

Varieties of Divine Providence in Medieval Jewish Philosophy

Editor's note: Baruch A. Brody z"l (1943-2018) was one of the most prominent bioethicists in America as well as a contributor to both general and Jewish philosophy. When Prof. Brody passed away, he had been working on a paper on divine providence in Jewish philosophy. Like his article on the afterlife in volume 17 of this journal, the paper was designed as a presentation and critical appraisal of the views of medieval Jewish thinkers, followed by his own analysis based on elements in his earlier critique. He had not written the final section, however. An anonymous reviewer for this journal recommended publication despite the paper's unfinished state. Based on the reader's suggestions, and with the consent of the Brody family, I have made minor changes and inserted a few bracketed footnotes. I thank Rabbi Dr. Shlomo Brody for helping prepare the paper for publication.

Deism, which emerged in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, was the belief that the physical universe was created and designed by God, but that He had no further relations with what He had created. God was needed according to the deists to explain the existence of the universe, but had no other role to play. It

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required, of course, just one step to move from deism to secular naturalism; one only needed to offer scientific accounts of the origins of the universe. But even before that occurred, it was clear that deism was not really a religion. If God had nothing to do with the physical universe, why should anything in that universe (including human beings) have anything to do with God? The deistic God was no more an object of religious worship than Aristotle's many prime movers, one for each of the spheres.

My purpose in making these remarks about deism is to introduce a discussion of the meaning and significance of the religious belief in divine providence. The belief in divine providence is the belief that deism is wrong; God exercises providence over the universe. But what does that mean? Many possible versions of this belief exist, and one can believe in several (perhaps even all) of them. To make things more complicated, there are different possible understandings of these versions. I think that it will be useful to begin with a brief characterization of the major ones that will receive further development throughout this essay:

1. *Epistemic providence*: God knows everything that is happening in the universe. For some, this includes knowledge of everything that will happen in the future. Others will deny such knowledge, at least when human free will is a causal factor.
2. *Caring providence*: God, for reasons that may be known only by Him, wants certain things to occur and others not to occur.
3. *Causal providence*: God is the cause of what occurs. For some, this is a general providence, a providence that is exercised by God's creating the universe subject to certain causal laws so that particular occurring events are directly caused by previous events in accordance with these divinely willed laws. (Taken alone, this view sounds similar to deism.) Others insist, however, that such providence is at least sometimes, or perhaps always, an individual providence, wherein God directly causes the particular event to occur.
4. *Human causal providence*: God's causal providence, general or individual, extends directly to human actions about which human beings seemingly deliberate and choose. Some will be led to the conclusion that human beings are not free choosers of their actions. Others will insist that they are, despite this providence, or will deny that human causal providence exists when human beings act freely.

5. *Moral providence*: God reveals to human beings what He wants them to do and what He wants them not to do.

6. *Justice providence*: God, as part of his providential rule, causes the good (those who follow his wishes) to be rewarded and the bad (those who do not) to be punished. These rewards and punishments may be seen as occurring in this life, or they may be seen as occurring primarily in some future life after the person has died.

7. *Eschatological providence*: God will cause the existence of a perfected world at the end of current historical time.

It is the belief in divine providence that turns the belief in a creator into a religion. For example, causal providence, especially in the individual version, grounds petitionary prayer, and moral providence grounds religious morality and ritual.

These beliefs about providence are not problem-free. Causal providence raises questions about the point of moral providence. Human causal providence, especially in the individual version, raises questions about human freedom. And justice providence is challenged by the observation that the wicked often prosper while the good often suffer. These problems have long been recognized and much of the philosophy of religion is devoted to an examination of them.

Judaism, like other theistic religions, believes in divine providence. But different major thinkers have understood that belief differently, in part because they have attempted to resolve these problems differently. This paper has two major goals. The first is to review some of the major medieval attempts to deal with these problems, thereby illustrating the variety of traditional positions. The second is to provide an account of components of divine providence that synthesizes some of the major insights of these authors, avoids unwarranted philosophical assumptions that complicated their accounts, and provides a sound basis for the many religious practices grounded in these beliefs in divine providence.¹

1. [As indicated in my editor's note, the author passed away before he was able to provide his original account. - Ed.]

I. Sa'adyah Gaon²

A. Human Causal Providence

Treatise IV of *Sefer Emunot ve-De'ot* begins with a straightforward denial of human causal providence (again, the thesis that God's providence extends to human actions):

The Creator, magnified be His majesty, does not in any way interfere with the actions of men and He does not exercise any force upon them either to obey or to disobey Him (IV:4, p. 188).

In defense of this claim, Sa'adyah offers a large number of arguments: (1) Our introspective awareness of our ability to choose one course of action or the other without any power limiting that choice. This is, presumably, part of the phenomenology of deliberation; (2) The rabbinic statement that "Everything is in the hands of heaven except the fear of Heaven (*Berakhot* 33b); (3) Furthermore, and probably most importantly, the whole notion of divine reward and punishment presupposes human freedom and not divine causation. As he puts it: "If God were to force him to perform some act, it would not be proper for Him to punish him for it" (p. 189). For Sa'adyah, human actions are free just because God does not cause them.

But there is a familiar argument that, even if uncaused by God, human actions are not free because God has foreknowledge.³ If God knows in advance what you will choose to do and what you actually will do, then you cannot fail to do it because God is omniscient. Sa'adyah begins his response by reminding us that God's foreknowledge does not mean divine causality. But it could still be the case that God's foreknowledge precludes human freedom. How can you do anything other than what God knows you will do? Sa'adyah is aware of this argument and offers the following enigmatic response to it:

Should it be asked therefore: But if God foreknows that a human being will speak, is it conceivable that he should remain silent? We would answer simply that, if a human being decided instead of speaking to be

2. Sa'adyah's views are found primarily in the Arabic work generally known by the Hebrew title *Sefer Emunot ve-De'ot*. Citations here are found primarily in *Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, trans. Samuel Rosenblatt (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1947).

3. The roots of this argument are to be found in Aristotle's discussion of the Sea Battle in *De Interpretatione*, 9. There, however, the discussion is about the truth of a future-tensed statement about a human action or inaction, and not about God's foreknowledge.

silent, we would merely modify our original assumption by saying that God knows that the human being will be silent (IV:4, p. 191).

What makes this response enigmatic is that it seems to be saying that the later choice of the person as to whether he will speak causes what God knew in advance, and this type of backward causality seems untenable, both because backward causation is problematic per se and because of the difficulty in understanding how, in particular, human beings can cause God's beliefs.

But I think that we can understand what Sa'adyah is saying, and even find his answer plausible, if we forget about all causal claims and employ instead a conditional analysis built upon the notion of dependency. Sa'adyah wants to say that, despite appearances, all of the following claims are true, and their joint truth establishes that divine foreknowledge and human freedom are compatible.

- (1) At time t2, you are free to speak.
- (2) At time t2, you are free to keep silent.
- (3) If you speak at t2,
 - i. God knew at t1 that you would speak at t2
 - ii. It is also true that if you had kept silent at t2, He would have known at t1 that you would keep silent at t2.
- (4) If you keep silent at t2,
 - i. God knew at t1 that you would keep silent at t2
 - ii. It is also true that if you had spoken at t2, He would have known at t1 that you would speak at t2.

We are assuming, since humans are free, that (1) and (2) are true. Both (3i) and (4i) are true because of God's omniscience. The truth of (3ii) and (4ii) follow from God's omniscience and the standard logic of counterfactual conditionals. So, no matter what you do, (1)-(4) are jointly true and that is all that Sa'adyah needs to establish to make his point that freedom and foreknowledge are compatible.

