Giuseppe Veltri and Michela Torbidoni

Introduction

The Book and Its Legacy

Socrates, Or On Human Knowledge (*Socrate overo dell'humano sapere*) was published in Venice by Tomasini's printing house in 1651. The scope and purpose of the work are indicated in the book's extended title: *The Serio-Ludic Exercise of Simone Luzzatto, Venetian Jew. A Book That Shows How Deficient Human Understanding Can Be When It Is Not Led by Divine Revelation* (*Esercizio seriogiocoso di Simone Luzzatto hebreo venetiano. Opera nella quale si dimostra quanto sia imbecile l'humano intendimento, mentre non è diretto dalla divina rivelatione*).

Luzzatto achieved this goal by offering an overview of the various and contradictory gnosiological opinions that had been disseminated since ancient times: he analysed the human faculties, namely the functioning of the external senses, the internal senses (common sense, the imagination, memory, and the estimative faculty), the intellect, and also their mutual relation.¹ His work gives an accurate analysis of all of these issues by getting to the heart of the ancient epistemological theories. The divergence of these views, to which he addressed the most attention, prevented him from giving a fixed definition of the nature of the cognitive process. This obliged him to come to the audacious conclusion of neither affirming nor denying anything concerning human knowledge, and finally of suspending his judgement altogether. The book embodies a strong stance against dogmatic knowledge and its authority – of which philosophy is a part – and contains the promise of a genuinely sceptical investigation into the validity of human certainties. The pattern of Luzzatto's arguments and the many metaphors and images which enliven his *Socrates* were strongly inspired by Sextus Empiricus's *Outlines of Scepticism*. The ten *tropoi* lead his inquiry through the subjectivity of human perception, a source of continual illusion, or the inconstancy of the state of the whole, up to the final acknowledgment of the inscrutability of any object by itself.¹ Like Sextus, Luzzatto is persuaded that suspension of judgement (*epochē*) is the correct attitude towards the world, because every statement is subject to irreconcilable conflicts (*diaphōnia*). Equipollence, which demands the suspension of judgement that in their opinion restores peace of mind or tranquillity (*ataraxia*), reigns in every inquiry that sceptics undertake.² Luzzatto's philosophical

¹ On the impact of Sextus Empiricus's *Outlines of Scepticism* on Luzzatto's *Socrates*, see Michela Torbidoni, "Il metodo del dubbio nel *Socrate* di Simone Luzzatto," in *Filosofo e rabbino nella Venezia del Seicento*, ed. Giuseppe Veltri (Rome: Aracne, 2015), 183–245, and Giuseppe Veltri, *Alienated Wisdom: Enquiry into Jewish Philosophy and Scepticism* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), 217–24.

² On the legacy of Pyrrhonism, see Richard H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Savonarola to Bayle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) and *The High Road to Pyrrhonism*, ed. Richard A. Watson and James E. Force (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993).

investigation demonstrates that he was well acquainted not only with these and the many other aspects of Sextus's *Outlines*, but also with the Academic scepticism of Carneades, whereof Cicero's *Academica* is the chief source. The "probable" (from the Greek *pithanon*) plays a major role in *Socrates*: Luzzatto does not hesitate to define it as the "North Star in his journey through life," showing himself thus to be consistent with the sceptic's instruction to follow the probable in the absence of truth.

Next to the many indirect references to ancient scepticism, the great impact of Michel de Montaigne's *Essays* on Luzzatto's work must not be overlooked. The footnotes of the present edition of the text refer to the many passages, examples, images, and verses taken from the ancient poets, as well as one from Estienne de La Boétie himself, which have also been noted in Montaigne's *Essays*. Although Luzzatto never made direct reference to Montaigne's name or work, these parallels may be considered an interesting starting point for further research on this topic and on the many philosophical and religious implications of the highlighted similarities between these two authors. Montaigne's modern scepticism – based, like Luzzatto's, on ancient sceptical thought – reverberates throughout *Socrates*, although Luzzatto does not miss the opportunity to reinterpret it in light of the new challenges of his era, such as the scientific discoveries and the collapse of many ancient certainties.

Furthermore, like that of Montaigne, Luzzatto's philosophical commitment may be considered a wise defence and celebration of free thinking beyond any dogmatic restriction. Luzzatto achieved the daring undertaking of undermining the traditional body of knowledge and succeeded in his purpose without worrying about any possible criticism thanks to the expression "serio-ludic exercise" announced in the title. Through this "serious-playfulness," he invited his readers not to take what he was going to present entirely seriously. In this way, Luzzatto enabled himself to freely investigate and bring into question all human knowledge traditionally accepted as true. The modes of playful expression, parody, and ambiguity through which he treated some crucial issues of his time, such as the topic of the immortality of the soul, are another fundamental clue framing Luzzatto's work in a specific context. They demonstrate that it should be viewed as participating in the genre of *serio ludere* ("to play seriously"), which was very popular in the Renaissance and the early modern period.³ The irony which surrounds the entire work seems therefore to be in line with the sceptical and pessimistic concept of human life conceived as a play performed in the theatre of the world. Luzzatto therefore demonstrates his awareness of the idea of the *theatrum mundi*, which found its highest expression in the theatrical representations of Lope de Vega and Calderón de la Barca.⁴

³ See Maria V. White, "'Serio Ludere': Baroque Invenzione and the Development of the Capriccio" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2009).

