Activities and Events

Opening of the 2nd Academic Year
on 8 November, 2016

Giuseppe Veltri: The Limits of Scepticism and Tolerance

Sceptical thinking has often been regarded as being dangerous to social and political stability; or, as the Enlightenment philosopher Christian Wolff stated: ‘The sceptic is dangerous for religion because the sceptic does not consider anything without doubting it.’ Almost every heresy has sprung from an answer to a question about the validity of norms, customs, and dogmatic patrimony. While past scholarship was interested in emphasising the role of sceptical groups or individuals and their impact on society, as well as their alleged danger to the social order, recently researchers have increasingly directed their attention towards sceptical challenges to hegemonic power structures and to (state) religion (which was a topic already discussed in the eighteenth century by Moses Mendelssohn). Here, Stuart Sim is worth mentioning for his emphasis on ‘why we need more scepticism and doubt in the twenty-first century.’ Sim envisages the problem of the entanglement between politics, dominant culture, and (political) belief and the need for a sceptical attitude as a privileged form of attacking authoritarianism in daily life. Although scepticism is commonly considered a negative attitude, it becomes a positive and necessary resistance to excessive power and to the suppression of dissent. Hence, a possible impact of scepticism on modern society could be the generation of tolerance.

In this lecture, Veltri discussed three fundamental and debatable points. The first question is whether a sceptical attitude can be considered a danger or a profit to society. The second is the origins and nature of tolerance, namely, what are the paradigms which enable a tolerant approach to controversial aspects of social and political life. The third and more complicated question is the relationship between tolerance and scepticism, or what limits are implied by a sceptical and/or tolerant vision of society.

Regular Events

Dialectical Evenings

The Dialectical Evening is an informal meeting every four weeks (in fortnightly rotation with the Reading Evening) for discussions and readings, which is designed to promote dialectical culture and sceptical thought within the research unit. Members of the Maimonides Centre and occasional guests convene to challenge, doubt, and explore theses in various subject areas.

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In the early days of Jewish Studies, the so-called Science of Judaism (‘Wissenschaft des Judentums’), along with its scholarly pursuits, implemented an extensive process of revision of the religious foundations of Judaism. Reform and Wissenschaft are believed to have concomitantly arisen in the first decades of the nineteenth century in the German cultural area, later to spread their influence east and west to other parts of Europe and to the United States. Recent scholarship has challenged the germano-centric interpretation of the origins of these movements. As far as Italy is concerned it is still generally assumed that ‘the question of reform was never seriously considered’ (Cecil Roth), albeit the flourishing of the Science of Judaism there.

But was it really so? Not in the eyes of Moritz Steinschneider, an observer well-acquainted with Jewish life in Italy. In his review of a sermon by Rabbi Marco Mortara, Steinschneider could not refrain from expressing his surprise at the strength of the Italian reform movement: ‘dass in Italien die hier bekämpfte extreme Partei so bedeutend sei, hätten wir kaum geglaubt.’ Indeed, Italy had numerous Jewish reformers, from Aron Fernandez of Leghorn to the school teacher Moisè Soave of Venice and the Rabbi Daniel Pergola of Turin. They promoted radical reform programs in their writings concerning liturgy, education and Halakhah. Some even implemented significant reforms in their own communities.

Where they isolated figures or did they give voice to significant trends inside an otherwise conservative Italian Judaism? Which models of reform did they refer to and how did they interact with the orthodox camp? And first and foremost, did reformers recur to sceptical tools to attack the dogmatic foundations of Judaism?

Sextus Empiricus, the main authority of Pyrrhonian scepticism, showed that we cannot develop a universally valid art of living because we are unable to determine the supreme good without reference to interests that are always shaped by our belonging to a community. However, Sextus’ scepticism does hold out the promise of arriving at a beneficial state of mind, by pointing towards an attitude that can be maintained only performatively. If one abandons the search for the good by itself, tranquillity can be attained without putting forth a general argument against the possibility thereof, thus freeing oneself from the burden of dogma.

At this dialectical evening, Renger explored the potentials and limitations of comparison by juxtaposing this attitude with other stances and ways of life that have been labelled sceptical, such as the teachings of Nāgārjuna, the first historically significant authority in the context of Mahāyāna Buddhism, which contain a compa-
rable promise. The ‘Middle Way’ (Mādhyamaka) of this Indian philosopher puts forth the view that one can calm or still one’s thinking by refraining from taking up any position, holding instead to an inconceivable middle among all extremes.

What happens when famous authorities that are seen as sceptics, like Sextus and Nāgārjuna, along with their modern ‘descendants’ (in the sense of a Wittgensteinian family resemblance), are brought into dialogue with one another in a sceptical fashion?

Stephan Schmid: History of Philosophy and Scepticism about Philosophy: Three (Alleged) Routes from History to Scepticism

Some are sceptical about the possibility of ahistorical or timeless philosophical knowledge on the grounds that philosophy itself has a history (and is perhaps more closely related to its history than many other academic disciplines). Three arguments for this kind of scepticism concerning philosophical knowledge were discussed during the Evening. Schmid concluded that all these arguments are quite problematic. Thus, there are good reasons to be sceptical about historical scepticism about philosophy.