There is an alternative potential interpretation of this text, which emerges if we apply an analysis offered by the contemporary philosopher Trenton Merricks, who does not discuss Sa'adyah but develops his own theory of divine foreknowledge and human freedom.⁴ This approach asks us to distinguish between what the truth of the

4. See Trenton Merricks, "Truth and Freedom," *Philosophical Review* 118, 1 (2009): 29-57.

proposition depends upon (what fact F1 about the world must exist for the proposition to be true) and what caused the proposition *to be true* (what earlier fact caused F1). There is no cause of the person speaking or of their keeping silent except their free choice, and what they choose to do does not cause God to have held the correct belief beforehand. That would be an untenable case of backward causation. But what is the truth about what God did believe beforehand does depend upon what the person chooses to do. Backward *dependency* is quite different from backward *causation*, and there is legitimate backward dependency. I think that the two analyses are quite compatible.

Having made and defended this strong claim that divine foreknowledge and human freedom are compatible, Sa'adyah spends considerable time explaining away scriptural verses and incidents that seem to affirm God's causation of human actions. Sa'adyah agrees that there are passages of this type, but argues that, contrary to appearances, they do not affirm that God causes human actions. A classic example is the passage stating that God hardened Pharaoh's heart so that he did not let the Jews leave Egypt (Ex. 7:3). Many of the classical commentators have been troubled by this passage; did God truly prevent Pharaoh from choosing to let the Jews go?⁵ Sa'adyah suggests the following idea: Pharaoh freely chose to not let the Jews go, but he "needed a bolstering of the spirit in order not to die from the plagues . . . but remain alive until the rest of the punishment had been completely visited upon him" (199; see also 216). God gave him courage to carry out that choice. The difference is subtle, but important; it enables Sa'adyah to say that, even in this case, Pharaoh acted freely since, with God's help, he carried out that which he had freely chosen to do. Sa'adyah is saying that you act freely if you do what you freely choose to do, even if you need help in carrying out your free choice. Sa'adyah's commitment to denying God's control of human actions is clearly illustrated in this discussion.

5. Thus, Maimonides (*Laws of Repentance* 6:3) says that there are sinners who deserve so much to be punished that God prevents them from repenting their sins. This approach, while quite popular, is strongly criticized by Abarbanel in his commentary (Ex. 7:3) because it is incompatible with the strong Torah commitment to the efficacy of repentance.

B. Justice Providence

Sa'adyah believes in divine reward for the good and divine punishment for the wicked but he downplays the significance of that belief for how the good and the wicked fare in this world. The just distribution of rewards and punishments is what occurs in the World to Come.⁶

God has also informed us that during our entire sojourn in this workaday world, He keeps a record of everyone's deeds. The recompense for them, however, has been reserved by Him for the second world, which is the world of compensation (Treatise IV, p. 208),

At the beginning of Treatise IX he reinforces this claim by arguing that this world is not structured to be the place of divine rewards and punishments and by quoting a number of rabbinic statements to support his view.⁷ So for Sa'adyah, the righteous may pray that they fare well in this world, and do good deeds to support that prayer, but they have no reason to trust that this will actually occur.⁸

Despite having made this point, Sa'adyah seems reluctant to cut off all connections between what happens to an individual in this world and his merits or demerits. So he adds the following:

Notwithstanding this, however, God does not leave his servants entirely without reward in this world for virtuous conduct and without punishment for iniquities. For such requitals serve as a sign and an example of the total compensation which is reserved for the time when a summary account is made of the deeds of God's servants (ibid.).

This account leaves open the issue of justice in the distribution of goods and evils in this world, so Sa'adyah presents still another idea, no doubt prompted by his sense of the apparent injustice of the distribution of the good and of suffering in this world:

6. See my discussion of his account of these rewards and punishments in Baruch A. Brody, "Jewish Reflections on the Resurrection of the Dead," *Torah u-Madda Journal* 17 (2016-2017): 93-122, at pp. 96-100.

7. One to which he ascribes particular importance is the familiar *mishnah* in *Avot* (4:21) that exhorts us to treat this world as a vestibule in which we should prepare ourselves to be fit to enter the main hall, the World to Come.

8. This may seem strange to many contemporary religious people whose practices seem to suggest that they believe otherwise. But a similar point was made by R. Avraham Yeshayahu Karelitz (Hazon Ish), in *Emunah u-Bittahon (Faith and Trust)*, trans. Yaakov Goldstein [Jerusalem: Am HaSefer, 2008] who insists that trust in God is just the belief in causal providence: "Trusting in Hashem is not [the belief that all will be good for the righteous]—but rather the belief that nothing happens by chance, and that everything that occurs under the sun is a result of a decree of the Almighty" (pp. 38-40).

... It often happens that a generally virtuous person may be afflicted with many failings, on the account of which he deserves to be in torment for the greater part of his life. On the other hand, a generally impious individual may have to his credit many good deeds, for the sake of which he deserves to enjoy well-being for the greater part of his earthly existence (p. 211).

The good suffer in this world for the sins they have committed so that their life in the next world is pure reward, while the bad prosper in this world so that they receive the reward they deserve for their good deeds in this world, leaving the next world as a place of pure punishment for their evil deeds.

In addition to this general claim, Sa'adyah presents a series of ideas designed to at least partially restore our sense of justice providence. The good may suffer as a trial of their goodness so that they may receive greater rewards in the World to Come if they pass that trial.⁹ He offers a series of reasons why evil people may survive and continue to flourish (e.g., that it is necessary so that some good person will benefit from them).

At one point (p. 194), Sa'adyah addresses the crucial questions raised by any theory of justice providence: how does it relate to causal providence and the natural order of the universe and how does it relate to human freedom. The latter question particularly troubles him. If God, as part of justice providence, decrees that someone should be killed or have his money stolen from him, what does that do to the freedom of the murderer or of the thief? Sa'adyah's response is: "For as long as [divine] wisdom demands the extermination of the individual in question, even if the actual slayer should not in his malice slay him, the victim might perish by some other means." But others might also freely choose not to slay him. So Sa'adyah must mean that he will die of natural causes. This raises another question. If there is a natural order of the universe, and God's causal providence is exercised indirectly through it, can justice providence be obtained in this world without God miraculously intervening as needed? If, on the other hand, God's causal providence is exercised directly without a natural order, so it is easy to see how justice providence can obtain, how do we explain the natural regularities we observe?

If Sa'adyah had stuck to his original claim that justice obtains only in the World to Come, this would be less of a problem because the natural

9. Sa'adyah, 214-15, even attempts to use this to justify the suffering of innocent children, but it is unclear how they can pass such a trial.

order applies only to this world, while the World to Come follows laws of justice. But once he makes these specific claims about this world, he must face this issue, and I do not see where he confronts it. We will see whether and how other authors confront this issue as we progress in our study.

II Maimonides¹⁰

A. Human Providence

Maimonides, like Sa'adyah, positively denies human causal providence (hereafter referred to simply as human providence) and insists that human actions are freely chosen without any divine impact. He calls this belief “a pillar of Torah and the commandments” in chapter five of Laws of Repentance, which is devoted to this topic and in which he says:

If a person wants to go on the good path and to be righteous, he may do so. And if he wants to go on the wrong path and be wicked, he may do so. . . . That is to say that the creator does not force a person or decree upon a person to do good or bad but their heart is given to them. . . . And do not wonder or say how can a man do whatever he wants . . . can anything be done in the world without God's permission? . . . In the same way that He wants . . . all things in the world to behave like their custom that He has ordained, He wants that the person has the permission that all his deeds are his and God does not force him or incline him, but rather he by himself, with the wisdom the creator gave him, can do whatever a person is able to do (5: 1-4).¹¹

There are several crucial points to note about this passage, and about its invocation of both human freedom and the natural order:

- Maimonides denies that God even inclines a person to do the good or the bad. People's choices are theirs, and while their pattern of past behavior may incline them to behave one way or the other, that is due to their choices and not the choice of God.
- Maimonides, in drawing the comparison between the natural

10. As always, when discussing Maimonides, I begin by looking at his discussion in the *Mishneh Torah*, as it was in Jewish history his most influential work. But especially on this topic, I will pay considerable attention to what he says in his *Guide for the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines (University of Chicago: 1963).

