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Jews on Trial and Their Sceptical Attorney: Philosophic Scepticism and Political Thought in Simone Luzzatto's Italian Works

Therefore, deprived of any biased emotion, I am going to express my own advice about the way to judge Socrates. I hold it sensible that we have to judge him by adopting the very same method he adopts in judging the things he happens to be met with. He suspends his own judgment and we are going to suspend our judgment about him too. Nor will we come to a peremptory decision *pro nunc*. Thus, we will suspend the final verdict until some clearer evidence becomes available to us allowing us either to absolve him or to sentence him.¹

Luzzatto, who was seated at the head as judge in the contest, suddenly banged both hands on the table and said: "The verse that is being disputed, as you know, has left all the most excellent rabbis perplexed and bewildered in such a manner that they do not know whether they are in heaven or on earth." And after some more similar words he placed his finger on his mouth and added: "Let us kindly be silent and close our books, because if we continue to speculate on this prophecy of Daniel, it will come to pass that we will all become Christians. It cannot be denied that there is clearly shown that the messiah, whose time is already passed, has come. Whether this is Jesus of Nazareth, I do not wish to decide hastily."²

The juxtaposition of Luzzatto's original quotation taken from the conclusion of his philosophical dialogue entitled *Socrates or on Human Knowledge* (1651) and a pas-

1 Luzzatto, *Socrates*, 399 (all the passages taken from the *Socrates* are translated by me).

2 Morosini, *Via della fede* (Roma: Nella Stamparia della Sacra Congregazione De Propaganda Fide, 1683), "A i dispersi Figliuoli d'Israele della presente Cattività" s.p.: "Il Luzzatto, che sedeva nel primo luogo, come Giudice del contrasto, battendo improvvisamente ambe le mani sulla tavola, disse: *Il Testo, che si disputa, fa stare, come sapete, tutti i più eccellenti Rabbini perplessi, e sbalorditi in maniera, che non sanno, se siano in Cielo, ò in terra.* E dopo alcune altre parole simili postosi il dito alla bocca, soggiunse: *Taciamo di gratia, e chiudiamo i libri, perché se staremo più a specolare su questa profetia di Daniele, converrà, che tutti ci facciamo Christiani. Non può negarsi, che in essa non si mostri chiaramente esser venuto il Messia, di cui il tempo è già passato. Se questo sia Giesù Nazareno, io non voglio precipitare il mio sentimento.*" English translation available in Ravid, "Contra Judaeos," 333. For a more recent evaluation of Morosini and his work, see Michela Andreatta, "Raccontare per persuadere," and annexed bibliography.

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sage extracted from Giulio Morosini's *Via della fede* (1683) may sound like a provocation, especially if one takes into account the fact that this specific passage is suggesting an alleged conversion of Luzzatto to Christianity that previous scholars have already exposed as false.³ However, I suggest reading and comparing both passages from a different point of view. In fact, they both deal with the final verdict of a process involving a judgment based on available evidence and arguments. In the new version of Socrates's trial elaborated by Luzzatto, the final verdict concerning the philosopher is suspended according to the sceptical procedure of the suspension of judgment (*epochē*). Luzzatto's final verdict as transmitted by Morosini concerns a controversy between two brothers, both of whom were Jews who had been previously forced to convert to Catholicism. The first wanted to return to Judaism, and the second wanted to keep his brother in the Christian religion. Thus, they organised a dispute in Venice about the interpretation of Daniel's messianic prophecy. Simone Luzzatto was called to act as a judge since, as Morosini himself puts it, he was a rabbi and enjoyed "the highest reputation for his Jewish knowledge and he was also held in the greatest esteem among the Christians for his education and eloquence."⁴

Beyond the above-mentioned issue of conversion, scholars are still discussing the authenticity of the episode. Some argue that Morosini was not reliable and that he invented the whole story; others are more inclined to think that the incident is authentic while casting doubt on the meaning of Luzzatto's detailed words.⁵ A comparison of this passage with the one taken from the *Socrates* may suggest that Luzzatto did actually say these words, but intended to say something very different from what Morosini wanted to put in his mouth.