Roi Benbassat: Thesis—Religious Faith and Scepticism do Not Contradict One Another

Scepticism is normally considered to be an attitude opposed to religious faith, even though some advocates of faith present doubt as an important feature of religious development. The more you confront and overcome greater doubts, these advocates of faith say, the stronger and firmer your faith will be. However, it is evident that even from this ‘tolerant’ religious viewpoint, scepticism is viewed as something that should eventually be overcome, and that the ideal of faith is still the termination of scepticism. However, Benbassat discussed a different religious approach here: one in which scepticism can and should be constantly maintained alongside faith. This is a religious approach that not only regards scepticism towards religious beliefs as essential for maintaining one’s faith, but also considers any form of faith that does not incorporate a sceptical element to be mostly corrupted. This unusual religious approach is exhibited by the Jewish thinker Yeshayahu Leibowitz (1903–1994), whose fusion of faith and scepticism will be called into question in our discussion.
Charles E. Snyder: Anti-Political Animals

Anti-Political Animals: On more the one occasion, Aristotle defended the view that the human being is by nature a political animal (Nicomachean Ethics, I 1097b, Politics, I 1253a). Such a view does not entail for Aristotle that the human is the only political animal, since he also believes that certain non-human animals–bees, wasps, cranes–are political (History of Animals, 487b33, 488a9–10). And yet critics and loyalists of Aristotle continue to ascribe to him the view that what distinguishes the human from other animals is this natural propensity for politics. Both camps obscure the real issue and let Aristotle off easy, it seems to me. Snyder opposed Aristotle’s old commonplace about the human from a different direction. In this opposing view, the human is according to nature the anti-political animal; if not the most sociopathic animal; and it is this anti-political element that distinguishes the human from other animals. This view is one that Aristotle should have developed given his own metaphysical commitments. His reticence is unfortunate and revealing. To register this reticence, Snyder refrained from any presupposition of a modern perspective or theory in opposing Aristotle and from appeals to the recent U.S. congressional and presidential elections, the ongoing threat of nuclear war, and the accelerating destruction of human-fueled climate change as evidence for the rising tide of anti-political power were kept to a minimum. Instead, Snyder opposed Aristotle according to the very same metaphysical presuppositions he used to support inter alia his view of the human being. If this opposing view is correct, this need not mean that Aristotle’s commonplace was entirely false, or that the annihilation of life on earth is inevitable. Nor does it entail that we should abandon Aristotle’s metaphysics or immunise political thought from metaphysics, generally. It could mean however that his metaphysical and political commitments combine to conceal the shadowy truth of the anti-political human, a view that he was apparently unfit to theorise.

[DE14] 14 March, 2017
Teresa Caligiure: The Sceptical Approach in Petrarch’s Secretum

The purpose is to discuss the suspension of judgment proposed by Petrarch in his work entitled Secretum regarding the lack of a definitive choice regarding his search for Truth; in the literary fictio, a dialectic meeting takes place just in her presence between the teacher Augustine and his disciple Francesco, which is one of the greatest manifestations of a sceptical thought strategy that refuses to embrace a univocal moral position in the dialogic genre. The author’s ethical scepticism reflects man’s inability to pursue and apply the teachings of Christianity, despite wanting to, which is why the writer moves away from the rigid morality of stoicism. In the dialogue, based on the Augustinian motif of rediscovering oneself, the moral project, suggested by the beloved praeceptor, is without any doubts definitely postponed
by Francesco at the end of the work and substituted for a literary _otium_ dedicated to the celebration of Laura and to classical scholarship. The sceptical approach in Petrarch’s _Secretum_ is also intended as a continuous question from the disciple Francesco, who doubts the dimension proposed by his teacher Augustine and continuously contests the principle of authority.


Thomas Meyer and Bill Rebiger: **The Use of Sceptical Strategies to Undermine Authority**

Although they do not appear in ancient scepticism, topics such as knowledge, certainty, and doubt are essential in early modern scepticism. In particular, questioning the certainty of traditional sources of knowledge and doubting the established authorities became more and more common in early modern times, even in discourses outside the traditional philosophical schools. In this non-philosophical context, the posing of questions of certainty and the casting of doubt on authorities were realised by means of sceptical strategies in a broader sense, as Rebiger defined during this dialectical evening. In short, sceptical strategies are a set of literary or rhetorical means intended to induce doubts, questions, and intellectual uneasiness. Eventually, when successful, the use of these sceptical strategies will result in undermining the reliability or trustworthiness of (any) authority as a source of knowledge.

From a modern, i.e. post-1945, point of view, for many Jewish philosophers and intellectuals the (old) difference between ‘the ancients and the moderns’ (known since the eighteenth century as the ‘Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes’) became a starting point for reevaluating the sceptical tradition from Pascal to Kierkegaard on the one side and Jewish sceptical traditions since Maimonides on the other. For example, Hannah Arendt, Karl Löwith, and Leo Strauss addressed and answered the problems of ‘1) relativisation, 2) historicisation, 3) indictment of heresy, 4) delegitimation, 5) ridiculisation, and, finally, 6) objectification’ (Rebiger) in different ways: their ‘solution’ was the ancient way of understanding ‘political things’ (Aristotle’s _Πολιτικά_). Their observations could work as a basis to systematise the understanding of ‘Jewish scepticism.’

[DE16] 22 August, 2017

Giuseppe Veltri and Dirk Westerkamp: **Quaestio sceptica disputata de philosophia judaeorum: Is there a Jewish Philosophy?**

Leon Roth’s (in)famous question ‘is there a Jewish philosophy?’ has been the subject of an ongoing and controversial debate. What may seem a mere argument of nomenclature among philosophers and historians of philosophy in fact raises important
questions concerning the particularistic (‘-ish’) or universalistic (‘philosophy’) status of systems of philosophical thought that are intertwined with religious ‘truth claims.’

At the Dialectical Evening, both the basic arguments in favour of the ‘existence’ (not in the quantificational sense) of a Jewish philosophy and their counter-arguments were presented and controversially discussed. The form of the dispute was reminiscent of a mediaeval scholastic *questio* in order to provide a lively and fruitful discussion.

### Reading Evening

The Reading Evening is an informal meeting every four weeks (in fortnightly rotation with the Dialectical Evening). Fellows and researchers read and discuss primary texts that are specifically relevant to their respective projects. Each meeting, one fellow or research team member selects and presents a text of particular importance for her research. In reading together, the group benefits from the expertise of the individual researcher.