11. Maimonides, in a part of the passage we did not quote, denies any predestination. The classical commentators on his text attempt to explain away various talmudic passages that seem to say otherwise, but discussion of that talmudic exegesis lies beyond the scope of this paper.

order (“their custom that He has ordained”) and human freedom, implies that God is not the direct cause of what occurs naturally. Causal providence does not mean that God directly causes every natural event to occur; He is the ultimate cause because He created the world subject to a natural order by which things are directly caused. Similarly, human actions are directly caused by human free choices, but they are made possible by God’s granting human beings freedom. He is the ultimate cause of those actions.¹²

– None of this is incompatible with God’s being the direct cause of a human action (for example God compelling Pharaoh to not let the Jews leave) or the direct cause of some event that is not in accord with the usual natural order.

Like Sa’adyah, Maimonides is very aware of the problem that belief in divine foreknowledge poses for belief in human freedom, but he approaches that problem quite differently:

We have already explained in chapter two of the Laws of the Fundamentals of the Torah that God does not know with a knowledge that is separate from Him as do people whose knowledge and self are different; He and His knowledge are one . . . and because this is so, we do not have the ability to know how God knows all created things and their actions (ibid 5:5).

This is an extremely difficult passage to interpret.¹³ I think that what is most important is to focus on the theme of God being identical with His knowledge. What does it mean? Why does Maimonides assert its truth? And how does this solve the problem of foreknowledge and freedom? Any satisfactory interpretation of his views on this point must answer these three questions. We need to turn to the *Guide* for more insight into Maimonides’ position on these issues.

12. [See also Guide 2:48. The difference between this account and deism can be explained via a point made by Eliezer Goldman. The key point is that, in deism, God is truly separate from the world, but in Maimonides there is a system of emanations or influences from God. See Goldman’s “Responses to Modernity in Orthodox Jewish Thought,” *Studies in Contemporary Jewry*, 2 (1986): 57. - Ed.].

13. For an interesting survey of views ranging from Meiri and Rivash up to R. Elhanan Wasserman and *Or Sameah*, see vol. 1 of R. Yosef Cohen’s *Sefer ha-Teshuvah* (Jerusalem: Machon Harav Frank, 2006), 420-25. Some of the interpretations assimilate Maimonides’ view to the claim of Boethius that the issue does not exist because God and His knowledge are outside of time. But that interpretation does not do justice to the passage quoted in the text.

His discussion of them (in *Guide* 3:20) centers on the nature of divine knowledge, but understanding it requires some understanding of Maimonides' general views about divine attributes. I refer here not to his special view about the negative understanding of these attributes (namely, we can say only what God is not), but rather to his views about divine simplicity. Maimonides, like most other medieval Jewish and non-Jewish philosophers,¹⁴ is committed to the view of divine simplicity, the view that God is a total unity in which no parts or differences exist. His incorporeality rules out his having spatial parts. But simplicity is a more demanding belief; it requires that God be *metaphysically* simple. This is understood as meaning that (1) God does not have multiple different attributes and (2) His single attribute is identical with His very essence.¹⁵ It is assumed in much of the contemporary literature that this belief was accepted as part of the view that God is absolutely perfect and that His having many attributes, separate from His very essence, would compromise his absolute perfection.¹⁶

Maimonides applies this doctrine to divine knowledge in the following passage:

. . . So although we do not know the true reality of His knowledge, because it is His essence, we do know that He does not apprehend at certain times while being ignorant at others. I mean to say that no new knowledge comes to Him in any way . . . that nothing among all the beings is hidden from Him; and that his knowledge of them does not abolish their natures, for the possible remains as it was with the nature of possibility (p. 483).

The answer to our first two questions is that these claims about knowledge are just part of his commitment to divine simplicity. But what about the third question? How does our answer to the first two solve the problem of divine foreknowledge and human freedom? I interpret the passage to be saying the following: God will certainly know what you have

14. I used to think that this belief about divine attributes, often called the belief in divine simplicity, was just a Jewish and Muslim way of criticizing Trinitarian Christianity. But that cannot be the whole story because the classical Western fathers (Augustine, Anselm and Aquinas) all accepted this belief as well.

15. This is a difficult doctrine to understand, and faces many paradoxes. For a long time, it fell out of fashion, although there has been a revival of interest in it in recent years. See the entry "Divine Simplicity" in the online *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* for a full discussion.

16. Others, more historically inclined, see its acceptance as a result of the influence of Neoplatonic theories of the One and early Islamic theories of God's unity. See Alexander Altmann "the Divine Attributes," *Judaism* 15,1 (1966:) 40-60.

chosen after you choose it. But since His knowledge does not change, He must have known before you choose what you would choose. But you did choose freely. So we must deny the claim that God's foreknowledge entails that you could not choose otherwise, and that's okay because the logic of claims about God's knowledge is not the same as the logic of claims about our knowledge, since the two are so metaphysically different.

As is well known, R. Abraham ben David (Rabad), in his gloss on a similar remark of Maimonides in *Laws of Repentance* 5:5, criticizes Maimonides for raising the question but not really answering it. But the truth of the matter is that if you combine his remarks about divine simplicity in *Repentance* 5:5 with his view that God's nature is unchanging, you get a real answer, the one we just explained. But notice that this answer requires accepting two metaphysical views about God: divine simplicity and divine immutability. Sa'adyah's response requires no such metaphysical claims. In this regard, Sa'adyah's view has an advantage over that of Maimonides.

B. Justice Providence

A fuller understanding of Maimonides' position about providence, and its implication for justice providence, requires us to consult the *Guide*, where the topic of divine providence is discussed extensively (especially in 3:17-18). Just before that discussion, Maimonides was discussing unacceptable views about divine knowledge and he claimed that those views grew out of concerns about justice providence:

What first impelled them toward this speculation was the fact that they considered the circumstances of the people, the wicked and the good, and that in their opinion these matters were not well ordered (463-64).

He presents five positions about divine providence, and its relation to justice, and he quickly rejects three. One is the Epicurean view of no providence, which he rejects on general cosmological grounds. The second is the view that God directly causes everything that occurs and that, because everything is God's will, there can be no injustice in what occurs. The third claims that human beings act freely, and when there appear to be injustices in their fates, God compensates them in the other world. The fourth is that God cannot do an unjust action, so that a good person cannot be afflicted, and that providence watches over all beings, including leaves and ants. Maimonides, though, adopts a position that he describes as a mixture of Aristotle and Jewish tradition. Its major claims are:

- (1) Human beings act upon their own free will. (This is why he rejects the second position.)
- (2) All that befalls human beings befalls them equitably (this is why he rejects the third position, which is close to Sa'adyah's).
- (3) Justice providence extends only to human beings; all other living creatures are governed by chance, from a justice perspective, even while they are subject to natural forces. (This latter part is derived from Aristotle and disposes of the fourth view.)
- (4) This justice providence over individual human beings is present in proportion to their excellence.

Claims (3) and (4) raise obvious questions. How does justice providence operate in relation to the natural order? And why don't less excellent beings still deserve full justice? There are two broad lines of interpretations of Maimonides' claims about justice providence.¹⁷ One, a more conservative, traditionalist interpretation, is that God, as an act of justice providence, directly intervenes, in proportion to people's excellence, to stop harms that would naturally befall them. This would be very much like one of the interpretations we offered of Sa'adyah's position. The other reading, offered by Samuel Ibn Tibbon (translator of the *Guide*) and his son Moses, is that justice providence involved no direct divine intervention. Rather, Samuel argues, the more perfect you are, the more you develop your intellect, the more you recognize the unimportance of the harms that befall you because you are focused on the true goal of life—knowledge of God.¹⁸ In addition, Moses Ibn Tibbon observes that there is a connection between knowing science and being able to protect oneself.¹⁹

17. See, for example, Moshe Halbertal, *Maimonides: Life and Thought* (Princeton University Press, 2014), 338-41. Note that divine providence is similar to divine prophecy, according to Maimonides, since both require human attainment of excellence. (See *Guide* 2:32 [prophecy] and 3:17-18 [providence]).

