the Arabic and Hebrew versions. Because of these discrepancies, which sometimes touch central theoretical passages, the aims and scope of Ibn Gabirol's work are noticeably difficult to assess.

Some scholars, like Fernand Brunner and Jacques Schlanger, tried to amend the theoretical dysfunctionality of the text by referencing Ibn Gabirol's supposed perspectivism. According to them, the divergent doctrinal positions presented by the *Fons vitae* would be the result of a rather peculiar approach by the author, focusing on the particular aspect of the problem he was dealing with in each single thematic part of the text, somewhat similarly to Plotinus and other Neoplatonic philosophers.⁴ Other scholars, particularly Sarah Pessin, have pointed out that the most theoretical discrepancies appear to have originated in the Latin translation of the text. Pessin has contrasted the Latin version of the *Fons vitae* with both the sources used by Ibn Gabirol and the Arabic and Hebrew versions of his work. Her examination displayed that the Latin version is characterized by a radical semantic slippage. In turn, this mis- or re-interpretation is based on the incorrect translation of two terms, *al-'ir'adah* and *al-'unşur al-'āwual*, rendered as *voluntas* and *materia prima*, respectively.⁵ As a consequence of misunderstanding the original meaning of the text, the Latin translators have Aristotelised, consciously or unconsciously, the *Fons vitae*.⁶ Many of the theoretical discrepancies characterizing it resulted from this original misunderstanding.

The present contribution aims to shed some light on the questions about whether and how Gundissalinus and John of Spain Aristotelised the *Fons vitae*. I want to provide contextual data and some further doubts about the making of the Latin translation of Ibn Gabirol's work. In the first section, I outline Dominicus Gundissalinus's activity as translator and philosopher. Next, the second section examines Gundissalinus's interpretation of Ibn Gabirol and his gradual detachment from some of Ibn Gabirol's doctrines he previously held. Gundissalinus's disingenuousness in his first reception of the *Fons vitae* is then contrasted with Ibn Daud's harsh criticism of Ibn Gabirol. My analysis shows that Ibn Daud interprets the *Fons vitae* in a noticeably Aristotelian way, consistent with the Latin rendering of the text. Finally, in the last section, I explore different possibilities (and raise some doubts) about the Latin translation of the *Fons vitae*.

4 See, for instance, Brunner, 'La doctrine de la matière chez Avicébron' and Schlanger, *La philosophie de Salomon Ibn Gabirol*, p. 181.

5 See Pessin, *Ibn Gabirol's Theology of Desire*.

6 See Pessin, *Ibn Gabirol's Theology of Desire*, pp. 53–117.