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*Jewish Philosophy in the Middle Ages: Science, Rationalism,
and Religion* by Tamar M. Rudavsky (review)

James A. Diamond

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The sense of alienation may also have something to do with Pinzani's own apparent alienation from the material he is studying. He ends the study thus: "Every answer to the Porphyrian questions we have considered in this work only result in new and seemingly insurmountable difficulties. . . . The position of the problem of universals has to do with an attempt to justify the truth of categorical statements. However, the complications of the paths followed by the authors . . . suggest that scholastic philosophers find themselves in a maze, where the starting point is not accepted as an escape route, being in fact the only way out" (298). Pinzani seems therefore to believe that the whole way in which the medieval philosophers he discusses posed the Problem of Universals was confused. It is hardly surprising, therefore, if his discussions, impressive philosophically, fail as history, since good historians rarely judge whole areas of thought to be confused, but prefer to try to understand how what now may seem confused did not do so to thinkers in the past. If the medieval debaters on universals were really in a maze with no way out, then it is more important for the historian to explain why they found themselves there than to revel, as Pinzani seems to do, in their repeated failures to escape from it.

JOHN MARENBO

Trinity College, Cambridge

Tamar M. Rudavsky. *Jewish Philosophy in the Middle Ages: Science, Rationalism, and Religion*. The Oxford History of Philosophy. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. Pp. xii + 305. Cloth, \$40.00.

Tamar Rudavsky's erudite survey of Jewish philosophy during the Middle Ages is the latest compendium of a wide array of thinkers who profoundly constructed bridges between the two worlds of Jewish beliefs informed by the Hebrew Bible and its rabbinic overlay on one end, and of science and philosophy dominated by Aristotelian physics and metaphysics at the other. Jewish philosophers, like their Islamic and Christian counterparts, tirelessly exerted themselves to reconcile the two into a unified system. The very title of Maimonides's seminal *Guide of the Perplexed* reflects his attempt to resolve the angst of his intellectually sophisticated coreligionists who faced an irreconcilable either/or choice between the teachings of the "Law" and the truths of reason. Rudavsky admirably guides us along what she professes is her "major quest" "to determine the extent to which this reconstruction in the Jewish domain is successful" (58).

The book presciently begins by defining 'Jewish philosophy' as "philosophizing with and about the Jewish tradition" (7). Although many of the issues are common among the three monotheistic traditions, what makes a particular philosophic enterprise "Jewish" is engagement with Judaism's own particular texts that form its sacred canon. Rather than a chronological tour, Rudavsky presents her case thematically, effectively placing diverse thinkers in dialogue, from Saadiah Gaon in the tenth century to Joseph Albo in the sixteenth. It ultimately comes to a screeching halt with Spinoza, the Jewish philosopher who dismantled that bridge constructed by his Jewish predecessors of the previous six centuries, postulating truth as the exclusive preserve of reason rather than Scripture.

After proving God's existence via cosmological and teleological arguments, the vexing question arose of what can be said of an ineffable Being that transcends all Aristotelian categories. The Hebrew Bible abounds in anthropomorphic God talk that offends divine incorporeality at every turn. Maimonides is the most radical exponent of an apophatic theology where the more one negates of God, the more one comes closer to God's apprehension. All scriptural descriptions of God are metaphors that ultimately lead to a silence that alone is appropriate for capturing God's nature. On this subject as others, Maimonides's most formidable philosophical opponent is Hasdai Crescas, who, distinguishing between essence and existence, counters that there are essential predicates that in fact are knowable.

Evil and innocent suffering are affronts to traditional notions of divine perfection such as omnipotence and omniscience. For “Jewish” philosophy, the book of *Job* proves indispensable. Maimonides treats evils as privations. Intellectual perfection is the means to overcome evil. Job’s problem is that, though perfectly moral, he is not wise. Gersonides, another major figure in this story, views matter as outside of the realm of God’s control.

Some evil can be attributed to human freedom, yet that very freedom seems inconsistent with omniscience. If God knows everything including the future, then any human choices are predetermined, rendering freedom a chimera. Solutions range from Saadiah’s considering divine knowledge not causative, to Maimonides’s skepticism which places the nature of divine knowledge beyond the human ken, to Gersonides’s quasi-determinism where human intellect and will can escape the grip of astrologically determined destinies.

The issue of creation pitted Aristotelian eternity against traditional readings of Scripture advocating creation *ex nihilo*. For the main triumvirate of medieval Jewish philosophers—Maimonides, Gersonides, Crescas—there is a general sense that Aristotle never demonstrated eternity but rather posed dialectical arguments that are not decisive. Yet, Maimonides, as Rudavsky and others have argued, may have exoterically endorsed the Torah view of creation while esoterically subscribing to eternity, the very position he explicitly renounces.

Rudavsky then expertly discusses a number of other contentious theoretical issues such as the nature of the soul, what survives the body posthumously, and whether miracles are divine intrusions into the natural order or an inherent component of nature itself. But she concludes with the question toward which all these others should ultimately lead: the meaning and purpose of life. After all, is that not the aim of every religious/spiritual/philosophical quest? What role do behavior and ethics play in Judaism, whose overarching concern seems to be conduct regulated by a pervasive system of commandments (*mitzvot*)? If, according to Maimonides, immortality is achieved via intellectual perfection, where does that leave the majority of the obedient faithful who are not equipped to realize that ultimate felicity? On these crucial questions, Maimonides prevaricates with an ostensible preference for a Farabian view which prioritizes political, legal, and ethical involvement over insular intellectual self-perfection as the *summum bonum*.

The only minor quibble I have is Rudavsky’s characterization of Spinoza as the “culmination of Jewish philosophical thinking.” His biblical criticism, rejection of essential Jewish doctrines such as revelation at Sinai, and draining the Bible of philosophical content, place him outside the pale of the Jewish enterprise concerned. Otherwise, Rudavsky’s book is certain to contribute appreciably to its readers’ philosophical felicity.

JAMES A. DIAMOND

University of Waterloo

Laurens van Apeldoorn and Robin Douglass, editors. *Hobbes on Politics and Religion*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. Pp. xiv + 297. Cloth, \$70.00.

It is refreshing to read fifteen erudite articles written by seasoned experts and promising young scholars who engage the wide-ranging question of the intersection of religion and politics in Hobbes’s works. The free standing arguments are not framed by Hobbes’s alleged religious (in)sincerity, or by a priori conceptions of natural law, or some modernization thesis. This work is therefore a must-read for scholars yearning to explore Hobbes’s religious politics in new ways. I hope it inspires more volumes, possibly organized around narrower religious topics (I will suggest two).

Johan Olsthoorn argues that Hobbes’s theory of representation takes him beyond Erastianism to the stronger claim of church-state identity with the sovereign speaking and acting in this new unity’s name. Al Martinich likens Hobbes’s human sovereign to his divine natural sovereign. God’s sovereignty derives from the sure and irresistible power that He