18. See especially *Guide* 3:23 on Job.

19. Of course, since both naturalistic interpretations (Samuel and Moses) downplay the role of God, they seem problematic to conservative interpreters. [To clarify: In 3:17-18, Maimonides declares, "Providence is consequent upon the intellect" (pp. 473-77). Many interpreters maintain that he conceives of the relationship between intellectual excellence and providence as naturalistic, and they seek a way of explaining how the former leads to the latter. The explanations of the Ibn Tibbons are examples of such an account. One may combine these explanations, and refer as well to the ability of an intellectually perfected individual to escape corporeality. - Ed.]

III. Interim Summary

We have reviewed the views of Sa'adyah and Maimonides on divine providence. There are some striking similarities between their views but also important differences between their views:

1. Both are strong opponents of the belief in human providence because they believe that justice requires that human beings act freely if they are to be rewarded or punished and that this is incompatible with God's causing their behavior. Maimonides believes that certain human actions, like the decisions of Pharaoh, are caused by God,²⁰ but Sa'adyah offers a different account of such cases in which human freedom still exists.
2. Both insist that God has foreknowledge of human actions despite the fact that the actions are freely chosen. To make this possible, Maimonides invokes the doctrine of divine simplicity and divine immutability. Sa'adyah offers a reconciliation of these two views without invoking such metaphysical beliefs.
3. Neither believes in the full working of justice providence in this world. Maimonides believes in justice providence. "Providence is consequent upon the intellect" (Guide 3:22-23), and human beings receive providence only in proportion to their excellence, as a result of which only some human beings will receive protection. For Sa'adyah, God has his reasons for extending some justice providence to both good and bad persons, but in the end, justice providence is really a feature of the World to Come.
4. Neither has a fully-worked out theory of the relation between human freedom, natural providence, and justice providence.

IV. Nahmanides

To understand the position of Nahmanides on issues of providence, we need to consider a wide variety of sources.²¹ These include two of

20. [There are also naturalistic interpretations of Maimonides' account of hardening of the heart. For example: if we apply *Guide* 2:48, Pharaoh's earlier free hardening of *his own* heart took away his free will on later occasions in a naturalistic fashion. He could not break the habit. - Ed.]

21. This feature of his work helps explain its relative neglect in secular histories of Jewish thought. When you combine this feature with the facile claim that Nahmanides is a Kabbalist, and not a philosopher, this neglect becomes easy to understand.

his essays²² and his remarks in his commentary on the Torah and his commentary on the book of Job.²³ Moreover, his various remarks don't always fit easily within one interpretation. My goal is not to offer one account that completely explains all of his remarks, but rather to offer a picture of the tensions found in his remarks.

A. Human Providence

In his commentary on the Torah, Naḥmanides makes a startling claim about human freedom and human providence, one that also has important implications for the meaning of eschatological providence. Commenting on Deut. 30:6, he says:

The Rabbis have said that if a person comes to purify himself, God helps him. God promises that if you return to Him with all your heart, He will help you. . . . From the time of creation, it was in the power of people to do what they want, good or bad. That was true in all of the time of the Torah in order that they should have a reward for choosing the good and a punishment for choosing the bad. But in the days of the Messiah, it will be natural for them to choose the good . . . and people will return in those days to how they were before the sin of Adam. . . . In the days of the Messiah, they will have no rewards or punishment because in those days humans will have no will; they will do naturally the fit action. Therefore there will be no rewards or punishments because those are dependent upon the will.

These themes had already been developed in his commentary on chapters 2-3 of Genesis. Naḥmanides seems to be making several points here:

- a) Before the sin of Adam, human beings naturally did what was right. The ability to do what they wanted by willing to do it emerged after the sin of Adam, and it will disappear in the messianic era.
- b) Reward and punishment is appropriate only for actions performed after the sin of Adam but before the coming of the Messiah, because it is only during this limited period of time that people act freely in accordance with their will.

22. *Torat Hashem Temimah*, in *Kitvei Ramban*, ed. Chaim (Charles) Chavel (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook) 1:139-75; and *Sha'ar ha-Gemul*, *ibid.*, 2: 264-311. Numbers in parentheses for *Kitvei Ramban* refer to volume and page.

23. Chavel, 1: 9-128. Ramban's introduction is of special importance and a quotation below (under "Justice Providence") is from that introduction.

c) Repentance is a special case. Once you freely choose to repent, God will help you overcome obstacles that stand in the way of repentance.

There are many puzzling features of this account.

- One is how to explain the sinning of Adam and Eve since they did not have the will to choose until after they sinned.
- The second is to understand the purpose of their being created; it could not be, as many have suggested, to enable them to receive rewards for their good deeds, because they were created in a way (without will and choice) that precluded deserving rewards.
- But the largest problem is with Naḥmanides' attitude towards free will. It seems to be a punishment for sin, rather than a gift of God that distinguishes humans from animals. To quote Isaac Abarbanel:

All that is good and complete in a human being is in the choice and the ability to do good or bad according to his wishes. If that were not so, he would not be a person, and God would not have commanded him that he could eat from all the trees of the garden but must not eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. A commandment does not apply except to someone who has choice and will.²⁴

I have a speculative hypothesis to explain Naḥmanides' thinking that at least resolves the second and third issues. The key to this hypothesis is a remark by Naḥmanides commenting on Gen. 2:17. Rejecting the view that humankind was always doomed to mortality, Naḥmanides says the following:

According to the opinion of our rabbis, if Adam had not sinned, he would never have died. For the higher soul that was given to him lives forever. And it was God's wish for him at the time of his creation that he would cling to God forever and God would sustain him forever, as I explained on the verse "And God saw that it was good."

God had not created humans with free will so that they can earn merits and be rewarded. God had created humans as perfect beings to be with Him always, and they needed no merits to be with God forever. But Adam marred this perfection by sinning (leave aside question #1 about

24. Abarbanel, commentary to Gen. 2:15.

how he could do so) and this original plan was no longer possible. So God gave humans free will to enable them to earn the merits required to be with God forever at the time of the messiah. Free will is not a punishment; it's second best, but the best available for humans after Adam's sin.

Whether or not this interpretation is correct, the crucial point to note is the limited role of God in determining how humans act. Originally, human beings were so constituted that they always did what was the right thing to do. Given that this was so, God had no need to cause individual human actions. The most one could say, using classical terminology, is that God exercised general species providence over human actions, but he did not exercise individual providence over the specific actions of individual human beings. This will also be true at the time of the Messiah.²⁵ In the interim period, human beings have free will; God helps the efforts of the penitent, but otherwise, what you do is up to you.

The last point (c) about repentance resonates very well with Nahmanides' discussion of God's hardening of Pharaoh's heart (Ex. 7:3), a text which, as noted earlier, has troubled many since it seems to take away Pharaoh's choice. Nahmanides offers two accounts to explain why Pharaoh should be punished given that, at least in the second five plagues, his refusal was due to God acting to harden his heart. The first is the Maimonidean explanation that he was punished because of his refusal after the first five plagues. He did not deserve to be able to repent, so God hardened his heart so that he would not repent. The second is his own explanation: that God knew that if Pharaoh sent the Jews out, it would not be a true repentance; he would be doing it only because he was afraid. So God prevented him from performing this pseudo-repentance. The point that emerges from both of these passages is that acts of repentance are treated differently. God intervenes to help or prevent such acts in a way that to some degree supplants human freedom. Repentance is an exception, but the exception proves the rule that the actions of human beings are usually free and independent of God's wishes. Nahmanides, like all the others we have covered, denies the claim of human providence.

