Salomon Maimon’s Lebensgeschichte

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

Apart from this, Maimon’s Lebensgeschichte is a unique historical source of Jewish life and culture in eighteenth-century Eastern Europe and an important document about both the emergence of the (New) Hasidism founded by Israel Ben Eliezer (also known as Baal Shem Tov or Besht) and the social status of Jews in Western Europe, comprising such different groups as the enlightened Jewish circle around Moses Mendelssohn in Berlin and Jewish salesmen in Amsterdam. It also testifies to the huge impact of Jewish Enlightenment on late eighteenth-century German philosophy in general.

Moreover, the Lebensgeschichte is particularly key for understanding Maimon’s philosophy, as it meticulously describes the development and formation of his thought: his early talmudic studies, his teenage digressions into kabbalist magic, his fascination with Maimonides, and his encounter with Enlightenment philosophy in Berlin and its empiricist and rationalist forerunners such as Locke, Hume, Spinoza, and Leibniz, which eventually led him to synthesise their views in a ‘Coalition system’ that he self-consciously opposed to Kant’s transcendental philosophy.

In fact, the Lebensgeschichte was Maimon’s first published book. Despite being often unknown (or at least unmentioned), this is a highly significant fact, as it reveals an altogether new facet of this book. The Lebensgeschichte is far more than a mere collection of autobiographical memories. It is his official introduction to the German Enlightenment under his newly adopted pseudonym of ‘Maimon’—derived from his philosophical hero Maimonides—and also, at the same time, the constitution of his public philosophical persona. It is an integral part of Maimon’s public presentation as a Jewish philosopher.¹

That Maimon’s purpose in the publication of his *Lebensgeschichte* was partially also to introduce himself to the philosophical community of his days as a Jewish thinker adopting the legacy of Maimonides helps to explain the otherwise startling fact that he opens the second part of his book with ten chapters (comprising 135 pages in the original German edition published in 1793) of a summary and vast excerpts of Maimonides’ *Guide for the Perplexed*.² Maimon prefaced his digression into Maimonides’ philosophy by confessing that his intellectual development was highly influenced by Maimonides’ writings and his wish to ‘familiarise the reader, at least to some extent, with the spirit of these writings’ in order ‘to enable the reader to assess the influence this great man’s writings had on me.’³

Now, Maimon was well aware of the fact that not all of his readers would be interested in his digression about Maimonides’ philosophy, writing that ‘[r]eaders looking for mere incidents or a novelistic story can skim these pages, which will not, however, be unimportant for intelligent readers.’⁴ What is striking, however, is that none of the editors of modern editions of Maimon’s *Lebensgeschichte* (whether in German, Hebrew, or English) seem to belong to these ‘intelligent readers’ addressed by Maimon, since they all omit the first ten chapters of the second part of his *Lebensgeschichte* or banish them to appendices. In light of the significance of these chapters, this ‘emendation’ of the original text seems to be fatal: 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.

For this reason, a new edition of Maimon’s *Lebensgeschichte* which preserves the original order of the text is urgently required. Precisely such an edition has been prepared by Abraham Socher and Yitzhak Y. Melamed, which is presented in a widely accessible English translation by Paul Reitter. It was to the discussion of this text that we devoted the Maimonides Centre’s first Sceptical Atelier.

The New Format of the Sceptical Atelier

But what is a Sceptical Atelier and why do we need this new format? Unlike familiar event formats such as conferences or workshops, in which participants speak about

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² As Warren Zev Harvey reported during the Sceptical Atelier on Maimon’s *Lebensgeschichte*, some scholars have explained Maimon’s vast digression by the (alleged) fact that Maimon was paid by the page and was trying to augment his salary by filling some of them—135 in total!—with excerpts from Maimonides’ *Guide*. This explanation could neither be confirmed nor refuted by the participants of the Sceptical Atelier.


⁴ *Ibidem.*
their research and findings by giving talks or papers, 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, participants in a Sceptical Atelier will not have prepared a particular talk or paper, but will rather have studied the object of common inquiry in advance—in our case, the new edition and translation of Maimon’s *Lebensgeschichte* prepared by A. Socher, Y. Melamed, and P. Reitter—so as to share their notes and thoughts about it in the joint discussion.