[RE09] 9 August, 2016

Marietta Horster, Christiane Thompson and James Thompson: **Ludwig Wittgenstein —On Certainty**

Wittgenstein certainly belongs to the most challenging and puzzling philosophers of the twentieth century. Even though he has been regarded as an important figure for positivism and analytic philosophy, it has been incredibly difficult to situate his philosophical work. The *Tractatus logico-philosophical*, published in 1921, is nearly the only work published during Wittgenstein’s life time and its reception has been rather one-sided. One important theme of Wittgenstein’s work is the critique of philosophy as the bewilderment of language. Wittgenstein’s works strongly portray a therapeutic notion of philosophy. The text collection, *On Certainty*, goes back to notes written by Wittgenstein shortly before his death in 1951. The notes have been published posthumously in a collection by Anscombe and Wright in 1969. According to the editors, Wittgenstein’s notes deserved to be published separately under the heading of ‘certainty.’ A central theme of these notes is that propositions—once uttered—can be conceived as ‘certain’ without being scrutinized in their validity claim (see, e.g., the statement ‘This is my hand’). Here, Wittgenstein engages with George Edward Moore, who had published contributions about ‘common sense’ and the ‘proof of the outside world’ (cf. Moore 1969). Wittgenstein criticizes Moore for treating certainty as a form of knowledge. The experience of certainty cannot, according to Wittgenstein, be taken as a foundation of knowledge. The goal of this reading evening is to discuss the possibilities and limits of scepticism following Wittgenstein’s reflections...
on certainty. How are belief/certainty/conviction and knowledge related? How does Wittgenstein treat scepticism and doubt? Under which circumstances is the sceptical attitude warranted? These questions were tackled with a selection of text passages from On Certainty.

Cedric Cohen-Skalli: Isaac Abravanel's Preface to his Commentary on Former Prophets (1483–1484): Scepticism and New Rhetorical and Philological Attitudes Toward the Biblical Text in the Renaissance

In his ground-breaking 1937 article “Don Isaac Abravanel and His Relationship to Historical and Political Questions,” Baer bluntly states: ‘Abravanel was the first Jew to combine Renaissance ideas with the Torah of Israel. He was the first to study tradition in the light of the new historical and humanistic method.’ Baer’s affirmation, although exaggerated, relied greatly on the reading and interpretation of Abravanel’s preface to his Commentary on the Former Prophets (on Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings) written in Castile in the years 1483–4, and especially of its discussion of the question: who wrote the books of the Former Prophets. In the discussion, Abravanel develops a new historical sensitivity toward the texts’ history and composition. Moreover, he describes the making of the books of the Former Prophets as a multilayered process entailing firstly the sources written by the historical redactors and later the work of compilation and edition made by the editors. This view opened new pathways for later biblical criticism, but also for a new scepticism about the transmission of the divine message within the biblical text itself. Far from Baer’s celebration of Isaac Abravanel as the Jewish ‘father’ of biblical criticism, Cohen-Skalli proposed a new reading and interpretation of this important preface, also taking other parts of it, such as Isaac Abravanel’s autobiographical narrative and his discussions on the rhetorical and historical finality of the books of the Former Prophets and on prophecy into account. The reading tried to present the link that unites biographical narrative, historical narrative, biblical narrative, and prophecy in Abravanel’s preface.

Oren Hanner: Sceptical Arguments against a Mind-Independent World in Vasubandhu’s Twenty Verses

The Twenty Verses (Sanskrit: Viṃśīkā-kārikā) is one of the central works of the Buddhist ‘Consciousness Only’ (Vijñapti-mātra) School. It is ascribed to the Indian Buddhist philosopher Vasubandhu and is dated to the end of the fourth century or the beginning of the fifth century CE. This work is dedicated to defending the school’s idealist claim, according to which our experiences do not originate from external ob-
jects outside the mind (or at least, we cannot be certain that this is the case), while questioning and refuting realist assumptions concerning an objective external reality. Consisting of a polemical dialogue between the author and a hypothetical opponent, the text raises various objections to the idealist stance and then addresses them, relying to a large extent on various Buddhist doctrines and principles.

Modern scholarship has offered different readings of the Twenty Verses, with some interpreters suggesting that it articulates a form of ontological idealism, others claiming that it maintains a form of epistemological idealism, and still others seeing it as making principally phenomenological claims. During the reading evening, a recent interpretation by Birgit Kellner and John Taber (2014) was followed, who argue for an idealist interpretation of the Twenty Verses and suggest that Vasubandhu’s strategy of argumentation in the work is based on an extended argumentum ad ignorantiam, where the absence of external objects is derived from the absence of evidence for their existence.

[RE12] 28 February, 2017
Harald Bluhm and Bill Rebiger: The Function of Experience in Montaigne’s Scepticism

The focus of the reading evening was a specific aspect of Montaigne’s scepticism. This was not the well-known, long, and sophisticated Apology for Raymond Sebond (II.12), but the essay On experience (III.13), the concluding part of Les Essais.

Montaigne’s existence-philosophical approach forms the basis of his scepticism, his criticism of de-contextualized thinking and ethnocentrism. Some interesting topics in this framework are different elements of scepticism regarding reason and experience, such as the function of experience in critiquing endless conceptual distinctions, in critiquing incorrect ideas of certainty (e.g. interpretations of law, texts, and norms), and in critiquing ‘incorrect’ ascriptions of relevance.

A starting point for the second text of this Reading Evening, written by Marie de Gournay, was Montaigne’s revised view of friendship after his experience of intellectual friendship with her. With this text, a shift of the perspective took place to the experience of a contemporary female author who wanted to become a member of the male-dominated ‘république des lettres.’ This perspective will open up a new field of insights into scepticism.

[RE13] 21 March, 2017
Josef Stern: Maimonidean Scepticism

Two short selections from the Guide of the Perplexed were read in order to give a taste of Maimonides’ brand of scepticism. Unfortunately, the way Maimonides wrote the Guide makes it impossible to understand one passage in isolation; ‘you must connect
its chapters one with another’ (Introduction, Pines 15). So, in addition to the two selections, related chapters were given as background.