25. It is unclear why he says this will occur at the time of the Messiah, rather than at the time of the Resurrection.

Naḥmanides' view about the change in the human condition after Adam's sin has some of the problems associated with the Pauline view of original sin. To be sure, there is no agreement with Paul that after Adam's sin, humanity is inherently corrupted and can only be saved by an act of divine sacrifice. But there is still the problematic notion that the sin of one individual can permanently harm the moral status of all of their descendants. But perhaps Naḥmanides found this less troubling, living in a Christian environment. Unfortunately, that issue did not arise in his debate before the king, so we cannot get any help from that text on this point.

But even if God does not cause individual human actions, doesn't His foreknowledge mean that there is no freedom? We get a hint about Naḥmanides' views from his discussion of God's testing Abraham when He commands him to sacrifice Isaac:

In my mind, on the matter of tests, it is because the actions of men are completely free in their hands; they can do it if they want and if they don't want, they won't do it. So it is called a test from the perspective of the one who is tested. But from the perspective of the tester, God commands him so as to bring him from potentiality to actuality, so that he will receive the reward of a good deed and not just the reward of a good heart. Know that God tests the righteous when He knows that the righteous person will do it; He tests him so that he can show his righteousness. He doesn't test the wicked, who will not listen (commentary to Gen. 22:1).

This passage begins with a strong affirmation of human freedom and an apparent denial of human providence. It also clearly affirms that the purpose of the test is to reward the person who is tested. But then it limits God's testing to those cases in which He knows that the righteous person will pass the test by doing the action He commands.

B. Justice Providence

In his introduction to his commentary on the book of Job, Naḥmanides makes three central points:

1. He distinguishes between the belief that God knows everything that occurs in the world (epistemic providence), and the belief that God determines what will happen to people, depending upon their behavior (justice providence). Both of these are essential beliefs, but they are two separate beliefs.

2. He believes that the problem of the suffering of the righteous and the flourishing of sinners led to two different types of heretics. One does not believe in epistemic providence, and the other does not believe in justice providence.

3. He believes that the correct solution to the problem of justice providence is to recognize that rewards or punishments extend to the World to Come. Good people who suffer in this world are being punished for their sins so that they will receive only rewards in the World to Come, while sinners who prosper in this world are being rewarded for their good deeds so that their fate in the World to Come is to receive only punishments.

The first two points seem obviously correct, and they support this paper's strategy of differentiating the different components of the belief in divine providence. The third point is similar to Sa'adyah's fundamental account of justice providence. Nahmanides makes the point in the following passage:

This question of Job would not be constantly bothering people if they believed in the world of the souls and in rewards in the World to Come. . . . Therefore, even the completely righteous person that does a small sin should be punished But the punishment is lightened from the righteous because it affects only the inferior thing, his body, and for a limited period of time in this world; and he will receive his reward in the World to Come. . . . Similarly for the sinners: it is unlikely that they did not ever do anything good so they receive their reward [in this world] (1: 23-24).

There is a passage in *Sha'ar ha-Gemul* that helps explain why the ideas in this passage were so important to Nahmanides. The obvious challenge that Jews in the Middle Ages had to confront was, if they were right in their religious beliefs and practices, while the Christians and Muslims were wrong, why was their fate so much worse than the fate of the believers in these other religions? In a period of time in which Jews faced so much persecution, that must have been a major challenge to their faith. Nahmanides uses this idea to deal with the challenge:

In accordance with this standard, most Jews have pain and suffering in this world to a greater extent than other nations. How? It is not possible that other nations do not have good deeds, and it is not possible that Jews don't perform sins. But the idolatrous nations are punished for their sins of idolatry by Gehinnom and by destruction, while the Jews are rewarded by life

eternal. . . . And therefore, the strict law is stretched out before all of Israel to exact a reckoning for the filth of their sins in this world, while the standard of goodness is placed over the idolatrous nations to pay them reward in this world for their pleasing actions and their acts of charity (2:268).

But like Sa'adyah, Nahmanides wants at least some of the righteous to receive rewards in this world. But the way in which he does so raises serious interpretive questions.

One passage seems to offer a straightforward account:

The completely righteous person who is constantly cleaving to God and whose thoughts are never distracted by matters of the world will be constantly protected from all that is occurring, even if it occurs naturally, by constant miracles. . . . Someone who is far from God in his thoughts and deeds, even if his sins do not deserve death, is left to chance. . . . And most of the world belongs to the middle group. . . . It is fitting that what happens to them happens by nature and chance.²⁶

There are many passages that seem to adopt the same approach. I quote two more because they add crucial additional elements:

The reason for now using this name of God [SH-D-Y] is because it is with it that He performs hidden miracles for the righteous: to save them from death and to let them live in times of famine and to redeem them in war from the sword like all the miracles that were performed for Abraham and the other patriarchs (Commentary to Gen. 17:1).

In general, then, when Israel is in perfect [accord with God], constituting a large number, their affairs are not conducted at all by the natural

26. Commentary to Job 36:7, in Chavel 1:108-109. In these discussions, *rishonim* regularly use the notion of chance (*mikreh*). I do not think that they mean an event that is uncaused or purely accidental. I think that they are referring to the Aristotelian notion of chance, defined in the *Physics* as follows:

A man is engaged in collecting subscriptions for a feast. He would have gone to such and such a place for the purpose of getting the money, if he had known. He actually went there for another purpose and it was only incidentally that he got his money by going there; and this was not due to the fact that he went there as a rule or necessarily, nor is the end effected (getting the money) a cause present in himself—it belongs to the class of things that are intentional and the result of intelligent deliberation. It is when these conditions are satisfied that the man is said to have gone by chance (*Physics* II: 5, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon [New York: Modern Library, 20th edition, 1966], 245.

A better word might be coincidence.

[As David Berger points out in the article cited in n. 30 (at pp. 141-43), the Nahmanidean passage cited in the text closely resembles one in *Guide of the Perplexed* 3:18, yet contains significant divergences. - Ed.]

order of things, neither in connection with themselves, nor with reference to their Land, neither collectively nor individually, for God blesses their bread and their water, and removes sickness from their midst, so that they do not need a physician and do not have to observe any of the rules of medicine, just as He said: “For I am the Lord who heals you” (commentary to Lev. 26:11).

Putting these two passages together, and using some of the material from the preface of the Job commentary, we get the following view:

- What happens to most people in this world happens by nature and chance, and is independent of their merits and demerits.
- The completely righteous are a special case, because God will (sometimes? always?) miraculously save them from bad things that would otherwise happen because of natural causes.
- These miracles are “hidden miracles,” presumably because their miraculous nature is not evident.
- Justice providence for the rest of us is provided in the World to Come.
- This situation will change if Israel is righteous; the natural order will no longer prevail over Israel.

But if this is his view, how can he make claim (3) of his remarks in the preface to the Job commentary? If what happens to all except the completely righteous is determined by nature and chance, how can he maintain that what happens to them relates to the inverse type of justice providence he describes in (3)?

There is a much more serious problem. There are other passages in which he seems to be saying something very different. Consider the following oft-quoted passage from *Torat Hashem Temimah*:

We see that a man does not have a share in the Torah of our teacher Moses until he believes that all that occurs to us and our actions are all miracles, and there is in them no nature or the way of the world. . . . For if we say that nature is what sustains and causes everything in the world, then a man does not die or live because of his merits or demerits. Since we believe that God cut off the life of this person before he would have died naturally, behold “the hand of the Lord did this” (Is. 41:20) [caused his death]. And he changed nature just like in the splitting of the Yam Suf. . . (1:153).²⁷

27. Chavel, in his edition, notes at least six other passages in which Naḥmanides makes a similar point. Perhaps the most famous of these passages occurs in his commentary

There is actually an internal tension in this passage, because the beginning seems to deny that a natural order exists while the end seems to suggest that it does exist but is sometimes superseded by God's direct intervention. More crucially, it seems to challenge the claim that divine providence miracles are only for the very righteous or for the very evil (unless anyone who deserves *karet* for even one sin is considered very evil).