A Sceptical Atelier is, by nature and design, ‘sceptical’ in the original sense of the term: it is an open and unbiased investigation of a certain topic in which arguments from different perspectives are weighed and compared.⁵ Being concerned with Salomon Maimon, our Sceptical Atelier was also sceptical with respect to its particular subject: given that we have only a finite capacity for understanding, Maimon held that we are never able to acquire infallible (and thus true) knowledge about empirical matters and are thus doomed to empirical scepticism.⁶

So much for the new format of the Sceptical Atelier. What is the advantage of this format, and why is it needed? The format of the Sceptical Atelier is particularly apt when it comes to understanding a multifaceted phenomenon or object of study whose full appreciation requires a combination of a whole gamut of disciplinary perspectives. It is a format that makes interdisciplinary research extremely fruitful and rewarding: by being devoted to a single yet multifaceted subject of study, the format of the Sceptical Atelier guarantees a focused and unified discussion. It ensures that the contributions from different disciplinary perspectives are indeed concerned with the same subject and will therefore lead to a comprehensive understanding of one topic, as opposed to a collection of various views about different things (as unfortunately happens all too often in interdisciplinary discussions). By developing the single disciplinary perspectives in real time, as it were, and in the presence of experts from other disciplines, the format of the Sceptical Atelier ensures that the different perspectives do in fact complement and inform one another. In this way, a Sceptical Atelier is not only likely to provide us with a better grasp of one multifaceted subject of study, but rather with a unified understanding of this subject: an understanding that does not only yield knowledge that the subject in question exhibits various fac-

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⁵ The Greek word ‘skepsis’ means ‘search’ or ‘investigation.’ In line with this, Sextus Empiricus wrote: ‘Those who are called Dogmatists in the proper sense of the word think that they have discovered the truth [...] [...] Academics have asserted that things cannot be apprehended. And the Sceptics are still investigating.’ See idem, *Outlines of Scepticism*, ed. and transl. by Julia Annas and Jonathan Barnes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1994): 3 (I.i.3).

⁶ As Maimon explains in his *Lebensgeschichte*, ch. 16 (original edition: 254; MS 381), his empirical scepticism is part of his philosophical ‘coalition system,’ which ‘takes up the problem that Kant’s *Critique* tries to solve—namely the, *quid juris*?—but [...] leaves room for *Humean skepticism* in all its force.’ For more on Maimon’s empirical scepticism, see the “Concluding Note” of his *Essay on Transcendental Philosophy*, eds. and trans. Nick Midgley et alii (London: Continuum, 2019): 220 – 227, and as a commentary the essays collected in Gideon Freudenthal, ed., *Salomon Maimon: Rational Dogmatist, Empirical Skeptic; Critical Assessments* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2003).
ets, but an understanding that also reveals how and why these multiple facets are unified in the subject in question. To make a long story short, then, 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.

As has become plain in the section above, Maimon’s Lebensgeschichte is precisely this kind of multifaceted phenomenon. Touching upon such diverse topics as the history of Eastern European Jews in the eighteenth century, the various traditions and manifestations of Jewish life, faith, and scholarship, the emergence of Hassidism, and the German philosophy of the Enlightenment, an adequate treatment of the Lebensgeschichte calls for an interdisciplinary approach in which the single disciplinary perspectives are integrated into a unified understanding of this exceptional book.

Participants and Programme

The Sceptical Atelier on Maimon’s Lebensgeschichte was organised by Stephan Schmid and Yitzhak Melamed. Schmid is professor of the history of philosophy at the University of Hamburg and one of the co-directors of the Maimonides Centre for Advanced Studies—Jewish Scepticism, who is particularly interested in the philosophy of Spinoza and the way it was developed and transformed by Salomon Maimon. Melamed is Charlotte Bloomberg Professor of Philosophy at the Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, USA. He is a world-leading scholar of Spinoza and Maimon with a particular interest in how they shaped or even initiated the development of German Idealism. Particular relevant to the Sceptical Atelier is the fact that Melamed is one of the editors of the new annotated English translation of Maimon’s Lebensgeschichte.