The first selection and background chapters (Selection: III: 9: Pines 436–437; Background: III: 24: Pines, 500, paragraph in brackets, II: 33: pp. 363–366, II: 24: pp. 326–7, material within brackets, Introduction, pp. 11–12, material in brackets) is one of Maimonides’ clearest sceptical statements about the impossibility of knowledge of immaterial beings by hylomorphic substances (like us) as part of a parabolic interpretation of the scriptural descriptions of the divine ‘revelation’ at Mt. Sinai. The second selection and background chapters (Selection: I: 32: Pines, pp. 68–70; Background: Mishneh Torah, ‘Laws of the Foundation of the Torah,’ iv, §§10–13, pp. 152–153) describes the kind of perfection that can be achieved by a human who recognizes the limitations of his intellect with respect to knowledge of metaphysics. Again, this is in the context of a parabolic interpretation of a text (here: the rabbinic text about Pardes).

[RE14] 25 April, 2017
Emidio Spinelli: Ancient Scepticism and Its Philosophical Self-Justification (Sextus Empiricus, Outlines of Pyrrhonism, I 1–30)

Against the background of a new complete commentary on Sextus Empiricus’s Outlines of Pyrrhonism, this lecture aims to offer a first analysis dedicated to a general introduction to Sextus’s work and his Pyrrhonian philosophy. Accordingly, after some preliminary considerations of the (non-‘linear’) history of ancient scepticism in its Pyrrhonian form, it will present a global picture of the self-justification of this ‘movement’ (which Sextus particularly sets forth in the first book of his Outlines of Pyrrhonism, §§1–30). After examining the structure of the main reference points at the roots of ancient Pyrrhonism, there was space to offer some reflections on the role of a specifically sceptical use of rationality as well as for underlining (and hopefully clarifying) some general difficulties usually linked to the ethical proposal of ancient Pyrrhonism.

[RE15] 13 June, 2017
Guido Bartolucci: Political Scepticism and Grotius’ Theory of Natural Law

The Protestant Reform contributed to the formation of a rift in European ethical and religious unity, which for centuries had formed the basis of collective security. This historical transformation was a factor in determining a conflict between different ideas of what was true, holy, and right.

Montaigne and Charron were witnesses to and the greatest interpreters of this period and they used sceptical philosophy to provide interpretive keys to this transformation. One target of their analysis was the traditional idea of natural law, which
they criticised using the tools of scepticism. In 1625, Hugo Grotius published his work *The Rights of War and Peace*. In this book, the Dutch jurist reacted against Montaigne’s and Charron’s ideas of natural law by proposing a new theory that on the one hand was linked to sceptical critique and on the other attempted to go beyond it. The purpose of this Evening was to read the passages in which Grotius discussed this issue and to frame them within the broader transformation of the political thought of this period.

### Occasional Events

**Lecture Series 2016/2017: Scepticism and Anti-Scepticism in Medieval Jewish Philosophy and Thought**

**Convenor: Racheli Haliva**

The tension between reason and revelation has for centuries occupied Jewish philosophers who were committed, on the one hand, to defending Judaism, and, on the other hand, to remaining loyal to philosophical principles.

Maimonides is considered the most prominent Jewish religious philosopher, whose aim was to reconcile philosophy, in particular Aristotelian philosophy, with the fundamental principles of Judaism. But many other Jewish thinkers, before and after him, also struggled with this task, raising the question whether it is possible to attain this reconciliation.

The connection between philosophy and religion was often not an obvious one. As a consequence, it could serve in some cases as grounds for supporting Maimonides’ project, while in others it could lead to rejection.

The lecture series ‘Scepticism and Anti-Scepticism in Medieval Jewish Thought’ focuses on sceptical questions, methods, strategies, and approaches raised by Jewish thinkers in the Middle Ages. In the series of lectures, the variety of attitudes presented by these thinkers, and the latest readings of contemporary scholars concerning those attitudes were examined.

29 November, 2016

Charles Manekin, University of Maryland, College Park/USA

**On the Role of Certain and Near-Certain Knowledge in Maimonides’ Religious Philosophy**

In his famous parable of the palace in the *Guide of the Perplexed*, Maimonides claims that one who has achieved demonstration to the extent possible of everything demonstrable, and who has come close to certainty in those matters in which one can only come close to it—draws near to ‘the ruler,’ i.e. God (*Guide*, 3.51). Yet why
should the psychological state of certainty be relevant for approaching God? Wouldn't it be more appropriate to emphasize the attainment of knowledge? And why would anything less than demonstrated truths affect this process? These questions were considered in light of the importance Maimonides’ accords towards the possession of well-established truths in the rational soul. This importance was discussed with special reference to his views on the education of the multitude, the indubitability of the prophetic message, and the necessity of putting deviant philosophers to death. Manekin argued that the possession of well-established or well-grounded truths in the rational soul lies at the heart of his project, and that the achievement of rational certainty and near-certainty are among the means for achieving this goal.

13 December, 2016
Warren Zev Harvey, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem/Israel

Ḥasdai Crescas’ Sceptical Critique of Maimonides

In his Guide of the Perplexed, Maimonides (1138–1204) sought to anchor the Jewish religion in the principles of Aristotelian science and philosophy. Rabbi Ḥasdai Crescas (c. 1340–1410 or 1411), in his Light of the Lord, presented a radical critique of Aristotelian physics and metaphysics, and on the basis of this critique he rejected Maimonides’ approach. According to Crescas, human reason can prove the existence of a first cause, but cannot prove God’s unity or goodness, that is, it cannot prove the God of the Bible. Religion, he argues, is based on prophecy not philosophy.