What are we to make of all of this? One way of reconciling these conflicting remarks is to affirm that events which occur by the natural order are also acts of divine providence, because God has decided not to intervene. This strategy is adopted by R. Aryeh Leibowitz, who says:

If an individual suffers hardship, and is not saved from calamity, it may be an indication that the individual was not righteous enough to merit divine intervention. . . . In other words, specific individual divine providence is always the determinant of what transpires in one's life. Sometimes specific individual divine providence dictates that God will intervene on one's behalf, and other times specific individual divine providence dictates that God will not.²⁸

This is a thoughtful suggestion about what a follower of Naḥmanides should say. Even though the fate of most of us is determined by nature and chance, God could have chosen to intervene but He did not. But I don't think that this could be the interpretation of a text that says "there is in them no nature or the way of the world."

R. Leibowitz is clearly intending to expand our understanding of divine providence so as to support the centrality for Naḥmanides of divine providence in all human affairs. David Berger argues for a more naturalistic interpretation of Naḥmanides, in which for the most part natural forces determine what happens in the world.²⁹ At the end of his essay, most of which is devoted to establishing the importance of naturalistic themes in Naḥmanides, Berger directly confronts the question of how he interprets the absolute denial of nature by Naḥmanides in passages like the one in *Torat Hashem Temimah*. He says:

to Ex. 13:16.

28. Aryeh Leibowitz, *Hashgacha Pratis* (Brooklyn, NY: Targum Press, 2014), 76. A similar position has recently been advocated in Micah Segelman, "Divine Providence and Natural Forces," *Ḥakirah* 19 (2015): 257-72.

29. David Berger "Miracles and the Natural Order in Nahmanides," repr. in Berger, *Cultures in Collision and Conversation: Essays in the Intellectual History of the Jews* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2011), 129-51.

To resolve this question, we must look again at his standard argument for hidden miracles and the terms in which it is couched. As we have already seen, the essence of this argument is invariably the fact that the Torah promises rewards and punishments that cannot come naturally; hence, they are all miracles. . . . Nahmanides' intention is that "all things that happen to us" in the context of reward and punishment "are miracles."³⁰

While this is an important suggestion, it faces a problem with petitionary prayer. Nahmanides says the following in the very same passage in *Torat Hashem Temimah*:

In short, no person ever prayed to God to give him a good or to save him from something bad, or to curse his enemy by name, unless he believes in all of these miracles as I have said, because it is with a change in the nature of the world all is done, not by something else (1:153-54).

Berger might respond by saying that all answers to petitionary prayers are matters of reward and punishment, a suggestion supported by the language used by Nahmanides himself late in the passage. Even so, I am not sure we can accept that claim about prayer. God may have many reasons for responding to petitionary prayer.

I don't think that we are going to be able to find an interpretation that fully and consistently explains all of what Nahmanides said on this topic. Remember that he has no single treatment of the entire topic; we are trying to interpret remarks made in many different contexts. But I think that the following claims capture the spirit of what Nahmanides said about justice providence:

1. Most of the things that happen in the world are due to the natural order of the world.
2. God always can, and sometimes does, intervene to bring about some other outcome. Some of these interventions are clearly miracles, but others are hidden miracles because they could have occurred naturally.
3. Justice providence is primarily a matter of what occurs in the world of the souls, but God does sometimes intervene in this world for reasons of justice. These may be the rewards and punishments mentioned in the Torah. But these interventions may be rewards

30. *Ibid.*, 149.

for sinners insofar as they have done some good things or punishments for the righteous insofar as they have sometimes sinned.

4. There are those who are fully righteous and to whom God offers special protections.

5. God may also intervene in response to petitionary prayers.

Keep in mind, however, that all this describes the world post-Adam's sin, where humans have free will and deserve rewards and punishment. The messianic world, where free will no longer exists, is governed by other principles.

V. Gersonides³¹

Unlike Nahmanides, Gersonides presents a comprehensive treatment of our issues; it appears in Books III and IV of *The Wars of the Lord*, his major philosophical treatise.³² Book III deals with divine knowledge, while Book IV deals with divine providence. His treatment of these topics is, as we shall see, an attempt to maintain the belief in human freedom by denying epistemic providence, while at the same time defending the belief in justice providence.

A. Human providence

All of the authors we have considered have rejected the doctrine of human providence. If human beings are to be responsible for their actions, making free choices, then God cannot cause their actions. But rejecting human providence is not sufficient to ensure human freedom. There remains the challenge posed by divine foreknowledge, a problem to which Sa'adyah and Maimonides offer very different answers. Although their answers differ, they agree that there is divine foreknowledge of human free choices. It is this assumption that Gersonides challenges in Book III, chapter 4.

He states his position as follows:

31. Much of Gersonides' discussion of the fates of human is presented employing his astrological views. I will try to do justice to his claims about providence without invoking those beliefs.

32. All references will be to the translation by Seymour Feldman, *Wars of the Lord* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society: 1987), volume 2 only.

It has previously been shown that these particulars³³ are ordered and determined in one sense, yet contingent in another. Accordingly, it is evident that the sense in which God knows these particulars is the sense in which they are ordered and determined. . . . On the other hand, the sense in which God does not know particulars is the sense in which they are not ordered, i.e., the sense in which they are contingent. For in the latter sense, knowledge of them is not possible. However, God does know from this aspect that these events may not occur because of the choice, which he has given man But He does not know which of the contradictory outcomes will be realized insofar as they are [genuinely] contingent affairs; for if He did, there would not be any contingency at all (pp.117-18).

From His general knowledge, God knows which choices are possible. But in the case of free choices, contrary to Sa'adyah and Maimonides, He does not know beforehand which choice will be made. This seems a limitation on epistemic providence, but it can be argued that it is not really a limitation, for the future-tensed statement is not true before the events it describes happens. Gersonides himself makes this argument in Book III, chapter 4. The point is that there is no truth to be known before the free choice has been made.

Obviously, the main reason for Gersonides' belief about foreknowledge is his concern to maintain human freedom by insisting that the contingency of human choices requires the absence of divine foreknowledge of what people will choose to do. This view of Gersonides has not won much acceptance in Jewish theology. But it is interesting to note that one recent movement in Protestant theology, the "open theist" position, has adopted a viewpoint that closely resembles the views of Gersonides:

Where Scripture certainly depicts aspects of the future as settled in God's mind (foreknowledge) or by God's Will (predestination), no Scripture forces the conclusion that the future is *exhaustively* settled, that it is necessarily settled for all eternity.³⁴

The natural way to interpret Gersonides' approach would see it as claiming that God does not know what the person will do before the person makes their free decision, but once they make that decision and acted upon it, then God certainly knows what they decided

33. The particulars he is most directly talking about are free human beings.

34. Gregory Boyd, "God Limits his Control" in *Four Views of Divine Providence*, ed. Dennis Jowers (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 197-98.

and what they freely did. Gersonides was criticized on this point by R. Isaac b. Sheshet (Rivash)³⁵ who pointed out that if God knows after the person's action what the person did, but did not know beforehand because it was a free choice, then this is a change in God's knowledge and a challenge to His immutability. This was acceptable to the open theists who saw the doctrine of divine immutability as a corruption of biblical faith by Greek philosophy. So admitting that God's knowledge changed after the free choice was not a problem for them. But Gersonides believed in divine immutability. So how could he resolve this problem?

It seems that Gersonides had a more radical view in mind:

. . . God's knowledge of generated events does not change with the actual generation of these events—even if the event in question has changed from a possible state of affairs to a state of affairs that actually has occurred. . . . God's knowledge of these events is based upon the intelligible order in His intellect, and since this order is immutable, His knowledge does not change when one of these events is realized (p. 134).