⁴ See Michael McGaha, ed., *Approaches to the Theater of Calderon* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1982); Wolfram Nitsch, *Barocktheater als Spielraum. Studien zu Lope de Vega und Tirso de Molina* (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 2000).

Although this work seems to be a perfect reflection of Baroque literary taste, it unfortunately had little success in Luzzatto's lifetime and was subsequently almost forgotten. Only a few copies existed before it was republished in 2013,⁵ for the first time since 1651. The absence of evidence from Luzzatto's contemporaries and that of his epistolary have thus increased the difficulty of tracing not only the legacy of *Socrates* in the history of philosophical thought, but also of understanding the circumstances surrounding its composition.

Some references to Luzzatto's book began to appear in scholarly literature from the end of the seventeenth century, although the often incomplete and mistaken form in which information concerning this book, including its title, has been delivered testifies that *Socrates* had not been thoroughly examined by the authors who had mentioned it, and probably not even read by some of them. Besides mentions in *Bibliotheca Magna Rabbinica* (1693) by the Christian Hebraist Giulio Bartolucci,⁶ Jacques Basnage's *Histoire de Juifs* (1706),⁷ and Johann Christoph Wolf's *Bibliotheca Hebraea* (1727),⁸ brief references to Luzzatto's *Socrates* appeared in some works of the nineteenth century such as the well-known *Dizionario* (1802) by Giovanni Bernardo De Rossi⁹ and Moritz Steinschneider's *Die Italienische Literatur der Juden* (1901).¹⁰ Between the middle and the end of the nineteenth century, brief mentions also appeared in the works of the German scholars Julius Fürst and Gustav Karpeles.¹¹ More detailed descriptions may be found in Isidor Busch's *Kalender und Jahrbuch für Israeliten* (1866)¹² and Heinrich Graetz's *Geschichte der Juden* (1868).¹³ Graetz's summary of the book refers to *Socrates* as a "parable" written by Luzzatto during his youth.¹⁴ He paid special attention to Luzzatto's mathematical skill and to his solid knowledge of ancient and modern literature, an element of the book which is particularly striking. Graetz specifically focuses on one aspect that he considered to be the main claim of the work, namely that reason and the authority of holy texts cannot each claim to have exclusive power over human matters, but that both must contrib-

5 See Simone Luzzatto, *Scritti politici e filosofici di un rabbino scettico nella Venezia del Seicento*, ed. Giuseppe Veltri (Milan: Bompiani, 2013).

6 See Giulio Bartolucci, *Bibliotheca Magna Rabbinica* (Rome: Typographia Sacrae Congregationis de Propaganda Fide, 1693).

7 See Jacques Christian Basnage, *Histoire des Juifs*, vol. 9, book 2 (Rotterdam: Reinier Leers, 1706), 883–84.

8 See Johann Christoph Wolf, *Bibliotheca Hebraea* (Hamburg: Christophorus Felginer, 1727), 3:1115–35.

9 See Giovanni Bernardo De Rossi, *Dizionario storico degli autori ebrei e delle loro opere* (Parma: Dalla Reale Stamperia, 1802), 2:16.

10 See Moritz Steinschneider, *Die Italienische Literatur der Juden* (Frankfurt a. M.: Kauffmann, 1901), 418–19.

11 See Julius Fürst, *Bibliotheca Judaica* (Leipzig: Wilhelm Engelmann, 1863), 2:283–84; Gustav Karpeles, *Geschichte der Jüdische Literatur*, vol. 2 (Berlin: Oppenheim, 1886), 228.

12 See Isidor Busch, *Kalender und Jahrbuch für Israeliten* (Vienna: Schmid, 1866), 6:106–8.

13 See Heinrich Graetz, *Von der dauernden Ansiedelung der Marranen in Holland 1618 bis zum Beginne der Mendelssohnschen Zeit 1750*, vol. 10: *Geschichte der Juden* (Leipzig: Oskar Liener, 1868), 148–53.