20 December, 2016
Yehuda Halper, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat-Gan/Israel

The Sex Life of a Metaphysical Sceptic: Platonic Themes in Gersonides’ Commentary on Song of Songs

Gersonides’ Commentary on the Song of Songs transforms the celebration of the erotic courtship between Solomon and a young woman into a tale of longing between the material intellect and the acquired intellect. On the whole, the presentation of the Commentary is Aristotelian: longing is connected to actualising potential, and the active intellect is acquired through the orderly study of the sciences—beginning with logic, then continuing on to mathematics, physics, astronomy, and metaphysics. Yet, at the same time, many main themes of the Commentary are Platonic. Like Diotima’s description of eros in Plato’s Symposium, the object of desire is never reached in the Commentary. Indeed, this kind of eros comes from Song of Songs itself, where the erotic courtship is never consummated in the work. In Gersonides’ reading, metaphysics is not grasped by the intellect in the way that mathematics and physics are, since it is not grounded in sensory perception, but in common opinions. Moreover,
Gersonides’ tale of the material intellect’s journey to scientific knowledge is similar in a number of ways to the account of Plato’s search for scientific knowledge—and ultimately Plato’s lack of solid metaphysical knowledge—in Al-Farabi’s *Philosophy of Plato*. Gersonides probably did not read Arabic, but could have read Falaquera’s paraphrase of Al-Farabi’s work in *Reshit Ḥokhmah*, or else Falaquera’s own account of a similar journey to philosophy in *Sefer ha-Mevaqqesh*. According to Al-Farabi and thus Falaquera, Plato’s intellectual journey ends with the formation of a city that uses the myth of creation presented in the *Timaeus* as the basis of opinions on which a metaphysics can be built. For Gersonides the Bible, when properly understood, can provide a similar basis of common opinions for grounding metaphysics. Nevertheless, Gersonides himself preferred to study mathematics, physics, and astronomy—sciences he viewed as properly grounded in sensory observation.

10 January, 2017
Howard Kreisel, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Beer-Sheva/Israel

*Between Philosophic Optimism and Fideistic Scepticism: An Overview of Medieval Jewish Philosophy*

In this talk Kreisel showed that the philosophic tradition that penetrated Jewish thought was essentially an optimistic one grounded primarily in the Arabic translations of the writings of Plato, Aristotle and the Neoplatonic philosophy of Plotinus. The Jewish thinkers, following in the footsteps of the Islamic ones, essentially believed that the intellect was capable of apprehending the most fundamental truths regarding God and the structure of the world, whether these truths are attained by way of logical syllogism in the tradition of Aristotle or by way of the illumination of the intellect in the tradition of Plotinus. This optimism can already be detected among the Islamic theologians (*Kalām*) and it also influenced R. Saadiah Gaon (tenth century). Philosophic optimism also characterises the Islamic philosophers, beginning with Al-Kindi (ninth century), and in the Jewish world, beginning with Isaac Israeli, Saadiah’s older contemporary. Subsequently, the Jewish philosophic tradition in Andalusia, particularly the philosophy of Solomon Ibn Gabirol, gives expression to this optimism. In later periods, philosophic optimism characterises the Jewish philosophers of Provence (thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries), whose most important exponent was Gersonides, as well as most of the Jewish philosophers of Spain up to the expulsion.

The most blatant example of philosophic scepticism in medieval Jewish philosophy can be found in the thought of Judah Halevi (twelfth century), who on this issue may have been inspired by Al-Ghazzali. Yet in his case, as in the case of Al-Ghazzali, the use of scepticism came in order to defend religious doctrines and the truths of revelation (what some scholars have termed ‘fideistic scepticism’). In later periods, the use of scepticism was often tied to the defence of religion, and did not come
to question all forms of knowledge, most notably knowledge attained through revelation.

The Evening was concluded with the problem of how to interpret Maimonides on this issue. Maimonides’ approach to the ability of philosophy to discover fundamental truths, while at times stressing its severe limitations in the area of metaphysics and even natural philosophy, has led to widely divergent interpretations of his thought. Kreisel argued that Maimonides was a qualified optimist in his philosophic approach, and that some of his more radical sceptical statements regarding the limitations of philosophic knowledge may have served a religious purpose.

17 January, 2017
David Lebler, Université de Strasbourg/ France

Halakhic Dogmatism, Aggadic Scepticism: a Duality of Medieval Philosophical Exegesis

As regards the legal aspects of the Jewish tradition, Maimonides might be described as a dogmatic. In his Mishneh Torah, he proposes a final and exhaustive codification of the law, without mentioning the diverging views expressed in his talmudic sources. He also proposes a dogmatic list of compulsory beliefs. When one turns to the non-legal aspects of the biblical and rabbinical tradition, Maimonides appears far lesser assertive. He proposes philosophical allegorical interpretations of prophetic parables, but often stresses the fact that other interpretations are possible and sometimes offers several interpretations of one and the same passage. Maimonides’ abandoned project of writing a treatise dedicated to deciphering rabbinical aggadot was taken over by post-Maimonidean philosophers especially in Provence. In their philosophical exegeses of aggadot, authors such as Moses Ibn Tibbon or Levi ben Abraham of Villefranche show the same doubts as regards the possibility of offering a ‘true’ and final interpretation. What is at stake in this dual epistemic attitude of these philosopher-exegetes? Lebler argued that it reflects an essential aspect of their philosophical practice understood as a Foucauldian ‘spirituality.’

24 January, 2017
Lawrence J. Kaplan, McGill University, Montreal/Canada

Does Maimonides’ Theory of Parables in the Guide of the Perplexed Support a Sceptical Reading of the Work?

On the face of it there would seem to be little or no connection between Maimonides’ theory of parables in the Guide of the Perplexed and a sceptical reading of the work. But is this the case?