Socrates has been put on trial with the accusation of having tried to unsettle the foundations of the whole of human knowledge, and after examining the various philosophical theories on knowledge, he opts for a suspension of judgment, i.e. he opts for a sceptical attitude that acknowledges the lack of a well-founded knowledge. At the end of his long speech in his defence, the jury is bewildered by Socrates's arguments and divided as to how to judge him. In fact, there are some, like Alcmaeon, who would opt for convicting him, while others agree with Plato, who stood up in front of the jury and suggested absolving Socrates by adopting towards him the same suspension of judgement for which he had pleaded. In fact, Plato argues, the evidence both in his favour and against him is incomplete and does not enable the jury to express a final judgement. Thus, the suspension of judgement implies a silent attitude and at the same time an open-ended stance awaiting further

³ For an overview of the debate, see Ravid, "Contra Judaeos," 333–34 n. 67. Recently, the episode has been interpreted by Ariella Lang as proof of the intermediary role that Luzzatto played between the Jewish and Christian communities. See Ariella Lang, "Double Edge of Irony."

⁴ Morosini, *Via della fede*, Introduzione.

⁵ See Ravid, "Contra Judaeos," 333–34 n. 67.

and clearer evidence. Although the need for clear evidence to establish the truth recalls the Cartesian stance that gives in to radical doubt only in order to overcome it, Luzzatto remains here in the grip of a doubt that is much nearer to Montaigne's perplexed reason that never ceases its investigation.

In Morosini's lines, Luzzatto's final verdict marks the end of the above-mentioned dispute with a suspension of judgment expressed by a gesture – “he placed his finger on his mouth” – and by the words “I do not wish to decide hastily.” In a certain sense, it is possible to suggest that Morosini has unintentionally transmitted to us a small sample of Luzzatto's voice and sceptical attitude. In fact, it would be wrong here to understand the resort to silence as a gesture of agreement and consent.⁶ It is rather a sceptical silence that preludes and introduces the suspension of judgement.⁷ Luzzatto does not want to decide hastily not because of the risk that if “we continue to speculate we will all become Christians” – which he may have said only as an ironical baroque hyperbole – but because, as previously happened in Socrates's trial, there is not enough evidence to allow him to opt for one specific interpretation. In my opinion, the silence also introduces another interesting implication, since the unexpressed but tacitly implied conclusion is that until clearer evidence is found, both interpretations, the Jewish one and the Christian one, can retain their validity. Thus, scepticism also has a political effect, since it becomes the philosophical foundation for a peaceful coexistence and the tolerance of Jews in a Christian society, at least for the moment.

1 The *Theatrum Mundi* and the Trial

The central thesis of this essay is built upon the existence of a thematic continuity in Luzzatto's Italian works. This continuity is based on the connection between philosophy and politics.⁸ The motif that creates such continuity from a narrative point of view is the trial.

Now, the trial involves three basic steps: 1) the possibility of knowing something or someone; 2) formulating a judgement about it/him/her; 3) the legitimacy and validity of the authority that formulates the judgement. The trial is based on the

⁶ It has been pointed out, though, that there is a Talmudic discussion about whether to consider silence as consent. See Giuseppe Veltri and Michela Torbidoni, “Alcune considerazioni sulla sospensione del giudizio e il silenzio nella tradizione ebraica scettica,” in *Seconda navigazione. Omaggio a Giovanni Reale* ed. Roberto Radice and Glauco Tiengo (Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 2015), 744.

⁷ See *ibid.*, 750–51.

⁸ See Anna Lissa, “La zooantropologia scettica,” 99, 141 ff. The connection between the two works has puzzled many scholars until recent times. See, for example, Ruderman, *Early Modern Jewry*, 3–4: “Despite the considerable learning and eloquence of both works, one written to influence public opinion and the other without any obvious pedagogic or religious objective, Rabbi Luzzatto remains a mystery to those who would wish to understand his true intentions and ultimate beliefs.”

idea that it is possible to acquire a well-founded knowledge of the fact, or the person, that is under judgement. Once this knowledge is acquired, it is possible to formulate an exhaustive judgement. Finally, the authority that elaborates and utters the judgement must be reliable and authoritative.

The *Discourse* was specifically written to help the cause of the Venetian Jews in the Merceria trial⁹ and more generally to offer a different evaluation of the Jewish people to the Christian public. In the *Socrates*, Luzzatto brings a new trial against the philosopher to the stage that looks like a literary, theatrical re-enactment of the one held in Athens in 399 BCE. This is not, however, a literary re-enactment that draws upon the real trial. This is a second trial that takes place after the first one, even though the first one ended with Socrates's death sentence, as Socrates himself states: "I took the hemlock from the hands of the wicked judges."¹⁰ It is as if he wants to suggest that in the first "version" of the trial, he had been found guilty and sentenced to death. In this new version, however, everything must be decided anew. By making Socrates speak in the first person, Luzzatto creates a complete theatrical illusion.