14 Graetz, 150–51.

ute to human development. According to his interpretation, mankind will be only able to achieve all of its goals if reason and revelation join forces, that is, in the doctrine of the balance between *fides et ratio*. Graetz claimed that this doctrine was first formulated by Maimonides to form a contrast with Averroes, in a time when reason and faith were thought to be separated, considering them to be two different fields of research and enlightenment which must stay separate, exactly like the truth of faith and the truth of reason. The doctrine of a balance between *fides et ratio* was reintroduced by Thomas Aquinas, becoming a firm point in Scholastic thought. Even though Scholasticism had a moment of decline following Luther's criticism of it, it returned to prominence during the seventeenth century (the so-called "second Scholasticism") by putting forth the doctrine of a balance between *fides et ratio* once more while also introducing new elements. Some of its exponents thought that natural reason had to accept the "wonder of the probable," as Juan Caramuel put it.¹⁵ We should point out this important change as it was part of Luzzatto's cultural context. Graetz also focuses on another element, the spread of Lurianic Kabbalah, which was supported by an increasing number of followers. However, even though the Kabbalah considered the doctrine of a balance between *fides et ratio* almost as heresy, Luzzatto succeeded in complying with it, as Graetz reported. He interprets *Socrates* in the light of contemporary Jewish concerns, particularly focusing on the contrast between Kabbalah and rationalistic philosophy, pointing out that Luzzatto inclined towards the latter.

During the nineteenth century, Shmuel David Luzzatto stated in his *Autobiografia* (1882) that Simone Luzzatto was "less known than he deserved," but that he "had not only a broad rabbinical doctrine, but also a classical erudition and political and philosophical knowledge."¹⁶ In his summary of *Socrates*, he briefly mentioned the topic of scepticism, which he discussed with ill-concealed embarrassment and in a tone of indulgent justification. He concluded by pointing out the easy style and lack of erudition and philosophical knowledge in Simone Luzzatto's work.¹⁷ As far as criticism of the book's literary quality is concerned, one could easily object that this last remark is actually untrue, as is made evident by the work itself. Luzzatto's style is undeniably pretentious to a modern reader because it follows Latin sentence structure and typical seventeenth-century rules of syntax and punctuation. Furthermore, Luzzatto's use of a rich and multifaceted vocabulary drawn from the contemporary Venetian dialect, from the Spanish language,¹⁸ and from the legal sphere is particularly striking.

¹⁵ See Pablo Passivino, ed., *Le meraviglie del probabile: Juan Caramuel 1606–1682. Atti del convegno internazionale di studi, October 29–31, 1982* (Vigevano: Comune di Vigevano, 1990).

¹⁶ See Shmuel David Luzzatto, *Autobiografia di S. D. Luzzatto preceduta da alcune notizie storico-letterarie sulla famiglia Luzzatto a datare dal secolo decimosesto* (Padova: Crescini, 1882).

¹⁷ Shmuel David Luzzatto, 15–16.

¹⁸ In this regard, it remains to be clarified whether the words of Spanish origin belonged to the contemporary spoken Venetian language or whether they were integral parts of the lexicon introduced to Venice by Sephardi Jews who had escaped from Spain.

Ludwig Blau, in his *Leo Modenas Briefe* (1906),¹⁹ concisely reported the necessity of a deeper study of Luzzatto's *Socrates*. In the 1930s, a vague summary of the book could be found in Cecil Roth's *History of the Jews of Italy*,²⁰ while a more detailed one appeared in Jehuda Bergmann's article "Sokrates in der Jüdischen Literatur,"²¹ in which he traced the history of Socrates's appearance in the Jewish tradition, including Luzzatto's book. According to Bergmann's interpretation, the main issue Luzzatto raised was the necessity that neither reason nor authority should have supremacy, but that both should be equally honoured, because only by completing and limiting one another could they best rule human life. In 1992, Yaacov Shavit incorporated Luzzatto's *Socrates* into his discussion of the relationship between Hellenistic culture and Jewish culture in the early modern period.²² In the same year, in a chapter devoted to Jehuda Del Bene, Robert Bonfil offered an accurate description of Luzzatto's book focusing on the character of Socrates.²³

One of the more recent contributions devoted to research on Luzzatto's *Socrates* is David Ruderman's "Science and Skepticism: Simone Luzzatto on Perceiving the Natural World,"²⁴ which analysed Luzzatto's deep involvement in the naturalistic and scientific studies of his time by focusing on his appreciation of and proficiency in mathematics and astronomy. Ruderman particularly focused on the unclear role of revelation throughout the sceptical framework that Luzzatto put forth, suggesting that he had an ambivalent attitude towards religion by citing his formal respect for the ceremonies on the one hand and his denial of the concepts at their very roots on the other.

Ariel Viterbo, in his dissertation, which was originally written in Hebrew and partly published in Italian in 1999,²⁵ accepts a similar interpretation, supporting the idea of Luzzatto's "masked scepticism." Viterbo describes the text's contents and proposes interpreting it as an intellectual autobiography of Luzzatto and thus identifying him with the character of Socrates. Just like Socrates, Luzzatto was sceptical about the possibility that human beings could attain definite knowledge. According to Viterbo's

19 See Ludwig Blau, *Leo Modenas Briefe und Schriftstücke: ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Juden in Italien und zur Geschichte des hebräischen Privatstiles. Jahresbericht der Landes-Rabbinerschule in Budapest für das Schuljahr 1904–1905*, 2 vols. (Budapest: Adolf Alkalay & Sohn, 1905).

