

Michela Torbidoni

Report on the Sceptical Atelier on Simone Luzzatto's *Socrates*: Reading the Forthcoming First English Translation (22 – 24 May, 2017)

The second Sceptical Atelier took place from 22 to 24 May 2017 at the Maimonides Centre for Advanced Studies in Hamburg. It successfully accomplished the aim of gathering a group of ten experts together with the editors of the volume (Giuseppe Veltri and Michela Torbidoni) to discuss the philosophical and historical questions raised by Simone Luzzatto's *Socrates or on Human Knowledge* (1651) and the adequacy of the English translation.

In order to make the most of the available time, a number of key topics were defined, such as authority, imagination, and memory, the soul and the intellect, and the enigmatic final part of the book, with a corresponding number of pages being selected from the *Socrates*. The guest scholars were provided with these selections along with the entire book in the original language and a list of recommended literature one month before the beginning of the Atelier. They were then asked to focus more specifically on one of the key topics according to their areas of expertise and to be able to lead a debate on different crucial issues within those contexts. The different contributions followed a pre-determined programme scheduled according to the key topics, which was intended not only to give exhaustive room to each of the Atelier's guest scholars, but also to advance progressively into the heart of *Socrates*' main topics.

The topic of authority in the frame of Luzzatto's work and thinking was explored in an intense debate promoted by the significant inputs given by the invited scholars Vasileios Syros, Cristiana Facchini, and Anna Lissa.

Vasileios Syros, professor at the Academy of Finland whose work deals with the political thought of Simone Luzzatto, pointed out the importance of the reason of state in early modern Jewish thought and especially the influence of the Jesuit Giovanni Botero on Luzzatto's political thinking. He also highlighted some common ideas shared by many French libertines, such as Gabriel Naudé, and Luzzatto's philosophical work. He also stressed the attempt of Luzzatto's political and philosophical reflection to conciliate neo-Stoicism and scepticism in order to shape new arguments in favour of tolerance, cosmopolitanism, and the coexistence of different groups in the same city.

Cristiana Facchini, professor at the University of Bologna, emphasised the role played by the Inquisition and censorship and the actual circulation of the books in seventeenth-century Venice. She also invited us to overcome the usual categories of 'traditionalist' and 'anti-traditionalist' for defining Luzzatto's work and to focus more on the complex Baroque atmosphere of his time. The facts that many of Luzzatto's biblical quotations were also widely used in public sermons and that the trial, which is a significant pattern in the framework of *Socrates*, was also a recurrent meta-

phor in the literature of the time suggest that we should read Luzzatto's evidence as an element of urban history and of a policy in favour of tolerance within communities.

Anna Lissa, maître de conférences at the University of Paris 8, focused on the image of the trial as a linking pattern between Luzzatto's two Italian books: *Discourse on the State of the Jews* (1638) and *Socrates or on Human Knowledge* (1651). The first is an apologetic treatise and the second a fictional trial in which Socrates is to be sentenced because he promoted and spread a suspension of judgement, namely the suspension of judgement concerning what is fair and unfair in a society. She stressed the fact that the authority against which Luzzatto was arguing is political and that he acknowledged a state of political and cultural decay that must be solved not through violence, but rather through the tools offered by wisdom.

The topic of imagination and memory was investigated by the ideas presented by the guest scholars Paolo Bernardini, Antonella Del Prete, and Luciana Pepi.

Paolo Bernardini, professor at the University of Insubria, pointed out that Luzzatto approaches the issue of the imagination differently from Descartes. According to Luzzatto, imagination is like a 'referendary,' namely like those officials charged with the duty of examining and reporting on petitions or requests. Thus, he invited us to interpret Luzzatto's concept of imagination within the framework of Aristotelian philosophy, especially *On the Soul*, of which Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola was the mediator. The many quotations from Lucretius' *On the Nature of Things*, a book that was on the list of prohibited books, as well as from Dante's *Comedy* reveal the nature of an eclectic thinker influenced by Epicurean tendencies as well as the teaching of the well-known Aristotelian Cesare Cremonini at the University of Padua.

Antonella Del Prete, professor at the Tuscia University of Viterbo, also stressed the Aristotelian origin of Luzzatto's psychology. She pointed out that most of the information transmitted by the Aristotelian medieval tradition cannot be found in *On the Soul* itself, but rather in the works of Averroes and Thomas Aquinas, and that these same commentaries on Aristotle's works were drastically reduced and simplified during the early modern period. By offering an interesting overview of the development of the concept of the imagination throughout the epochs, she underlined that there are no traces of Renaissance tradition, which had highlighted the internal and external effects of imagination, in Luzzatto's *Socrates*. Luzzatto, on the contrary, seems to have focused more on the epistemological value and on the physiological and bodily nature of imagination: this aspect revealed his work to be mostly influenced by medical studies and thus its entirely materialistic approach to that issue.

Luciana Pepi, researcher at the University of Palermo, explored the meaning of the enigmatic absence of Maimonides in Luzzatto's *Socrates*. She furthermore underlined that the passages on imagination and memory seem not to have been updated with the philosophical tendencies of his time, and that this was responding to a common attitude among the Jews of reviving more ancient texts, probably also with the aim of holding back any trend that could then turn out to have dangerous effects on the Jewish community's survival.

The third session of the Atelier was devoted to the role of the soul and intellect in Luzzatto's speculation and was debated by Fabrizio Lelli and Emidio Spinelli.