This theatrical illusion in itself is not astonishing, since in Luzzatto's time the literary metaphor acknowledging the world and reality as a theatre – *theatrum mundi* – where men are occasionally called to play parts was well-known.¹¹ The metaphor of the *theatrum mundi* was an expression of the consciousness that reality was no longer submitting itself to human reason. Reality had become both differentiated and deceptive. The traditional anthropocentric thought based on and connected to Aristotelian metaphysics and scholastic philosophy was not in control of it any more, nor could it describe it any longer. Thus, Montaigne proclaimed "je ne vois le tout de rien," and with such an oxymoronic formulation, he dismissed whatever aspiration and claims metaphysical reason could put forward to confirm its ability to know the totality of reality.

On a closer look, there is also a connection between the trial and the *theatrum mundi*. A trial can be conceived as a representation on stage where the accused, the attorneys, and the jury are all called to play their part. Yet, it implies a final pro-

⁹ See Benjamin Ravid, "The Venetian Context of the Discourse," in this volume 243–74 especially 250–55.

¹⁰ Luzzatto, *Socrates*, 121.

¹¹ In Luzzatto's time, this metaphor already had a long history, whose origins possibly dated back to Plato. Furthermore, it sometimes had a dramatic approach to human tragedy on stage – *Heraclitus flens* – while other times it focused on the ludicrous happenings of human comedy governed by fortune – *Democritus ridens*. See Ernest Robert Curtius, *Europäische Literatur und Lateinisches Mittelalter* (Tübingen: A. Francke Verlag 1993 [1948]), 148–54; Franz Link, "Götter, Gott und Spielleiter," in *Theatrum Mundi. Götter, Gott und Spielleiter im Drama von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart*, ed. Franz Link and Günter Niggel (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1981), 49–92; Linda Gregorian Christian, *Theatrum Mundi: The History of an Idea* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1987).

nouncement, a sentence, while the theatrical representation could be left open-ended and leaves the responsibility to find an answer to the questions to the public.¹²

In the *Discourse* and the *Socrates*, these three above-mentioned basic assumptions about knowledge, judgment, and authority are undermined and finally debunked: they cannot stand the confrontation with the sceptical philosophical method that Luzzatto uses against them. This, I think, is the basic philosophical, political, and literary structure underlying the conception of the *Discourse* and the *Socrates* and connecting the two works. Nonetheless, it would be impossible to develop such an analysis without confronting the problem of the sources. Obviously, this problem implies an attempt to cut through a *mare magnum*; such a *mare magnum* can be braved only by circumscribing and delineating the enterprise. In this essay, I will focus especially on the philosophical sceptical foundations of Luzzatto's political thought and his appraisal of the Jewish people, and I will try to collect and discuss the sources related to these issues.

For the purposes of this analysis, I have divided this essay into two parts. In the first, I will deal with the problem of the sources, delving into layer after layer while attempting to stick to the historical sequence of classical, Renaissance, and early modern authors. I will start from Luzzatto's background knowledge of Aristotle, specifying that by the word "background" I mean that Aristotle was still part and parcel of the philosophical knowledge of the time, even for those intellectuals and scholars who were opposing him. He is present in the background of the *Discourse*, and although he does not play a pivotal role, his presence tells us something about the advancement of Luzzatto's thought, helping us to position him in the intellectual context of the time.

Luzzatto's familiarity with classic sceptical thought is of course at the core of my analysis. Accordingly, I will discuss his knowledge of sceptical authors from both the academic and the Pyrrhonian orientation. In order to give a proper shape to his political thought and his appraisal of the Jewish people, I will first dwell on Tacitus and then on the fifteenth- to seventeenth-century Tacitist literature with which Luzzatto might have been familiar. Finally, I will discuss his knowledge of some Renaissance and early modern authors such as Machiavelli, Bacon, and Montaigne.

In the second part, I will try to highlight Luzzatto's elaboration and usage of his sources in order to demonstrate that the resort to the sceptical method is not confined to the philosophical arena. Instead, it has relevant political implications and consequences. In the *Discourse*, the political implications play a major role in the survival of the Jewish people. In the *Socrates*, the problem of fair judgement is enlarged and extended to a general human level, but still retains its political implications.

¹² Concerning this important connection, see Dino Pastine, *Juan Caramuel: Probabilismo ed enciclopedia* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1975), 13–25.