20 See Cecil Roth, *History of the Jews of Italy* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1946), 263–64.

21 See Jehuda Bergmann, "Sokrates in der Jüdischen Literatur," *Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums* 80 (1936): 3–13.

22 See Yaacov Shavit, *Athens in Jerusalem: Classical Antiquity and Hellenism in the Making of the Modern Secular Jew* (London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1997), 136–37.

23 See Robert Bonfil, "Preaching as Mediation between Élite and Popular Cultures: The Case of Jehuda Del Bene," in *Preachers of the Italian Ghetto*, ed. David B. Ruderman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992): 67–88.

24 See David B. Ruderman, "Science and Skepticism: Simone Luzzatto on Perceiving the Natural World," in *Jewish Thought and Scientific Discovery in Early Modern Europe*, ed. David B. Ruderman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 153–84.

25 See Ariel Viterbo, "Socrate nel Ghetto: lo scetticismo mascherato di Simone Luzzatto," *Studi Veneziani* 38 (1999): 79–128.

opinion, such a mask was perhaps the only way for Luzzatto to spread his scepticism without fear of condemnation by the Jewish religious authorities, which was directed against anyone who doubted the truth of divine revelation.

The most recent contributions to research on *Socrates* were published by Giuseppe Veltri in his edition of Simone Luzzatto's works²⁶ and the volume he edited entitled *Filosofo e rabbino nella Venezia del Seicento*.²⁷ Veltri highlighted and elevated the importance of Simone Luzzatto's work as the only Jewish example of sceptical thought in the early modern period. In an essay published in the same volume, Michela Torbidoni analysed Luzzatto's practice of doubt in *Socrates* by examining the influence and role of Sextus Empiricus's *Outlines of Scepticism* throughout the book.²⁸ The most recent research into Luzzatto's life and work led by Giuseppe Veltri has begun to put forward some evidence concerning the possibility of reading *Socrates* in line with the controversial and libertine literature of the Italian Academies, and more precisely with the innovative and bizarre compositions of the *Accademia degli Incogniti*.²⁹ This new perspective does not seek to reduce Luzzatto's *Socrates* to a mere rhetorical exercise; on the contrary, it aims to open up the rich and still-hidden background of this rabbi's life and works. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, learned academies became the epicentre of a flourishing Italian culture;³⁰ they promoted discussions in a wide range of disciplines, from literature and philosophy to astronomy and medicine. As alternatives to the official universities, they attracted the attention of a different kind of scholar and promoted an intellectual exchange between them that stands out in terms of the topics and issues they encountered. They were associations or groups of learned people motivated by the desire to freely advance their innovative scholarly arguments and to perform poetry and plays which were sometimes marked by ludicrous, bizarre, and libertine traits. The *Incogniti*, who included important Venetian and foreign intellectuals, future senators, and even some members of the Church, played the role of an unofficial seat of political power in Venice for almost thirty years. Thanks to their wide range of publications – including moral essays, novels, and opera libretti – they had a profound influence on the cultural and political affairs of the Venetian Republic. Luzzatto's *Socrates* must thus be considered a key work for investigating the intensive transfer of knowledge between Jewish and Christian authors and as a mirror of the contemporary philosophical leanings and social and political changes.

²⁶ See Luzzatto, *Scritti politici e filosofici*.

²⁷ See Veltri, *Filosofo e rabbino* and also Veltri, *Alienated Wisdom*, 233–64.

²⁸ See Torbidoni, “Il metodo.”

²⁹ See Giuseppe Veltri and Evelien Chayes, *Oltre le Mura del Ghetto: Accademie, scetticismo e tolleranza nella Venezia barocca* (Palermo: New Digital Frontiers, 2016); Michela Torbidoni, “The Italian Academies and Rabbi Simone Luzzatto's *Socrate*: The Freedom of the *Ingenium* and the Soul,” *Yearbook of the Maimonides Centre for Advanced Studies* 2 (2017): 71–94.

³⁰ See Michele Battaglia, *Delle Accademie Veneziane: Dissertazione storica* (Venice: G. Picotti–G. Orlandelli Editore, 1826).

It is not surprising that Luzzatto chose Socrates as the leader of his inquiry: this legendary figure perfectly embodied the human desire for knowledge, and had symbolised the first authentic free thinker, as well as a victim of intolerance, since the earliest theological controversies.³¹ The shape of Luzzatto's *Socrates* and the richness of his message for a Jew in seventeenth-century Venice must be considered the missing tile of a complicated mosaic, namely that of the close intellectual relationship between Baroque Venice and the Berlin of the German Enlightenment. In eighteenth-century Berlin, where the cultural élite was beginning to consider officially acknowledging and integrating the Jews into the contemporary society and culture, the example of Venice was often recalled. This common sensibility explains why the Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn was called "ein deutscher Sokrates" in that period.