Fortunately, we managed to attract not only Abraham P. Socher, professor of Jewish studies and religion at Oberlin College (Ohio, USA) and the other editor of the new edition of the Lebensgeschichte, but also an excellent group of scholars specialising in Jewish thought, the history of Hassidism, East European Jewry, and the philosophy of Salomon Maimon. Aside from this, we were also able to arrange a Skype conference with Paul Reitter, professor at the Department of Germanic Languages and Literatures at The Ohio State University (Columbus, USA), who translated the document discussed in our Sceptical Atelier.

The participants invited to this Sceptical Atelier were:

Leora Batnitzky, Ronald O. Perelman Professor of Jewish Studies and professor of religion at Princeton University, USA. She is a specialist on (the emergence of) modern Jewish thought and the development of the idea of Judaism as a religion in the sense in which German Protestants coined this term.

Florian Ehrensperger, who works at the School of Library, Archival and Information Studies at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada. He has pub-
lished on “The Problem of Individuality and Subjectivity in the Philosophy of Solomon Maimon” and has edited a German critical edition of Maimon’s Essay on Transcendental Philosophy (Versuch über die Transzendentalphilosophie).

Warren Zev Harvey, professor emeritus of Jewish thought at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (Israel). He is an expert on medieval Jewish philosophy with a particular focus on Maimonides and Hasdai Crescas, and he is also famous for his work on Spinoza and Mendelssohn.

Moshe Idel, Emeritus Max Cooper Professor of Jewish Thought at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (Israel) and a world-famous specialist in Jewish mysticism and Kabbalah studies.

Ada Rapoport-Albert, professor emerita of Jewish history at the Department of Hebrew and Jewish Studies at University College London (England). She has done ground-breaking work on the emergence and dissemination of Hasidism in eighteenth-century Poland and on gender issues in the history of Judaism.

Oded Schechter, professor at the School of Philosophy of the National Research University, Higher School of Economics in Moscow (Russia). He is an expert on rabbinic hermeneutics and the philosophy of Spinoza and Salomon Maimon.

Shaul Stampfer, professor of Soviet and East European Jewry at the Hebrew University, who specialises in Lithuanian yeshivas as well as Jewish demography, migration, and education.

Apart from these, many members and (prospective) fellows of the MCAS, as well as graduate and doctoral students—some even travelling from other German cities—attended our discussions. Among them were Giuseppe Veltri, Racheli Haliva, Patrick Benjamin Koch, Josef Stern, Máté Veres, and Dirk Westerkamp.

The Sceptical Atelier on Maimon’s Lebensgeschichte lasted for three and a half days. During these days, we discussed the whole book page by page. Furthermore, our discussions were complemented by a satellite talk on “Maimonides: From Mysticism to Scepticism” held by Moshe Idel on Wednesday evening. Idel argued that Abraham Abulafia’s ecstatic Kabbalah was (at least in part) inspired by his reading of Maimonides’ recommendations on how to extract secrets from the Torah in his Guide for the Perplexed.

The combination of distinguished specialists in various disciplines, each of whom could illuminate certain aspects of the Lebensgeschichte, and a generous time schedule led to a unique atmosphere for an exceptionally fruitful discussion. This discussion not only resulted in intellectual satisfaction for our participants, but also in major improvements to the discussed manuscript.

**Results**

The Atelier proved to be an unparalleled event in the study of Maimon’s philosophy and thought and made an immense contribution to the development and success of the new edition of his Lebensgeschichte. The rare opportunity to bring together the
very best world scholars in various sub-fields of Jewish studies and to have them give a close study of this key text enabled the editors to solve numerous scholarly problems, test their conjectures, and overall to develop an extraordinarily rich overview of Salomon Maimon, the person and his philosophy.

For Socher and Melamed, the Atelier proved to be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, and they hope and strive to share the fruits of the event in the forthcoming book. The input we received from other participants was equally enthusiastic, to the extent that many suggested using this kind of intellectual forum for the study of other works and thinkers as well. In fact, we already held a second Sceptical Atelier on Simone Luzzatto’s *Socrate* in May 2017, and we have planned another for 2018.

The new edition and translation of Maimon’s *Lebensgeschichte*, discussed at the Sceptical Atelier, is expected to be published in spring 2018 with Princeton University Press.