This confirms once more the thematic connection between the *Discourse* and the *Socrates*. I will therefore investigate the issues of knowledge, judgment, and authority in the *Discourse*. As for the *Socrates*, I will dwell mainly on the pages where Luzzatto discusses the practical and political implications of the suspension of judgment. I will show that he returns to the topics discussed in the *Discourse*, sometimes by revising them, and sometimes by elaborating upon them.

Part I

The Sources of Luzzatto's Philosophical and Political Scepticism

1 Aristotle, Aristotelianism, and Anti-Aristotelianism

I have argued elsewhere that Luzzatto's Italian works are based on a refutation of Aristotelianism.¹³ Now, I would like to modify this statement slightly. The Aristotelian refutation notwithstanding, I feel obliged to point out that Aristotelian philosophical concepts, terminology, and even quotes are not absent from the *Discourse*. Aristotle is expressly mentioned and praised for his talents as a "practical political statesman" together with Cicero.¹⁴ Luzzatto consistently mentions and quotes the *Politics* above all other Aristotelian texts. In fact, the work is directly quoted once and expressly mentioned twice:

1. As Aristotle states in book V of the *Politics*: "*Especially should the laws provide against any one having too much power, whether derived from friends or money.*"¹⁵
2. The laws of Phaleas regarding the division of goods have only survived in Aristotle's attacks in the second book of the *Politics*.¹⁶
3. Aristotle [too,] in the first [book] of his *Politics*,¹⁷ employed all of his energy in reordering and correcting the divisions made by those two great masters of mankind.¹⁸

The above-quoted Latin passage coincides with the Latin translation of the *Politics* undertaken by Leonardo Bruni. This is a crucial fact. By quoting this specific translation, Luzzatto proves himself to be a well-informed and up-to-date intellectual,

¹³ Lissa, "La zooantropologia scettica," 177.

¹⁴ *Discourse*, 72v.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 25r.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 25v.

¹⁷ According to Lattes (*Ma'amar*, 158 n. 27), Luzzatto is referring to the second book of the *Politics*, where Aristotle discusses the State and the constitution of society and criticises Socrates and Plato.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 22r–v.

for he demonstrates an awareness of the restoration of Aristotelian texts executed during the Humanist and Renaissance periods by means of new Latin translations based on Humanist philological rules. Leonardo Bruni's translation quoted by Luzzatto is counted among the most important translations available in Luzzatto's time, since Bruni was the first scholar and translator to distance himself from the medieval practice of word-to-word translation, trying to render the Greek original in a polished, precise Latin.¹⁹ Unfortunately, I cannot prove that Luzzatto also read the other works of Aristotle in Bruni's translations, since there are no further direct quotes from him in the *Discourse*. Interestingly enough, I must also point out that Luzzatto's Latin quote coincides with Bruni's translation with Thomas Aquinas's commentary and not with the renowned Iunta edition with Averroes's commentary.²⁰ This fact may be somewhat deceptive. However, Luzzatto was familiar with Averroes's commentaries on Aristotle, since he mentions them in consideration XVI, "Regarding the Jews' Application to their Studies and the Various Classes of Sages":

Some years after Rabbi Moses, Maestro Levi, a scholarly man whose talents could match those of any other learned man, succeeded him. Although his life ended at the age of about thirty-two, he commented on all the works of Aristotle and expounded on much of the Arab Averroes in Hebrew. Some of them [his books] are manuscripts in my possession.²¹

The above-listed passages suggest first of all that when Luzzatto speaks of Aristotle, he is not referring to second-hand transmission, as it happens in the case of the Aristotelian texts conveyed by Thomas Aquinas. It seems possible to suggest that he read Aristotle first-hand and in a good and trustworthy translation. Furthermore, he appreciated the practical aspects and implications of Aristotle's political thought, whose advice is particularly evoked when he discusses general political issues that are related to the Jewish people. The second and the third above-listed passages refer to the orderly class division of the population and it introduces the arguments discussed in consideration VI, "Why the Mercantile Profession Ought to Be Kept Apart from Others," where social order and the distinction of the mercantile profession are functional to the role of the Jews as merchants in Venice. In a few words, the mercantile profession ought to be kept apart from the others, and the Jews are the best-suited candidates to practise it.

19 For the relevance of Bruni's translation, see Charles Schmidt, *Aristotle and the Renaissance* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1983), 67–68. On the same lines as Schmidt, see Luca Bianchi, "Continuity and Change in the Aristotelian Tradition," in *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Philosophy*, ed. James Hankins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007): 49–71.