This is a difficult passage, but apparently Gersonides is saying that God's knowledge does not change; the occurrence of the event after the person's choice is not knowable by God because He knows only those truths whose truth is based upon the intelligible order. In other words, God does not know what the person actually did. This would be, of course, a major limitation of epistemic providence. In the same responsum, Rivash point out the problems with such a view: "If God does not know [what the person did] after it was done, then God does not know the acts of people, and this nullifies reward and punishment and all the principles of the Torah that are related." In short, Gersonides cannot account for justice providence.

B, Justice Providence

The real problem with Gersonides' position is his attempt to combine three different views that taken together seem to represent an inconsistent triad:

1. To preserve human freedom: God does not have foreknowledge of what you will do.

35. Rivash was a fourteenth century halakhist who discusses this problem in his *Responsa*, #118.

2. To preserve divine immutability: God cannot know what you did after you do it.

3. Individual justice providence is based upon divine knowledge of what you did do.

It looks like the only way out is for Gersonides to reject claim 3. He could do so by rejecting entirely the idea of individual providence or by offering a different account of that providence. Gersonides does believe in at least some cases of individual providence, presumably to avoid the type of objection later raised by the Rivash. But he was well aware of the difficulty that he was left with:

Now that it has been shown that divine providence reaches some men in an individual way, it is necessary to determine how the principle established in the previous book with respect to divine knowledge can be made compatible with this conclusion. [It was maintained in Book Three] that God's knowledge does not extend over particulars insofar as they are particular and individual. It would seem that there is a difficulty here (p.176).

We can put this point another way. Gersonides accepted the standard view that when God created various species, he gave them a nature that was common to all members of the species and was beneficial to them. This is called general providence, and it posed no particular problem for his theory of divine cognition. But like Maimonides, he believed that God acted beneficially to at least some human beings, based upon their merits. It is this particular providence that poses a problem for Gersonides. Since God does not know how people have acted, how can he know which individuals deserve this particular providence? So Gersonides' only way to avoid the inconsistency is to modify thesis 3 by giving an account of divine individual providence that is independent of God's knowing what you actually did do. Seymour Feldman describes his modification as follows: ". . . for Gersonides, the concepts of providence and divine cognition are not identical, although they are closely related."³⁶ I shall try to show something stronger: for Gersonides, divine cognition of what human beings do is totally irrelevant to individual providence.

There are two crucial passages that contain his theory. The first offers his account of how divine individual providence works while the

36. In his translation of *Wars of the Lord*, 145.

second argues that it requires no knowledge by God of the actions of human beings:

Since it is evident from what has preceded that God (may He be blessed) informs some men of impending good or evil fortune because of His providential concern for their preservation, it follows from this fact that His providence with respect to individual men consists in informing them of the good or evil that is to come upon them, so that they will avoid the evil and pursue the good. This communication varies according to the different degrees of proximity to the Agent Intellect exhibited by these men (p. 178).

This [kind of providence] emanates from God because it is its nature to reach anybody who is prepared to receive this kind of providence. . . . Thus, it is clear that our admission that God's knowledge does not range over particulars as particulars does not entail that there is no individual providence with respect to some men, according to the manner in which we have explained this view (p. 181).

Gersonides' first point is that God's individual providence consists of letting it be known what will happen so that people can be guided in their actions. His second point is that this is not targeted to any specific individual, but only worthy individuals will in fact be able to receive this knowledge. As a result of these two points, he concludes that God's providence requires no knowledge on His part of what anyone has done. Providence is possible without epistemic providence.

It is important to note that this account of divine providence involves cases where knowledge of what will happen, known only to good people, can be used by them to avoid evils and obtain goods. The wicked, who do not receive this knowledge, are punished because they act mistakenly. This seems like a very limited type of divine providence. Are there not cases in which divine providence is extended to individuals in some other manner and are there not cases in which individual providence is extended to people who are not sufficiently developed intellectually? There is an important passage in which Gersonides seems to want to allow for those possibilities:

Yet it is possible that they are provided for insofar as they suffer certain pains providentially which protect them from even greater evils either that would have happened to them or direct them toward benefits. An example of this protection against harm would be when a good man is travelling with some merchants [who plan] eventually to go on a sea trip, but he gets a thorn in his foot and cannot continue with them. [This turns out to be] the cause why he escapes from drowning in the sea (p.179).

It is hard to see how this individual providence can operate without God's acting based upon His knowledge of particulars. Robert Eisen discusses two theories that attempt to deal with this issue. One, which he attributes to Charles Touati, accepts this difficulty and therefore argues that these examples are really cases of general providence.³⁷ Eisen correctly points out that this cannot be right because they are given as part of Gersonides' discussion of individual providence. His own view is that Gersonides was treating this case as similar to the cases of providence based upon knowledge. But Eisen himself points out the implausibility of this account: ". . . it is unclear how the perfection of an individual's intellect causes the higher order of providence [individual providence] to become operative and affect events in his vicinity." Nor can we solve the problem by treating these cases as miracles, for Gersonides' theory of miracles cannot allow for knowledge of particulars. As Menachem Kellner points out:

In the present context, Gersonides merely extends this description to include miracles. Miracles occur just as prophecy and providence occur, authored by the Active Intellect, without its having new instances of will or knowledge.³⁸

Gersonides has an extensive discussion of the distribution of good and evil to people given the limitations on divine knowledge imposed by his theory. But I want to focus on one passage that might offer him a way out of all these problems. It would do so by saying that individual justice providence, outside the cases of knowledge of what will occur, does not exist in this world:

Similarly, the view of our rabbis (of blessed memory) is that true reward and punishment occur in the World to Come, and that there is no necessity for reward and punishment in this world to be such that the righteous and the sinner receive material benefits and evils, respectively (p. 197).

Naturally, he would have to explain how rewards and punishments in the World to Come occur without divine knowledge of the actions of people, but I believe, without discussing this here, that the account he offers of immortality (in Book I) offers such an explanation.

37. Robert Eisen, *Gersonides on Providence, Covenant and the Chosen People* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press: 1995), 15-17.

38. Menachem Kellner, "Gersonides on Miracles, the Messiah and the Resurrection," *Daat* 4 (Winter 5740): 25.

I still find this account of providence problematic. Religious people normally think of divine providence as God's responding to their needs based upon their prayers, their merits, or just His general kindness and mercy. I share this understanding, because it is what differentiates the religious worldview from the deistic view. Gersonides' account leaves out this whole dimension of the religious belief in providence because it leaves out all divine knowledge of the individual's needs, prayers, merits, etc. Providence becomes just one more of the laws operative in this world. This is part of what led the "open theists" described above to assert God's knowledge of, and responsiveness to, human actions by denying that God is immutable. But that seems a small price to pay in order to maintain God's responsiveness to individual humans. Unfortunately, Gersonides did not appreciate this possibility. His commitment to divine immutability was absolute.

Let me put this point another way. The religious difficulties faced by Gersonides are not due to his denial of divine foreknowledge in order to preserve human freedom. They are due to his commitment to divine immutability, for that, as Rivash had pointed out, led him to his insistence that God did not know after the person acted what they had done. This, in turn, led to his problems with commitment to divine immutability.