If we pay attention to *Socrates*'s frontispiece, Luzzatto's signature is striking: with the expression "Venetian Jew," he wished to seal his double identity, his belonging to both the Jewish nation and the Venetian Republic. In his *Socrates*, he aimed to define a new relationship not only between the Jewish community and Venice, but also, more universally, among mankind. We may say that Luzzatto, at the height of his career and already of an advanced age, wished to strengthen the universal values whereby he began to envision a social and political project which aimed to combine different cultural identities.

Summary of the Content

Contrary to his *Discourse*, which is an essay divided into different sections, which he calls "considerations," *Socrates*'s structure is uniform. The book is organised neither into different chapters nor into paragraphs. However, following the fashion for books in Luzzatto's period, he included some marginal notes, which act as something of a guideline throughout the many topics and interlocutors, pointing out changes from direct to indirect speech and highlighting the exact sources of his quotations. The book also constitutes relevant evidence for the development of the printing press between 1638 (the publication date of the *Discourse*) and 1651: while in the *Discourse* the *recto/verso* type of layout is still used, the numbering in *Socrates* is progressive, as in modern books.

The book begins with a two-page dedication to "the Most Serene Prince and the Most Excellent Council" – namely the Venetian Doge Francesco Molino and the wise men of the Council (*Consiglio dei Savi*), also known as the Most Excellent Council (*Eccellentissimo Consiglio*) – and a three-page note introducing the list of *errata*. The

³¹ On Socrates's legacy, see Michael Trapp, ed., *Socrates from Antiquity to the Enlightenment* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007); Trapp, ed., *Socrates in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007); and Sara Ahbel-Rappe and Rachana Kamtekar, eds., *A Companion to Socrates* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006).

numbered pages begin with a dedication to “the Benign Reader,” which is followed by a summary of the entire work titled “Subject,” where Luzzatto explains the reasons that have led Socrates to be on trial again.

Luzzatto begins his “serio-ludic” philosophical exercise by portraying the fictional foundation of a new Academy in Delphi intended to reform human knowledge. He specifies that the meeting of the Academicians took place in the Temple of Apollo and became a pole of attraction for many people coming from different locations. The choice of Apollo’s temple in Delphi as a starting point for *Socrates* seems to be consistent with Luzzatto’s decision to perform an investigation that was both Socratic and sceptical. The temple was indeed the place where the Pythia stated that none was wiser than Socrates, who – by following one of the famous phrases carved into the entrance of the temple, “know yourself” – came to the conclusion that the wisest person is one who becomes aware of not knowing anything. The Delphic exhortation to know himself and the attainment of self-knowledge as an acknowledgement of human ignorance take on the meaning of a commitment to a persistent inquiry and search for answers. It reproduces in society the ritual manner in which people would deal with the Oracle. According to Plutarch’s dialogue *The E at Delphi*, among the famous inscriptions appearing at the entrance to the temple was an enigmatic “E.” One of the three interpretations that he gave of this letter suggested identifying it with the Greek word *ei* (“if”) as a fundamental part of the ritual phrase with which one consulted the Oracle. Apollo, according to Plutarch, solves the problems of our practical lives on the one hand and on the other is the god who raises intellectual doubts and offers them to whomsoever is naturally a philosopher by inspiring his soul to search for the truth.³²

Luzzatto chooses this place to host the first assembly of the new Academy. During the session, they find a letter claiming to have been sent by the incarcerated Reason, who is oppressed by human Authority. Reason asks to be released in order to give human doctrines back their lost splendour and to give a new dignity to mankind. Pythagoras and Aristotle, here identified with Authority’s principle of *ipse dixit*, suggest that they do not take this request into consideration.

In search of a solution, the Academicians decide to grant Reason’s wish and to create a letterbox for denunciations to collect all the secret charges against the absurdities perpetrated towards accepted doctrines. They find a charge against Socrates, who is accused of having attempted to subvert the human sciences because – due to his captious arguments, quibbling instances, simulated irony, deceptive questions, and inconclusive inductions that were deduced from carpenters, saddlers, shoemakers, and the like – philosophy seems to be subdued, virtue undisciplined, prudence inept, temperance useless, justice harmful, strength reckless, eloquence vain, and religion doubtful and perplexed.³³ In addition to this, Socrates is attempting

³² On this topic, see Torbidoni, “Italian Academies,” 77–79.