20 *Aristotelis Stagiritae Politicorum*, book 5, lectio 7, 79v: "Maxime vero lege ita providere conandum est ut nemini sit excessiva potentia, neque amicorum neque pecuniarum." In the 1550 Iunta edition, the text is different: "Maxime vero lege ita providere conandum est, ne alicui nimium sit excessiva potentia, neque amicorum, neque pecuniarum." *Tertium Volumen Aristotelis Stagiritae libri Moralem totam philosophiam complectentes cum Averrois Cordubensis in Moralia Nicomachiae expositione* (Venetiis: Apud Iuntas, 1550), 144r.

21 *Discourse*, 79r.

The first and second above-quoted passages are drawn from consideration VII, “Wealth Ought to be Limited and [Kept] in Circulation,” which is concerned with a balanced distribution of riches and wealth. Accordingly, a reference to the Aristotelian concept of distributive justice from the *Nicomachean Ethics* opens the entire discussion: “The best, most cautious politician has the duty of ensuring that the wealth and resources of the city are divided and distributed among the citizens into suitable mathematical proportions according to the rules dictated by distributive justice.”²²

Here again, the Jews can prove themselves very useful. In fact, the mercantile profession can make the people who practise it very rich and cause an imbalance in the distribution of wealth and a hindrance to its circulation. The Jews can contain this imbalance. Jewish richness, Luzzatto argues, never lasts long because the Jews have too many children, because of the ceaseless changes in their fortunes, and because of the special laws applying to them. Thus, allowing the Jews to practise the mercantile profession will make the circulation of money and the balance of riches easier to achieve for the government of the Serenissima.

Aristotelian terminology and concepts also come in handy when restrictive measures against the Jewish people are involved. This is the case with consideration XII, “The Replies to the Arguments Used against the Jews by Three Kinds of People.” Here, Luzzatto confutes a series of objections against the Jewish presence in a city, specifically to the politicians who argue that members issuing from the Jewish and Christian communities may mix and cause dissensions and disturbances. To this argument, Luzzatto answers as follows:

With regard to discord and dissension, one answer could be that the Jews are not different from the Christians as black is from white. Black and white do not match, although they belong to the same genus of colour. On the contrary, Jews and Christians are different from each other in the same way as the qualities of being sweet and being red, which are absolutely separated and unrelated to each other. Thus, [their only connection is] that they belong to the most general genus of quality that can be found in the same subject. In the same way, the Jews are separate and distinct from the Christians, and only rarely do they come into competition and contention regarding religious matters.²³

This passage is relevant to emphasise that Luzzatto is still using Aristotelian concepts and terminology and also and especially that he is using them in order to discuss an issue that is very important, if not crucial, to him. In fact, he strives to demonstrate that Jews and Christians are too different to be able to mix on the basis of Aristotelian categories such as genus and quality.

The relationship to Aristotle’s doctrines becomes more critical when Luzzatto leaves the practical political realm in order to enter the field of philosophy. This is the case for his appraisal of truth, especially the problem of distinguishing the truth

²² Ibid., 25r.

²³ Ibid., 41r–v.

from a lie. This is a seminal argument, which is at the foundation and origin not only of the *Discourse*, but also of the later philosophical treatise, the *Socrates*. The *Discourse* is dedicated to the lovers of truth. In the dedication, the author acknowledges the Aristotelian concept of truth formulated in the *De anima* as *invita*, free from passion and clearly distinguishable from falsehood, since human beings cannot escape the alternative between falsehood and truth.²⁴ In Luzzatto's times, however, the borders between the two of them were too blurred and the Aristotelian definition could no longer be completely valid, or, to put it better, these concepts were no longer fit to describe and define the surrounding reality.

The problem of truth is first of all a philosophical problem that has to do with the possibility of acquiring a knowledge that can prove itself trustworthy and helpful for human beings. One example will suffice to give an idea of the relevance of the issue. At the beginning of consideration XV, "Considering Various Objections Brought Forward by Cornelius Tacitus against the Ancient Jewish People, and Their Resolution," Luzzatto strives to distinguish and isolate the truth about the Jewish people from the lies that have been spread against it: "The lie can be compared to the shadow that, despite being made of mere vain privation, nonetheless possesses borders that circumscribe it and that depend on solid and real bodies. In the same way, a lie springs and derives from a substratum."²⁵

Once again, Aristotelian terminology – namely privation and substratum – is used to discuss problems concerning the Jews. The usage of this terminology could even seem ironic were it not for the consequences such lies used to have for the Jews. With a certain irony and yet with an awareness of the implied dangers awaiting the Jews, Luzzatto turns the lie into a shadow deprived of substance, but still stemming from a primary substratum, that is, matter.