VI. Hasdai Crescas³⁹

A. Human providence

There is a standard account of the contrast between Gersonides and Crescas: Gersonides had been able to account for human free will by denying God's knowledge of individuals qua individuals. Crescas, though, upheld God's absolute knowledge of particulars, and, therefore, Crescas was incapable of allowing free will. He held that human choices and actions are determined by a chain of causes and effects that

39. Crescas' *Or Hashem* is his major philosophical treatise. I have used the translation in Charles Manekin, *Medieval Jewish Philosophical Writings* (Cambridge: 2007). I have also used the translations of part of Part II (on Providence) in Warren Zev Harvey's 1973 doctoral thesis at Columbia University, *Hasdai Crescas' Critique of the Theory of the Acquired Intellect*. Harvey is currently preparing a critical edition of *Or Hashem*. [After Prof. Brody passed away, a full translation of *Or Hashem* was published. See *Light of the Lord*, translated with introduction and notes by Roslyn Weiss (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018) - Ed.]

makes those choices and actions determined.⁴⁰

Late medieval authors criticized Crescas for holding just this deterministic view.⁴¹ Even if he did, this does not mean that he believed in human providence, in the claim that God is the cause of human actions, since we are not told the causes of human actions. But if this account is correct, then human providence is a possibility according to Crescas. I think, however, that there are two accounts in Crescas, one the ordinary account and one that is more subtle than the one normally attributed to him, and I will argue for that claim by a close reading of the text of Crescas.

Crescas begins Part V with an affirmation of the existence of human choice and power. That seems to be a denial of any cause of human choices and actions, in accord with the views of all the authors we have covered. But this accord becomes questionable when he develops his account of human choice. As he says (p. 216): “The foundation of choice is that the nature of the possible exists.” What does this mean for Crescas?

In the course of his analysis, Crescas distinguishes three concepts of the possible:

- *Possible with respect to themselves*: There is nothing incoherent either with the statement *action A was performed* or with the statement *action A was not performed*.
- *Possible with respect to its causes*: Both action A being performed and action A not being performed are compatible with the occurrence of all relevant causal factors
- *Possible with respect to God’s knowledge*: Action A being performed and action A not being performed are both compatible with a complete description of what God knew in advance.

Consider now some action A, which we think of as a result of human choice and power. In what respect are both that action and its opposite possible? The standard interpretation of Crescas, as fully developed by Feldman, is that he is a determinist, believing that human actions are neither causally possible nor possible with respect to God’s knowledge.

40. See Daniel Lasker, “Chasdai Crescas” in *History of Jewish Philosophy*, ed. Daniel Frank and Oliver Leaman (Routledge, 1997), 407.

41. Seymour Feldman, “A Debate Concerning Determinism in Late Medieval Jewish Philosophy” *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 51 (1984): 15-54.

They are, of course, possible with respect to themselves, and that is the only sense in which they are possible. To quote one of many passages in Crescas supporting this interpretation:⁴²

Similarly, it is evident that the arguments taken from God's knowledge of the future and the fact that He informed the prophets of future events, even if they are dependent upon choice, do not imply the annulment of possibility with respect to itself. But things are possible with respect to themselves and necessary with respect to their causes, and from the aspect of their being necessary, they are known prior to their becoming necessary. . . . Thus, the complete truth implied by the Torah and by speculation is that the nature of the possible exists in things with respect to themselves but not with respect to their causes (p. 224).

This is the standard account of Crescas, and it is certainly supported by much of the text. But I think that there is another account that is also found in Crescas, one that is importantly different than the standard account, which relates directly to the question of human providence. The text of Crescas is notoriously difficult, and different accounts are given on different issues, so this is quite possible.

But introducing this account requires a discussion of the distinction between causes and reasons. A simple example will help explain the distinction between these two. Suppose you are hypnotized and ordered by the hypnotist to tie your shoes. You do so. What is the explanation of your doing it? You were caused to tie your shoes by the instructions of the hypnotist. Now suppose, walking down the street, you noticed that your shoes were getting loose. You stopped and tied them. What is the explanation of your doing it? You did it because you were afraid that you might otherwise trip and fall. In the one case, your action was caused. In the other case, you acted for a reason. The two answers are of a very different logical type. But they are both answers to a "why?" question, and in that way, they both are explanations of your action. There has been much controversy about the legitimacy of this distinction between causes and reasons, but its initial intuitive plausibility makes it reasonable to use it in interpreting Crescas.⁴³

42. Strangely enough, shortly afterwards, Crescas asserts just the opposite, claiming that when the will is involved, the actions are possible with respect to their causes. This passage was found in the margins of the Florentine manuscript and then incorporated into the printed texts, and may not necessarily be Crescas' view. [Cf. Zeev Harvey, "Le-zihui Mehabberan shel ha-Determinizim be-Sefer Or Hashem le-Rav Hasdai Crescas: Edut Ketav Yad Firenzah," *Kiryat Sefer* 55, 4 (September 1980): 794-801- Ed.]

43. The controversy was sparked by Donald Davidson's paper, "Actions, Reasons, and Causes," *Journal of Philosophy* 60 (1963): 685-700.

With that distinction in mind, let us turn back to the text of Crescas. He was faced by the standard challenge to determinists who also believe in divine commandments: if all of our actions are caused, then God's commandments are futile. To quote Crescas:

However, if things were possible from their own aspect and necessary with respect to their causes, then the commandments and prohibitions are not futile, but rather serve an important purpose. For they are causes which move things which are possible in themselves in the same way which other causes produce effects. Thus the divine wisdom consigned them, i.e., the commandments and prohibitions, to be intermediate movers and powerful causes, to direct us human beings towards human happiness (pp. 222-24).

In what sense are the commandments and prohibitions causes of our actions? Crescas thought, I believe, that they are reasons for which we do the action. If asked why you did something, the answer that it was in accord with God's commandments is a perfectly good answer. But it is an answer that provides a reason for doing the action, not the cause of the action.

For Crescas, then, God's role in determining human actions is promulgating commandments whose existence provides reasons for human actions. These are "intermediate movers" of human choices; they are providers of reasons for human beings to act. But of course not everyone follows those commands. They act for a different reason. At this point, Crescas adds an important distinction among these other reasons:

But when human beings act under coercion or compulsion and not through their wills, the coerced and compelled actions are not acts of their souls. . . . Thus it is not appropriate that a punishment should follow (p. 224).

So, on this account, there are three types of actors: those whose reason is that God commanded it, those whose reason is that they are compelled by others, and those whose reasons are based on their other desires. Only the latter are culpable, but all three are necessitated by the actor's reason. So the actions of all three are necessary with respect to the reasons that explain the performance of the action.

But why do some people choose to act for one reason while others chose to act for a different reason? It is here, on this account, that human freedom exists. All choices of actions faced by a human being are

among actions that are possible in themselves. The human being chooses for one reason rather than another. These reasons are the cause of the action and they necessitate the action, so the actions are necessary with respect to their causes. And the choice of reason is known by God, so it is necessary with respect to God's knowledge. But the choice of reason remains free.

But doesn't God's knowledge necessitate the action in itself? Crescas thought that it did not. He responded as follows:

If God's knowledge of things precedes their existence, then they are not possible with respect to His Knowledge, because that which is necessitated prior to its existence is not possible; but they are possible with respect to themselves. And since God's knowledge is not temporal, His knowledge of the future is like our knowledge of existing things, which does not entail compulsion and necessity in the essence of the things (p. 225).

God's knowledge poses no challenge to the freedom of the choice of reasons or to the possibility of the things in themselves, because God's knowledge is atemporal.⁴⁴

44. [As indicated in the prefatory editor's note, Professor Brody z"l passed away before finishing this paper. In a brief handwritten note to a draft of the paper, he indicated that he wanted to add here a discussion of Crescas' position on why a person may be rewarded or punished for believing (or not believing) in God. (See Harvey, *Rav Hasdai Crescas*, 107-13.) Brody also seemed interested in an article by Lynne Rudder Baker, "Persons and the Natural Order," in *Persons: Human and Divine*, ed. Peter Van Inwagen & Dean Zimmerman (Oxford University Press, 2007), 261-78. It is possible that he wanted to include some insights from that essay in his planned last section, but we cannot be sure. A brief paragraph in the last two pages of Baker's paper also seems related to a suggestion by Crescas about resurrection, which Brody refers to in a footnote in "Jewish Reflections on the Resurrection of the Dead," 117, n. 43. -Ed.]