Maimonides characterises parables as possessing either an external meaning (Arabic ẓāhir) or an internal meaning (Arabic bāṭin). In the introduction to the
Guide however, Maimonides seems to contradict himself regarding the value of a parable’s external meaning. On the one hand, he states that the parable’s ẓāhir, per se, is worth nothing—except that the ẓāhir serves the paradoxical dual function of first concealing the bāṭin, but then pointing to the bāṭin, once, that is, one has succeeded in, as it were, ‘decoding’ the ẓāhir. On the other hand, he states that the parable’s ẓāhir does possess intrinsic value, since it ‘contains wisdom that is useful in many respects, among which is the welfare of human societies.’

How are we to resolve this contradiction? Might a sceptical reading of the Guide provide us with a solution to this problem? Or should we seek to resolve this contradiction in light of the more traditional view of the Guide as a biblicentric work, concerned primarily with the meta-philosophical problem of showing how those parts of the Bible that appear to lack wisdom, do, in fact, if read and understood properly, contain it, if in different ways. The talk was devoted to an exploration of these alternative approaches.

7 February, 2017
Ariel Malachi, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat-Gan/Israel
Scepticism at the Service of Revelation: Logic and epistemology in Judah Halevi’s Kuzari

Many scholars have acknowledged the importance of Judah Halevi’s criticism of philosophy. Some of them even indicated Halevi’s use of philosophical tools to establish his criticism, in a way that might be regarded as a sceptical approach to philosophy. Nevertheless, the general impression from scholarly studies is that the criticism of philosophy is merely a secondary assisting goal for the main goal of the Kuzari, namely proposing revelation as an alternative to philosophy, and accepting revelation in a very unsceptical manner. Maybe that is the reason those scholars did not tend to analyse Halevi’s criticism of philosophy systematically. In the talk, Malachi tried to identify the principles of Halevi’s criticism of philosophy. In this regard, he argued: (a) that the criticism of philosophy represents a sceptical approach based on logical and epistemological principles of Aristotelian logic; (b) that this sceptical approach is used not only to criticise philosophy, but also to establish revelation. Consequently, he suggested that for Halevi, the same sceptic approach can propose revelation not only as a philosophically legitimate option, but also more persuasive and therefore preferable.
Numerous attempts were made in the Middle Ages by philosophers and theologians to explain the origin of the world. Positioning themselves with regard to this crucial issue was particularly important for medieval thinkers of all religions, since it indicated their relation to one of the fundamental principles of their faith. The present lecture presents the anti-sceptical approach, offered by Yitzhak Albalag and Yitzhak Polqar—two Jewish Averroists of the fourteenth century who lived in northern Spain, to one of the most fundamental questions every religious philosopher has to address: is the world created by God ex nihilo, that is from absolute non-existence, as suggested by religious tradition, or, is the world eternal, as argued by Aristotle?

Albalag and Polqar adopted the philosophy of Ibn Rushd and considered him to be the best commentator of Aristotle. Their interpretation of Judaism, in light of Averroes’ Aristotelianism, was based on the assumption that Judaism and true philosophy must always coincide. These two thinkers, then, explain the origin of the world, from a philosophical point of view which clearly rejects the traditional belief.

8–11 May, 2017
Conference: Scepticism from Antiquity to Modern Times

The First International Conference on Scepticism at the University of Hamburg, organised by the Maimonides Centre for Advanced Studies in close co-operation with the Department of Philosophy at La Sapienza University of Rome, addresses the main elements, strategies, and definitions of scepticism with a focus on ancient, medieval, and early modern philosophy. A group of established professors and young scholars working on PhDs and post-docs lectured on the main questions of sceptical philosophy, such as the criteria for defining and distinguishing ancient scepticism from modern scepticism and the debates on the existence and meaning of a Jewish (anti-) scepticism.

Lectures

Antiquity

Emidio Spinelli, Sapienza Università di Roma/Italien
‘Dialectic and Sophisms: the Sceptical Dissolution of Dogmatic Logic’
Katja Vogt, Columbia University New York/USA (via web conferencing)
‘Ancient Scepticism and its Interlocutors’

Charles Snyder, University of Hamburg/Germany
‘Academic Scepticism and the Teachability of Practical Ethics’

Stéphane Marchand, ENS de Lyon/France
‘Sextus Empiricus’ Use of δύναμις’

Diego Machuca, CONICET Buenos Aires/Argentina
‘Agrippan Pyrrhonism, Questionable Assumptions, and the Epistemic Challenge of Disagreement’

Jan Opsomer, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven/Belgium
‘Plotinus and Scepticism’

Charlos Lévy, Université Paris-Sorbonne/France
‘Scepticism and Monotheism: A Specific Relation?’

Gisela Striker, Harvard University/USA
‘Ancient vs. Early Modern Scepticism: Was There a Cartesian Revolution?’

Middle Ages

Josef Stern, University of Chicago/USA
‘What is Maimonidean Scepticism?’

Zev Harvey, Hebrew University of Jerusalem/Israel
‘The Problem of Many Gods in Al-Ghazali, Averroes, Maimonides, and Crescas’

Henrik Lagerlund, University of Western Ontario/Canada
‘The Sources of Medieval Scepticism and the Origin of Divine Deception’

Heidrun Eichner, University Tübingen/Germany
‘Reason and Revelation: Fighting Scepticism in the Context of Islamic Theological Manuals’

(Early) Modern Times I

Sébastien Charles, Université du Quebec à Trois-Rivières/Canada
‘Scepticism in Modern Times’
Stephan Schmid, University of Hamburg/Germany
‘Varieties of Early Modern Scepticism’

Yitzhak Melamed, Johns Hopkins University/USA
‘The Road not Taken: Why was Spinoza not a Sceptic?’