Fabrizio Lelli, professor at Salento University of Lecce, focused on the significant elements which reveal the possible readership of Luzzatto's book: like the case of Judah Leon Abravanel's *Dialogues of Love*, the use of the vernacular and the lack of sources from the Jewish tradition are evidence of the Christian readership for which the book was intended. The recurring quotations from Dante's *Comedy* strengthen the awareness of the double identity: to be Jewish and Italian also means to be intimately familiar with the Italian culture and to adopt it for themselves. He emphasised that the circulation of works composed by Jewish and Christian authors on the topic of the soul in this period in Venice was intense and that they all displayed a rhetoric very similar to that of Luzzatto's *Socrates*. Some examples are offered by the critical response of Sara Copio Sullam's *Manifesto* to the discourse on the immortality of the soul addressed to her in 1621 by Baldassarre Bonifacio, by Daniel Arón Afia's treatise on ancient philosophers' opinions on the soul published in 1568, or by Troilo Lancetti's compendium of Platonic and Neo-Platonic theories also focused on the soul published in 1643.

Emidio Spinelli, professor at Sapienza University of Rome, highlighted the Pyrrhonian methodology adopted by Luzzatto's arguments and thus the possible sceptical sources of his work. *Socrates'* doxographical style agrees with the Pyrrhonian strategy of achieving a *diaphonia*, which automatically leads to the suspension of judgement. Thanks also to the reference to Sextus Empiricus, mentioned in the *Discourse* (1638), one might suppose that Luzzatto owned the Renaissance edition of Sextus' works or that he adopted Pyrrhonian arguments by reading Montaigne's *Essays*. Yet the passages on the soul or the intellect show that Luzzatto's philosophy cannot be entirely defined as Pyrrhonian: he weakened a specific idea of the intellect by using sceptical strategies, but he still seems to accept that it is enlightened by divine revelation. This aspect also seems to clarify Luzzatto's evident inclination towards Platonic positions demonstrated by the abundant indirect quotations as well as by the clear appreciation of Platonic theses. Spinelli underlined Luzzatto's positive view of the Platonic logos together with a preference for an Averroistic *nous poietikos*, which appears to be the only one able to promise any kind of knowledge.

From the session on the soul and the intellect, the Atelier moved on to the final topic, namely that of the closing pages of Luzzatto's *Socrates*. Guido Bartolucci and Josef Stern expounded their interpretations of the philosophical and religious dimensions of the final part.

Guido Bartolucci, researcher at the University of Calabria, explored the nature of Luzzatto's political position by opposing the discourses held by Ippias and Timon, the two final interlocutors of Socrates. Ippias' refusal to trust in the perfection of human nature and the Socratic inclination of Timon's view reveal much more than a mere confirmation of Luzzatto's sceptical approach. In these two discourses, crucial issues are summarised: an idea of nature's perfection coherent with the practice of the probable that seems to strengthen the hypothesis of a Stoic tendency in Luzzatto's philosophy, and

also the pivotal role played by religion. Luzzatto seems to exempt the religion of the city as well as the religion of the wise man, the so called ‘true religion,’ from the sceptical inquiry. Bartolucci underlined the existence of a dichotomy in Luzzatto’s thought: on the one hand, the human sphere being threatened by the fallacies of human intellect, the actual realm of the probable, and on the other hand, the religious sphere enlightened by divine revelation being relieved by sceptical doubt. This also reflects the relationship between philosophers and rabbis as presented by Luzzatto in his previous work, the *Discourse*. The obedience due to religious authority was indeed a crucial concept in the framework of the religious and political crisis during the early modern period as well as for sceptical thinkers such as Montaigne himself. For this reason, he stressed that Luzzatto must be considered a refined voice of the so-called political scepticism of the time, which has nothing to do with the idea of sovereignty endorsed by Jean Bodin and with the issue of the reason of state.

Josef Stern, professor emeritus of the University of Chicago, suggested not interpreting Socrates’ inclination towards Timon’s view as Socrates’/Luzzatto’s full agreement with his motion. Rather, he underlined the existence of a separation between the theoretical and the practical in Luzzatto’s work that must be applied to the final *epochè* itself and thus limit it to the realm of theory, while the probable is a term for the domain of action without an epistemic commitment once the attempt to achieve the truth has been excluded. The way Luzzatto talks about nature and the fact that the probable is instilled in us by nature seem to be problematic and to contradict his sceptical premise. This opens up the possibility of suspecting that there is a kind of reverence for the first cause, and thus for a dogmatic position, in Luzzatto’s thinking. Despite the coherency between the suspension of judgement promoted by Socrates and the suspension of decision finally supported by the judges, as well as the appropriate use Luzzatto made of Pyrrhonian sources, nevertheless, as soon as he starts adopting expressions of praise for nature as ‘the best cause,’ the hermeneutic of his scepticism becomes problematic and even contradictory.

This short overview of the issues raised and the enthusiastic participation of the Atelier’s guest scholars clarifies the importance of promoting events such as this, in which the rich intellectual exchange achieves not only the goal of increasing and extending the knowledge of an author and his work, but also of enhancing the certainty of the significance of a scholarly project, and so in this case the philosophical and historical value of a translation of Luzzatto’s *Socrates*. The English edition will indeed provide the readership with the opportunity to access this work that, thanks to the experience of the Atelier, has already the potential to set out different options for further reflection on the cultural dynamism and admirable modernity of Venetian Jewish culture in the ghetto. Thanks to the guidelines of our new edition, we hope to help the reader in comprehending this immensely complicated work and in grasping some aspects of the composite cultural framework behind it.