³³ See Simone Luzzatto, *Socrates, Or On Human Knowledge*, 10.

to lead us to such foolishness by introducing the suspension of judgment and the withholding of assent among us, and to weaken humankind by depriving us of every solid and stable rule by which to rule and order our way of life; indeed, by removing any distinction between right and wrong, good and evil, and honesty and dishonesty.³⁴

The public assembly discusses whether such a charge deserves to be torn to pieces or whether it is worthy of debate. The only one against the trial is Xenophon, who attempts to save his teacher from the charge with pragmatic argumentation. He points out that a trial or sentence would only increase Socrates's fame. However, by dropping the charge, the entire issue and all of Socrates's doctrine would be silenced for eternity. However, Xenophon's opinion is not taken into consideration and the accused is called to appear in court.

Most of Luzzatto's book is occupied by Socrates's defence, which is expressed in the form of a long excursus reporting the opinions and doctrines of philosophers, politicians, and poets populating his search for certainty in human knowledge. Through them, Socrates explains to the judges the reasons that have persuaded him to suspend his judgement. The debates he reports define the different steps of his convoluted path up to accepting the "light of the probable" as his guide in life and the suspension of judgement as the only solution in the face of the impossibility of affirming or denying any dogma. Socrates begins by dealing with the vortex of the many contrary opinions crowding the history of philosophy, which he describes as being like "lines that go from the centre to the circumference, [which] when they are close to their origin, there is only a little distance between them, but as soon as they advance, they increasingly shift in different directions."³⁵ The suspicion that the apparently solid body of human knowledge is not based on any stable foundation progressively increases throughout his inquiry. Everything appears to Socrates to be ruled only by Chance, like the first move in a chess match. These concerns persuade him to appeal to sceptical doubt, to devote his inquiry to the scrutiny of himself – which is considered the only way to explore the nature of knowledge – and to verify whether the suspension of judgement may truly be considered a valid solution. Yet his purpose encounters the first difficulty, namely a quarrel between external objects, the senses, the intellect, and knowledge itself, which each allegorically begin to demand that Socrates examine them first.

After a momentary hesitation due to the different arguments that they put forth, Socrates inclines to the objects and initiates his philosophical search with them. He begins to wonder about the existence of a universal object, the limit of the mind itself. The immediate doubt arising from this first issue obliges him to question Gorgias, described as the wise man who became famous for conquering *ens* and reducing it to nothingness. The debate with Gorgias is the longest and most complicated of all the others: he is called to answer the question of the nature of *ens* which – thanks to

³⁴ Luzzatto, 11.

³⁵ Luzzatto, 23.

Socrates's questions – is made very extensive, also involving the concept of non-*ens* and truth, sensory perception (with special attention to the sense of touch and the eyesight), and the gnoseological value of dreams, deliriums, and the opinions of the common people. Gorgias's eloquence concludes in favour of a sceptical approach to knowledge by laying down the first basis for the suspension of judgement.

Convinced of the senselessness of investigating objects, Socrates decides to turn his attention to the five senses, especially to sight. Proceeding through a debate with the blind man Crito and then with a mirror maker, Socrates acknowledges the apparent truth of our sensory perception, which is compared to "curved and irregular mirrors which distort the shapes and appearances of objects."³⁶ Socrates's suspicion is confirmed by the contradictions of atomism towards sensation. The gnoseological scepticism matures along with Socrates's awareness of the risks of his inquiry: he provokes the hatred of both wise men and the common people, as they are each presented as the most responsible for the crystallization of knowledge into dogma. Socrates's inquiry shakes ancient doctrines, specifically Aristotelian philosophy, which held the most authority during the Middle Ages and Renaissance. Luzzatto, through the character of Socrates, intends to demolish this dogmatic conglomeration of knowledge, and he does so by putting forth his doubts and showing the mistakes and absurdities in ancient opinions thanks to a comparison with the scientific progress of his times: indeed, he recalls the astronomical observations achieved by Galileo's telescope in order to demonstrate the inconsistency of Aristotelian science. In conformity with the sceptical attitude of his contemporaries, Luzzatto develops an examination of human knowledge that proceeds from the external senses through the internal senses, the intellect, and up to knowledge. His aim is to show that none of these steps can withstand the blows of doubt as a methodology. In analogy with the intellectual sceptical philosophy of Michel de Montaigne, Luzzatto does not only want to list the wide variety of human opinions, but also to allow doubt to enter into fundamental philosophical issues.

Once Socrates has shown the mistakes and illusions produced by the eyesight, he is obliged to face reprimands first from Diotima, who accuses him of threatening the concepts of beauty and love, and then from Critias, who is interested in safeguarding the public and private value of gold and precious stones, which Socratic dialectic compares to coal.

Having left his examination of the external senses aside, Socrates undertakes a criticism of the internal senses: common sense, the imagination, the estimative faculty, memory, and finally the intellect become the objects of a thorough investigation which displays the paradox of mankind, unable to know its own nature, but obstinately aiming to discover the ultimate causes of the universe.