Criticism of Aristotle resurfaces in consideration XVI, "Regarding the Jews' Application to their Studies and the Various Classes of Sages," where Luzzatto isolates and discusses three classes of sages: the rabbis, the philosophers, and the kabbalists. Much of his appreciation and esteem goes to philosophers such as Ḥasdai Crescas (1340–1410/11): "After him, there was Rabbi Ḥasdai, who had a most sharp intelligence. He was the first who dared to oppose Aristotelian doctrine, as the illustrious Signor Giovanni Francesco Pico Mirandola relates in the book *Examination of the Vanities of the Nations*."²⁶

The reference shows that Luzzatto was familiar with early Aristotelian criticism as it had been expressed in Jewish philosophy by Crescas in the second half of the fourteenth century. However, he connects it to Giovanni Francesco (or Gianfrancesco) Pico della Mirandola's *Examen vanitatis doctrinae gentium et veritatis christianae disciplinae* (1520), possibly in order to make it more palatable to Italian readers.

²⁴ See *ibid.*, 3r n. 2.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 58v.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 79v.

With all probability, Luzzatto is referring here to book 6, chapters 2 to 6, where Gianfrancesco reports Crescas's counter-arguments against Aristotle's definition of movement and place and his demonstration of the non-existence of the void.²⁷ Furthermore, the mention of Gianfrancesco's *Examen* does not introduce sceptical arguments, as Luzzatto had already done in consideration XV by quoting directly Sextus. The real point is the praise of the criticism of Aristotle's *Physics*.

This issue deserves some further explanation. As is well-known, Popkin situates the beginning of the history of modern scepticism during the years when Savonarola and the group of intellectuals gravitating around him were active.²⁸ Furthermore, he attributes to Gianfrancesco the merit of being the first author who ever made significant use of Pyrrhonian ideas in his *Examen*,²⁹ although he did this with the purpose of debunking philosophical arguments and to promote a knowledge based solely on Christian revelation. Obviously, in the *Discourse* Luzzatto tries to keep his distance from religious apologetics. He even avoids the mention of the second part of the *Examen*. I am personally not inclined to think that this happens only because of the connection to Christianity. In fact, in this context he is not interested in apologetics, nor is he trying to introduce sceptical arguments. I think he chooses to do this in order to remain in the field of a pure philosophical discussion that is specifically related to Crescas's critique of Aristotle. What this critique consists of, Luzzatto does not care to say; perhaps because he is only giving his readers an overview of the most renowned Jewish philosophers without entering into the details of their arguments.

My analysis shows that Luzzatto's relationship to Aristotle is twofold.³⁰ There is a first layer involving practical political advice to be followed in order to preserve

27 Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola, *Examen vanitatis doctrinae gentium et veritatis christianae disciplinae*, 175r–179v. See also Harry Austryn Wolfson, *Crescas' Critique of Aristotle: Problems of Aristotle's Physics in Jewish and Arabic Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1929), chapter 2, "Infinity, Space and Vacuum," 38–69. See also David Harari, "Mi-hu ha-melumad hayehudi she-derkho noda' ha-sefer 'Or ha-Shem le-Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola?" ("Who was the Jewish Scholar who made Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola acquainted with *The Light of the Lord*?") *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 14 (1998): 257–69 [in Hebrew]; Mauro Zonta, "The Influence of Hasdai Crescas's Philosophy on Some Aspects of Sixteenth-Century Philosophy and Science," in *Religious Confessions and the Sciences in the Sixteenth Century*, ed. Jürgen Hel and Annette Winkelmann (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 71–78. The reference to Gianfrancesco in the *Discourse* was noted by Ruderman, who, however, did not discuss it (Ruderman, *Jewish Thought*, 159 and 173).

28 Richard H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Savonarola to Bayle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 22. See also Gian Mario Cao, "Inter Alias Philosophorum Gentium Sectas, et Humani, et Mites: Gianfrancesco Pico and the Sceptics," in *Renaissance Scepticisms*, ed. Gianni Paganini and José R. Maia Neto (Dordrecht: Springer, 2009), 127–47; Lucia Pappalardo, *Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola: fede, immaginazione e scetticismo* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2015). Concerning early interest in academic scepticism in Florence in the fifteenth century, see Anna De Pace, *La scepsi, il sapere e l'anima: Dissonanze nella cerchia laurenziana* (Milan: Edizioni Universitarie di Lettere Economia Diritto, 2002).

