Book Review

Religious Studies (2018) doi:10.1017/S0034412518000793

Shira Weiss *Joseph Albo on Free Choice: Exegetical Innovation in Medieval Jewish Philosophy*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). Pp. ix + 218. £71.00/$57.14 (Hbk). ISBN 978 0 19 068442 6.

Rabbi Joseph Albo (1380–1444) owed a great deal to his philosophical predecessors. Most philosophers do. Moreover, he was a complier, synthesizer, and popularizer of the thinkers who came before him. These considerations probably explain, in part, the lack of scholarly attention that Albo has received, until now. In her groundbreaking study, Shira Weiss deftly carves out a distinctive place for Albo. She uncovers a mediaeval thinker with probing and provocative thoughts of his own, on free will and Divine love.

A staunch incompatibilist regarding human freedom, Albo adopted the principle that a human act is not free if the agent couldn't have done otherwise. As a staunch libertarian, he was of the opinion that human agents *are* often able to do otherwise. In addition to these standard positions, Albo suggested that a human action is not free if the agent subsequently wishes that they had done otherwise. There is at once something highly counter-intuitive about this distinctive thesis, and also something deeply attractive.

It is counter-intuitive because we wouldn't tend to point to a video replay of a consenting adult acting without coercion, and say, 'there goes an unwilling, unfree agent'. But that is exactly what Albo's suggestion amounts to in any situation where we know that that adult later regretted her act. As Weiss puts it (107), 'if after they acted they desired to have acted otherwise, the act would be considered [by Albo] compulsory [i.e. determined], even though at the beginning it was done voluntarily'.

What's attractive about this position is that it animates the ways in which freedom of the will is supposed to interact with moral culpability. If repentance has any chance of removing culpability, you might think that it can only do so if it has the ability to render what seemed to be a willing transgression into something less than a willing transgression. Indeed, this is how some Rabbis traditionally viewed the power of repentance (see, Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Yoma, 86b). Perhaps the idea is that, for Albo, whether or not an act was free is what Ockham would have called a *soft* fact. Only the future will decide whether it was or wasn't free, depending upon whether the agent comes to regret what was done.

The second striking and distinctive thesis that Weiss (chapter 6) finds in Albo's work is that God's love for the Jewish people is (a) without reason, going so far as

to call it 'irrational' (159, although 'a-rational' may have been more apt); and (b) a paradigm of completely free agency in *virtue* of being without reason.

Love, according to Albo, generally responds to some feature of the beloved. Eros doesn't. Moreover, God is capable of possessing *eros*, though not as a *passion*, but in virtue of loving for no *reason*; in virtue of loving without regard for the particular properties and features of the beloved; in virtue of possessing a love 'due solely to the will of the lover, and therefore exceed[ing] the bounds of other kinds of love' (156).

Buridan's proverbial ass only ever made a decision when there was a sufficient reason to justify it. Accordingly, he died of thirst rather than arbitrarily deciding to drink from one of two equally good barrels of water located equidistantly. According to Albo, it would seem that Buridan's ass is never totally free, since to have your mind made up for you by a sufficient reason for acting is always to be imposed upon from without. Only when faced with an arbitrary decision is your will truly and utterly free.

According to Albo, God doesn't love the Jewish people for any property that they have. There were other equally good people for him to choose. Accordingly, his love doesn't respond to properties that they lose or acquire along the way. His love is, therefore, the epitome of freedom.

Some of the bizarreness of these claims evaporates when one realizes that, for Albo, freedom comes in degrees. You are free to the extent that you are not acted upon by forces external to you. You are free to the extent that you are not beholden to your nature, including you nature as a rational animal. You are free to the extent to which you will continue to endorse the acts that you perform. But this doesn't mean that you are totally unfree when, given your rational nature, you act in response to a good reason. Indeed, Weiss points out (123) that, according to Albo, the factors are so varied and subtle than an agent is often not in a position to know for themselves whether or not, and to what extent, they have acted freely.

In addition to his philosophical theses, Weiss demonstrates that Albo was a profoundly original philosophical-biblical exegete. Weiss is to be commended for teasing out these exegetical nuggets from his famous philosophical treatise, and bringing their originality fully into focus. Readers will no doubt enjoy Weiss's Alboean presentation of the binding of Isaac, the hardening of Pharaoh's heart, and the Book of Job.

My only criticism of this book is that certain opportunities were missed. Weiss alludes, in a footnote, to contemporary discussions concerning free will. And yet, in the body of the book, Albo's work isn't brought into conversation with that literature. For example, Weiss notes how Albo was dissatisfied with Hasdai Crescas's determinism. It sought to reduce human freedom to the fact that 'in some possible universe, different from our own, agents could have done other than they have done in this world . . . [Albo, by contrast] maintains that true freedom in this world requires a genuine ability to choose differently from what in fact was chosen' (61). It is difficult not to hear, in this debate, echoes of David Lewis on

Crescas's side, and Saul Kripke and Peter van Inwagen on Albo's side. Similarly, one wonders how one might draw lines of comparison between the Jewish debate concerning God and love, and Anastasia Scrutton's work on Divine emotions in contemporary and mediaeval Christian theology.

Another example of an opportunity missed is the lack of critical analysis of Albo's distinctive theses. Is Albo's additional criterion for freedom fit for purpose? Doesn't it render redundant the notion of a change of heart? If by changing my mind about a past action, I make it the case that I didn't freely do it, then how is it that I changed my mind, since – as it turns out – I never really willed to do the action that I'm trying to recant? Is loving for no reason compatible with God's perfection? Is it fair to exclude others from this love, for no reason?

Finally, it seems to me that there were opportunities to develop Albo's doctrines further. For example, Albo was of the opinion that God sometimes allows the righteous to suffer, in order 'to determine whether an individual serves God from pure love or from the love of reward and fear of punishment' (138). But surely, God doesn't need to determine the motivation of a person's service, given God's omniscience. Albo develops his own response to this concern (81), but given what Weiss has illuminated, one can imagine a new Alboean response, namely: to what extent an action is free of ulterior motives, is a soft fact. There is *no* hard fact of the matter for God to know, until a person has the opportunity to recant.

Note, however, that my only criticism is that Weiss's book wasn't longer and that her engaging exegesis of an under-appreciated philosopher wasn't peppered with more philosophical engagement. There's something slightly unfair about such a criticism. First and foremost, Weiss has written a work of intellectual history. If my concern is that the material hasn't been sufficiently brought into conversation with constructive philosophy, then my concern should really be translated into the following fulsome praise: Weiss has written a thoroughly engaging work of intellectual history that sets the stage for exciting new work in the philosophy of free will and religion. I hope that scholars will read her book and be inspired to pick up this mantle.

More than anything, Weiss's book stands as a beautiful testament to a religious leader. She delicately brings to life the horrific dilemmas of living as a Jew under the yoke of late mediaeval Christian anti-Semitism. From her study emerges the portrait of a leader trying to console and encourage a despondent flock. He sought to preach to them, through inventive readings of Scripture, that the freedom to serve God, in the face of persecution, and under the threat of forced conversion, requires courage; even a hard heart and a stiff neck. He encouraged his readers to love their God with a full heart, without concern for reward or punishment, just as he assured them that God loves his people, with a constant and abundant love that pays no heed to fate or fortune.

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