The analysis of the intellect, which is one of the most substantial at this point in *Socrates*, is shaped by the many different theories which Socrates collects from both

³⁶ Luzzatto, 78.

antiquity and the modern era. Concerning the essence of the intellect, he first considers the solution proposed by the Stoic tradition, which advocated that the human intellect was like a serail of fierce animals, and then the idea that there is only one monarch ruling us. Socrates's hesitation before these alternatives causes him to deny both of them. This passage deserves special attention because Socrates denies his past agreement with the Stoic theory of "animal spirits" to explain the complexity of human beings. This change of mind, dramatically likened to the mythological Saturn who devoured his own offspring, connects the book with Luzzatto's previous work, the *Discourse*, where he had supported this view as an apologetic argument in defence of the Venetian Jewish community.³⁷ Yet the doubt practised throughout *Socrates* has consumed every kind of opinion included in that work, finding relief only in the suspension of judgement.

Socrates's scepticism also deconstructs the certainties inherent in the intellect: he presents the different opinions concerning its nature, whether there is one or many ruling the human mind, its actions and functions, to what it addresses its operations, the place where it is located, the time it needs to carry out its actions, and its goal, and he comes to the final conclusion that the intellect is completely ignorant of itself, like a "painter who, when he draws the first sketch of a future painting with his own hand, is so foolish as to erroneously consider this [action] to be being carried out by a servant or maid."³⁸

Socrates reflects on the subject to which the intellect addresses itself and refers to a dialogue with Plato on the topic of universals. Luzzatto pushes Socrates to deny the existence of universals by invoking the concept of genus and species and recalling Simplicius's famous anecdote in his Commentary on Aristotle's *Categories*, in which Antisthenes polemically tells Plato that he is able to see a horse but not "horseness."³⁹ Socrates advocates the universals' subjectivity and individuality by stating that they also are constricted by the limits of space and time. Even though Plato feels his theory collapse, he modestly agrees to analyse his own knowledge more thoroughly in the future.

Once Socrates has proved the intellect's unawareness, he decides to continue and turns his attention to the nature of knowledge itself. He also lists the many contrary opinions about this case held by familiar personalities such as Prodicus, Homer, Protagoras, and Aristotle, all of whom agree to identify it as an internal passion. Then it is the turn of the Pythagoreans, who believe that knowledge is a kind of recollection. After them, he speaks with Dionysodorus, then with the Elean Stranger from Plato's *Sophist*, and with Anaxagoras, who warns him to be careful in spreading the pure and sincere truth by comparing it to the excessive light

³⁷ See Luzzatto, *Discourse*, 35v–36r.

³⁸ Luzzatto, *Socrates*, 144.

³⁹ See Simplicius, *On Aristotle Categories* 7–8, trans. Barrie Fleet (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 67.

that harms those with weak eyes when they stare at it, as well as annoying thieves because it reveals their rogueries. Likewise, the light of the truth damages plebeian intellects, as they cannot tolerate its rays, and it greatly torments sagacious and ill-intentioned [intellects], because they suspect that it may disclose their falsehoods and deceptions to others.⁴⁰

Luzzatto prudently refers to the concept of truth, showing that he is aware of the risks that may follow if one attempts to disclose the pure truth. Just as in his *Discourse* he hoped that his book would be read only by estimators of the truth, so in his *Socrates*,⁴¹ thirteen years later, some of the characters, like Anaxagoras, Cratylus, and Hippias, as well as Socrates himself, do not forget how thorny the issue of the sincere truth may be:

Disclosing the truth does not always fit or adjust it to our interests. Just as nudity is not appropriate for our bodies although their members were masterly constructed by excellent Nature, so often it turns out to be indecent that the truth should appear to vulgar people without any ornament.⁴²

Socrates continues with his inquiry and asks Euthydemus and Theaetetus about the nature of knowledge. Both of them argue that knowledge consists in carrying out two functions, namely to apprehend and to judge. Not satisfied by this answer, Socrates questions Archelaus, who believes that knowledge is an awareness of the four causes, namely the material, the formal, the efficient, and the final, which reminds him of Aristotelian theory whereby he explained natural events. Once he has demonstrated the inconsistency of the theory of the four causes, Socrates appeals to Theophrastus, who begins expounding Aristotle's opinion of knowledge. After having put forth the way the syllogism works as the main foundation of true knowledge in Aristotle's opinion, Socrates expresses his suspicions about this logical instrument and Aristotle's real intentions. Hopelessly, Socrates decides to address Philolaus, Xenocrates, and Euclid, who are inclined to define knowledge as a unit of measurement.

Although many different doctrines are mentioned in Luzzatto's work, references to Aristotelian philosophy occur more frequently than any other. This is a symptom of Luzzatto's acquaintance with the traditional doctrine of his time and, at the same time, of his critical rejection of it. Socrates proceeds with his defence and tells the judges that he met Plato again as soon as he came back from Egypt, full of new doctrines, but that in this case, the discussion between them also concluded with Plato's defeat, who warned Socrates by telling him

⁴⁰ Luzzatto, *Socrates*, 197.