29 *Ibid.*, 19.

30 In fact, there are other scanty references to Aristotle's *Metaphysics* and *On the Heavens* which deserve to be highlighted, although without further discussion. This is the case for three passages

the power in a state. This is a rather traditional approach to Aristotle, whose political texts were generally used to discuss the best form of government, the aims of social organisation, and the legitimisation and preservation of political power. Aristotle's empirical approach was free from any religious considerations or engagements. However, during the sixteenth century, it was subsumed under the political doctrines and agenda of Catholics, Lutherans, Calvinists, and Neo-Stoics, and it became the foundation for legitimising political absolutism by tracing a line connecting the power of the *paterfamilias*, the power of the prince, and the power of God.³¹ The problem of the preservation of the state by means of carefully balancing riches and harmoniously dividing society into classes is typical of Tacitist political literature. Interpreted from this point of view, Luzzatto seems to have conservative political inclinations – but it may also be that he was not a real conservative, but only a pragmatist acknowledging the predominance of a system and trying to make the Jewish people fit into it.

In a second and more in-depth layer, there is Luzzatto's critical attitude towards Aristotle's philosophical doctrines and system, as is the case with the references to early anti-Aristotelian authors such as Crescas and the problem of distinguishing the truth from a lie. This attitude is proof that Luzzatto was aware that the Aristotelian system could no longer give an exhaustive description of reality.

2 Politics

2.1 Machiavelli

Like many other early modern authors, Machiavelli is never explicitly mentioned in the *Discourse*.³² However, there are several indirect quotes from both *Discourses on the First Decade of Titus Livius* and *The Prince*. Although the reference to *The Prince* is not very meaningful from the point of view of the content, since it is mostly a

from consideration XVI: “For it is necessary that the measure and the measured be alike, as Aristotle says” (81r); “And the future and past tense are interchangeable and mixed together, which is obvious to the grammarians. Such an opinion [was] similarly expressed by Aristotle in book four of the *Metaphysics*” (81v); “This is the case, for example, with the elements, which are connected with the symbolic qualities, as Aristotle demonstrates in his book *De Coelo et Mundo*” (82v). In this last passage, Luzzatto is discussing a kabbalistic doctrine about all mundane things sharing a near and proximate gradation of short, distinct intervals.

³¹ See Michael Stolleis, *Storia del diritto pubblico in Germania*, vol. 1, *Pubblicistica dell'impero e scienza di polizia 1600–1800* (Milan: Giuffrè Editore, 2008), 55 ff.

³² This is not astonishing, especially because the entirety of his work had already been entered in the *Index librorum prohibitorum* by 1552. See Friederich Meinecke, *Die Idee der Staatsräson in der neueren Geschichte* (Munich: R. Oldenbourg, 1944). English translation by Douglas Scott: *Machiavellism: The Doctrine of Raison d'État and Its Place in Modern History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), 46.

rhetorical artifice,³³ it can at least be considered as proof that Luzzatto read and possibly owned a copy of the work.

The references to the *Discourses* are more intriguing:

1. A deteriorated fragment of an aged statue would be worth a respectable amount of money in the eyes of a curious antiques dealer if either Phidias or Lysippus had sculpted it. Similarly, the relic of the ancient Jewish People should not be depreciated, even though it is deformed and disfigured from distress and a long period of captivity. Moreover, it is a common consensus among men that this People once took [its] form of government and institution of life from the Supreme Opifex.³⁴
2. I sometimes marvel that the Romans kept their false superstitions and erected altars to deify the inventors of worthwhile professions – to such an extent that they even consecrated many sumptuous temples to Fortuna.³⁵

The first reference is taken from the general introduction to the *Discourse* and was first discussed by Giuseppe Veltri.³⁶ The text, however, deserves a full quotation:

When I consider, then, how much respect is given to antiquity and how many times (to pass over countless examples) a fragment of an antique statue has been bought at a high price in order that the buyer may have it near him to bring reputation to his house with it, and to have it imitated by those who take pleasure in that art, and when I know that the latter then with their utmost skill attempt in all their works to imitate it, and when I see, on the other hand, that the most worthy activities which histories show us, which have been carried on in ancient kingdoms and republics by kings, generals, citizens, lawgivers, and others who have laboured for their native land, are sooner admired than imitated (rather they are so much avoided by everyone in every least thing that no sign of that ancient worth remains among us), I can do no other than at the same time marvel and grieve over it.³⁷