Gideon Freudenthal, Tel Aviv University/Israel
‘Salomon Maimon: Scepticism of the First and Second Order’

Keynote Speech

Giuseppe Veltri, University of Hamburg/Germany
‘Enquiring into (Jewish) Scepticism’

Roundtables of Early Career Researchers

Benjamin Wilck, Humboldt-University Berlin/Germany
‘Sextus Empiricus’ Criticism of the Foundations of Ancient Mathematics’

Máté Veres, University of Hamburg/Germany
‘Lapsarian Scepticism in Cicero’s De Natura Deorum’

Ariel Malachi, Bar-Ilan University Ramat-Gan/Israel
‘When Scepticism Turns Against the Sceptic: The Use of Scepticism by Medieval Religious Thinkers—The Case of Al-Ghazali, Halevi and Maimonides’

José María Sánchez de León Serrano, Hebrew University of Jerusalem/Israel
‘The Role of Sceptical Doubt in Spinoza’s Naturalism’

Ville Paukkonen, University of Helsinki/Finland; Boğaziçi University Istanbul/Turkey
‘Scepticism Concerning Self-Knowledge in Early Modern Philosophy: the Case of George Berkeley’

Nancy Abigail Nuñez, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México/Mexico
‘Narrowing Process and the Context-Sensitivity of Knowledge Attribution Sentences’
Maimonides Lectures on Scepticism

The Maimonides lectures were established to invite international researchers to give a talk within the field of scepticism. The lectures are recorded and published on the webpage of the Centre in order to make them available to a larger audience.

8 February, 2017
Moshe Idel, Hebrew University of Jerusalem/Israel
From Mysticism to Scepticism

The lecture dealt first with an early passage by Maimonides, found in his Commentary on the Mishnah, Sanhedrin, dealing with the post-mortem union of the human intellect with the angelic world, which reflects the impact of the rational mysticism of Avicenna. This passage was accurately translated from Arabic into Hebrew by Naḥmanides, which puts into relief aspects that correspond with his understanding of Kabbalah.

Then, following the lead of Leo Strauss and Shlomo Pines, there was a brief discussion of the sceptical aspects of the late Maimonides, in the Guide for the Perplexed, concerning his attitude to the Hebrew language and the limits of human speculation, and, finally, a discussion of a passage from the Guide dealing with the manner in which the secrets of the Torah should be extracted from the biblical text, and compare it to Abraham Abulafia’s ecstatic Kabbalah.

1 March, 2017
Nuccio Ordine, L’Università della Calabria/Italy
The Search for Truth in Giordano Bruno’s Work

For Giordano Bruno, we do not possess the truth, but we search for it. His philosophy begins with Copernican heliocentrism and approaches an endless view of the universe: in an infinite universe, in fact, there can be no absolute centre; the centre of the universe is the one who observes the universe. Bruno therefore criticises two rigid and opposing but complementary positions: dogmatism (which posits that there is one truth), and some radical currents of scepticism (which deny the existence of truth). Bruno praises a point of view that encompasses doubt, uncertainty, and relativity, interwoven with typical arguments of scepticism, but places them in a perspective in which the search for truth is essential to give meaning to life.
3 May, 2017
Jonathan Garb, Hebrew University of Jerusalem/Israel

Doubt and Certainty in Early Modern Kabbalah

This lecture contrasted the rhetoric of certainty in medieval Kabbalah with the increased recurrence of doubt in modern Kabbalah, tracing the development of the ontological discourse on doubt and stressing the radical possibility that doubt is not limited to human perception of the divine, but could also limit divine self-knowledge. Then the lecture turned to psychological discussions of doubt and certainty of the Hasidim and R. Kook. Finally, Garb considered the broader historical context of this development: the rise of scepticism in the seventeenth century, Jewish enlightenment in the nineteenth century, and full-fledged secularisation in R. Kook’s time.

16 May, 2017
Jani Hakkarainen, University of Tampere/Finland

Hume on Possible Duration without Possible Temporal Parts—A Sceptical Solution

In A Treatise of Human Nature Book 1, Part 2, Section 5, Paragraph 29 (1739), David Hume (1711‒76) seems to put forward the view that an atemporal, steadfast, and unchanging object has the capacity to endure. This is deeply puzzling, for Hume believes that any enduring object divides into temporal parts. However, this is not possible for an atemporal object, that is, for temporal nothingness, so temporal nothingness cannot endure.

Hakkarainen argued that Hume should be read as claiming that in such cases it merely appears to us that temporal nothingness has the capacity to endure, and that it is causally possible that reality is different from appearance: really, there is a duration and composition of temporal parts. Therefore, the lecture draws on a distinction which Hume himself employs at the end of Treatise 1.2.5: the traditional sceptical distinction, familiar from the work of the ancient sceptic Sextus Empiricus, between appearance and reality in the sense of perceptions being distinguished from their real causes.

6 June, 2017
Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggemann, Free University Berlin/Germany

Lingua Adamica and Philological Scepticism—Rise and Fall in Kabbalistic Key-Concepts

God spoke and the world became real; and the pre-lapsarian Adam was given insight into the essence and the power of the divine language. It was one of the aims of both Jewish and Christian Kabbalah to regain this paradisiacal knowledge, which was lost with the fall of the first human beings. The idea of the lingua Adamica stems from
Philo; it was later shared by the Christian Church Fathers as well as Jewish rabbis, and it was fully developed by the Christian Kabbalists Pico and Reuchlin. The concept was harshly criticized in the High Middle Ages by Nahmanides (Ramban), and in the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, biblical criticism following these traces made it obvious that Philo’s allegorical exegesis of Genesis 2:19f. could not provide the philological basis for those far-reaching pious speculative and mystical consequences. However, the idea remained vivid, in spite of acid criticism in the age of Enlightenment, and it finally survived in Benjamin’s theory of language.

20 June, 2017
Omri Boehm, The New School for Social Research, New York/USA
Maimonides, Spinoza and Kant on Enlightenment and Prophecy

It is common to understand Kant’s notion of enlightenment as having the courage to ‘think for oneself.’ While not contesting this definition, the assumption that ‘selbst denken’ in Kant consists in refusing the guidance of another over our own thinking was rejected. Paradoxical though it may seem, following another’s guidance—in the strong sense of following without understanding—emerges in Kant as a necessary condition for thinking for oneself. In this light, the relationship between enlightenment (thinking for oneself) and religion (prophecy/revelation) must be reconsidered. Far from depending on the rejection of the prophets’ authority—as it is in Spinoza’s concept of enlightenment—Kantian enlightenment is impossible without it.