⁴¹ On the concept of *nuda veritas*, see Veltri, *Alienated Wisdom*, 232–33.

⁴² Luzzatto, *Socrates*, 256.

to be careful, because by demolishing his universals, I was endangering human knowledge, which gathered its permanent and stable foundations from these definitions, free and unfettered from space and time. So, if they were demolished and defeated, then all philosophy would be hindered and extinguished.⁴³

Without paying much attention to Plato's warning, Socrates continues in his investigation by questioning Cratylus, and the dialogue with him constitutes an important step in the maturation of Socrates's scepticism. Cratylus invites him to give up his quest because of the futility of his undertaking. He summarises some of the unbeatable constants that human knowledge always undergoes:

Yet if the human intellect's task is the cognition of natural things, it always becomes embroiled, among its other torments, in five cruel and constantly flagellating things: the infinite, which distracts it; the indivisible minimum, which burdens it; motion, which agitates it; time, which consumes it; and space or the void, which reduces it to nothing. These are such thorny matters that anyone who presumed to have finally intelligised them while he was entangled in them would certainly be unfortunate.⁴⁴

Cratylus suggests to Socrates that he rely on the probable, as a safe port where our minds may take relief from the uncertainty of life. This is not the first time that the probable appears as a method for evaluating and judging human affairs in Luzzatto's work, as it was already the criterion leading his arguments in his *Discourse* (30r). Throughout *Socrates*, the probable is an "intuition" which guides human beings through the humble acknowledgement of their own cognitive limits:

If we cannot acknowledge the exact truth like all-seeing Argus, we must be content with the fact that, like one-eyed Polyphemus, we may only see what resembles it. If we are excessively curious about it, in the end we will become like blind Tiresias, devoid of light and sight.⁴⁵

Despite Cratylus's argument, Socrates is determined to pursue his goal, and decides to focus on everyday human customs, because of the confidence human beings have shown themselves to have in them. There now begins an examination of prudence,⁴⁶ traditionally one of the most praised virtues in social and political life. Socrates devotes a long inquiry to prudence, which involves several philosophical and political personalities such as Protagoras, Pericles, Hippias, Critias, Thrasymachus, Cleinias, Alcibiades, and Anaxagoras.

Socrates ends his long journey through human knowledge by comparing himself to "a mendicant who does not feel dismayed by encountering a rapacious thief, but,

⁴³ Luzzatto, 228.

⁴⁴ Luzzatto, 231.

⁴⁵ Luzzatto, 236–37.

⁴⁶ Concerning the moral and political value of prudence, see Anna Lissa and Giuseppe Veltri, "La prudence de Simone Luzzatto dans le grand théâtre du monde," in *La Vertu des Païens*, ed. Silvie Taussi (Paris: Éditions Kimé, forthcoming).

on the contrary, dances and celebrates as his poverty makes him feel secure.”⁴⁷ His new state of misery does not sadden him; on the contrary, it is perceived as a form of relief from the suspicion and fear that he will one day lose all that he knows. His scepticism therefore makes him resistant to the attacks of sophists.

At the end of his defence, Socrates reveals to the judges that he was unsure whether to spread his new considerations or whether to avoid doing so, and thus that he decided to consult first Hippias and then Timon. The former expresses complete trust in human understanding and in its capacity to gather the best teaching from Nature itself, which he considers to be the main source of human moral, social, and political behaviour. Hippias believes in the privileged position that mankind occupies in the great theatre of the world, and thus tries to persuade Socrates not to disclose what he has learned to the common people, but only to some wise men. Hippias reveals that he believes that Socrates’s attempt concretely threatens the value of human wisdom, considered to be the sole human consolation.

Although Socrates is now already inclined to suspend his judgement, he decides to also listen to Timon’s opinion in this regard. Known to be a misanthrope, Timon objects to all of Hippias’s arguments: he does not trust human understanding at all, as he deems it to be moved only by an immoderate love for itself and to be always inclined to the apparent rather than to the essential. He also criticises Hippias’s concept of Nature and human knowledge by advocating instead that Nature displays the greater amount of injustice and amorality, while knowledge is only a cluster of false opinions. In conclusion, Timon invites Socrates to free himself from those thoughts which upset him and to disclose the sincere truth to all mankind. In the very last pages of the work, Socrates confesses that he was more persuaded by Timon’s arguments.

The court judging Socrates’s endeavour is divided into those who believe in the necessity of the suspension of judgement and those who rather consider Socrates a real threat to the future of human knowledge. It is only thanks to the moderate intervention of Plato that the decision to momentarily suspend judgement is accepted by the majority.

The book ends with a short summary of the consequences following the court’s decision: the majority of wise men continue to hold Socrates in high esteem, while the common people, due to the fact that Socrates does not receive a definitive acquittal, continue to be distrustful of him.

⁴⁷ Luzzatto, *Socrates*, 255.