11 July, 2017
Carlos Fraenkel, McGill University, Montreal/Canada
Metaphysical Scepticism and Sufi Alternative: Al-Ghazali, Maimonides, and Abraham ben Maimonides

In the talk, Fraenkel offered a solution to the puzzle of why Abraham ben Maimonides staunchly defends his father’s intellectual legacy against critics in the West and the East and presents himself as his intellectual heir while at the same time strikingly departing from this legacy: whereas Maimonides interprets Judaism as a philosophical religion, Abraham proposes a Sufi interpretation. Al-Ghazali’s account of the relationship between falsafa and Sufism was used as a model to explain the relationship between father and son. Both al-Ghazali and Maimonides are metaphysical sceptics—i.e., they hold that reason cannot conclusively settle metaphysical questions. However, in contrast to al-Ghazali and Abraham, Maimonides does not try to overcome scepticism through the Sufi path to God. Therefore, Abraham’s departure from Maimonides turns out to be (at least in part) an attempt to solve a specific epistemological problem.
Sceptical Ateliers

A Sceptical Atelier is required whenever we are faced with a multifaceted phenomenon which can only be understood in an interdisciplinary way by combining various disciplinary perspectives into a unified understanding which can account for how and why these facets are united in the phenomenon in question. The Sceptical Atelier is designed as a discussion forum, in which specialists in their fields contribute to the understanding of a certain topic or phenomenon. Thus, the participants will not have prepared a particular talk or paper, but will rather have studied the object of common inquiry in advance so as to share their notes and thoughts about it in the joint discussion.

6 – 9 February, 2017
Sceptical Atelier: Salomon Maimon’s Lebensgeschichte: Reading a New English Translation
Convenors: Yitzhak Melamed (Johns Hopkins University/USA) and Stephan Schmid (University of Hamburg/Germany)

Participants:
Leora Batnitzky (Princeton University/USA)
Florian Ehrensperger (University of British Columbia/Canada)
Warren Zev Harvey (Hebrew University of Jerusalem/Israel)
Moshe Idel (Hebrew University of Jerusalem/Israel)
Ada Rapoport-Albert (University College London/UK)
Paul Reitter (Ohio State University/USA)
Oded Schechter (HSE Moscow/Russia)
Abraham Socher (Oberlin College/USA)
Shaul Stampfer (Hebrew University of Jerusalem/Israel)

Salomon Maimon’s Lebensgeschichte has fascinated readers ever since its first publication in 1792/3. In light of Maimon’s exceptionally vivid description of his life as a Talmudic prodigy from—as he puts it—‘the woods of Lithuania,’ a preadolescent husband, an aspiring kabbalist-magician, an earnest young philosopher, a bedraggled beggar, an urbane Berlin pleasure-seeker, a Hamburg gymnasist, and, eventually, the philosopher of whom Kant would speak in highest terms, the widely shared fascination with and admiration of his Lebensgeschichte should not come as a surprise.

At the same time, fascination with Maimon’s vivid prose led later editors of this text to omit the philosophical passages found in his original version, which they found anathematic or even obstructive to the narrative of Maimon’s thrilling life story, or to banish them to appendices. In fact, there is no modern edition of Maimon’s Lebensgeschichte (whether in German, Hebrew, or English) which preserves
the original order of the text. Given that it was via his *Lebensgeschichte* that Maimon publicly introduced himself (under his newly adopted pseudonym ‘Maimon’) into the philosophical scene of the German Enlightenment, the omission of Maimon’s philosophical ‘digressions’ constitutes a fatal distortion of the original text: it prevents modern readers from seeing the extent to which Maimon conceived of himself as picking up the Jewish rationalist tradition founded by his medieval namesake Moshe ben Maimon (or Maimonides) so as to transpose it into transcendental philosophical terms inspired by Kant.

The Sceptical Atelier on Maimon’s *Lebensgeschichte* consisted of an intense close-reading workshop in which a new English translation of this text was discussed. This translation was prepared by Paul Reitter and edited by Yitzhak Y. Melamed and Abraham P. Socher. It is actually the first modern edition of Maimon’s *Lebensgeschichte* to preserve its original order. The collaborative study of this text promises to foster a deeper and better understanding not only of Maimon’s intellectual biography, but also of his philosophical thinking in general. The Atelier is a pre-read event devoted to a chapter by chapter discussion of the book (devoting roughly one hour to each chapter).

22 – 24 May, 2017

**Sceptical Atelier: Simone Luzzatto’s Socrates: Reading the Forthcoming First English Translation**

Convenors: Michela Torbidoni and Giuseppe Veltri

Participants:

Guido Bartolucci (University of Calabria/Italy)
Paolo Bernardini (University of Insubria/Italy)
Antonella del Prete (Tuscia University of Viterbo/Italy)
Cristiana Facchini (University of Bologna/Italy)
Fabrizio Lelli (Salento University of Lecce/Italy)
Anna Lissa (University Paris 8/France)
Luciana Pepi (University of Palermo/Italy)
Emidio Spinelli (La Sapienza University of Rome/Italy)
Josef Stern (University of Chicago/USA)
Syros Vasileios (University of Jyväskylä/Finland)

The Sceptical Atelier is a pre-read event devoted to the discussion of the forthcoming bilingual (Italian/English) edition of Simone Luzzatto’s *Socrate overo dell’humano sapere* (1651) prepared by Giuseppe Veltri and Michela Torbidoni. It is an important but overlooked work, which provides a critical perspective on the place of Jewish scepticism within the seventeenth century.
Simone Luzzatto (ca. 1583 – 1663) was the chief rabbi of the Jewish community of Venice as well as a highly talented classicist and a passionate reader of medieval Italian literature.