The intertextual relationship between the two passages seems to address Luzzatto's apologetic intention that aims at the legitimisation of the Jewish people on the basis of its antiquity, which goes far beyond classical culture. This, however, would be only a first layer of interpretation. The imitation of antiquity was a much-debated issue in Machiavelli's time. Many interpreters of his works and thought have highlighted that Machiavelli's usage of the past breaks with the Humanistic concept of the plain imitation of the past. Experience of contemporary facts as well as a careful reading of ancient histories allowing the reader to draw from them a lesson applicable to the past are directing Machiavelli in his political analysis.³⁸

³³ See *Discourse*, 3r n. 1.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 6v.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 18v.

³⁶ See *ibid.*, 6v n. 8.

³⁷ Machiavelli, *Discourses*, "Preface" in *Chief Works*, 1:190–91.

³⁸ See what Machiavelli himself states in the introduction to *The Prince*: "I have found among my treasures nothing I hold dearer or value so high as my understanding of great men's actions, gained in my lengthy experience with recent matters and my continual reading on ancient ones" (*The Prince* in *Chief Works*, 1:10). See also Machiavelli, *Discourses* in *Chief Works*, 1:188: "In it [the *Dis-*

Machiavelli's main problem was the decadence of the Italian states, and Luzzatto has a similar preoccupation. In fact, his main point is not, or at least not only, the antiquity of the Jewish people as such. Instead, he is exceedingly worried because of the cultural decadence of the Jewish people in the Diaspora, which he considers a consequence of the loss of political independence. He mentions the issue in the "Preface to the Entire Work": "The Jewish Nation has been as famous and illustrious in past centuries for human prosperity and divine favour as it is nowadays known both for suffering disasters and for its continued and constant endurance."³⁹

In consideration XVI, "Regarding the Jews' Application to Their Studies and the Various Classes of Sages," he returns to the subject and formulates his political and cultural problem more clearly:

Moreover, the Jews were no less renowned for their proficiency in the arts and sciences, since by universal consensus they had established the foundations of the most excellent teachings, [...] The Scripture has unending praise for the erudition and knowledge of the Jewish Nation, as well as for its valour and skill with arms, [...]. However, soon after they were forced to yield to the divine decree and were subjugated by the Romans. The Temple was destroyed, the city invaded, religion downtrodden, the people taken captive and dispersed. [At that time,] not only had they completely lost all military glory, being entirely destitute of courage and enfeebled in spirit, but the light of knowledge was almost extinguished within them and the splendour of their erudition was dimmed, for virtues want to be accompanied and associated with leisure and the comforts of life.

This was more detrimental and a greater blow than the first [the military defeat], for even if the decline of military reputation causes subjection and obedience, it will not result in a complete loss of honour and glory for the people, even if they have to show deference to others.⁴⁰

For obvious reasons, Luzzatto could not openly regret the loss of the military value and political independence of the Jewish people, nor could he exhort the Jews to take up arms and set themselves free, as Machiavelli did in his "Exhortation to Grasp Italy and Set Her Free from the Barbarians" that closes *The Prince*. Accordingly, while Machiavelli says of the Italians that "when they are in armies, they make no showing,"⁴¹ Luzzatto, in a more prudent and diplomatic fashion, explains that since the Jews have no access to arms, they must apply themselves to secular studies if they ever want to have a hope of survival and respect:

Certainly, the Jews, finding themselves in their present state of subjection and having no freedom whatsoever apart from applying their minds to study and doctrine, should devote them-

courses] I have set out all I know and all I have learned in the course of my long experience and steady reading in the affairs of the world." And below, 191: "As we read [the ancient histories] we do not draw from them that sense or taste that flavor which they really have."

³⁹ *Discourse*, 5r.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 74r.

⁴¹ Machiavelli, *The Prince* (*Chief Works*, 1:94).

selves to these with all their skill and industry. They should be aware of the fact that the unity of dogmas, the patronage granted by the princes, and the protection from so much oppression were obtained over such a long period of time, humanly speaking, from the learning of a virtuous few. They acquired credibility and authority under those who ruled, since they were deprived of all other means of aspiring to the favours and graces of the great in any other way. [The Jews] should [therefore] rest assured that if they were to lack appreciation deriving from their command of [liberal] letters and the esteem of the virtuous, they would incur a considerable decline and a more despicable oppression than they have ever endured in the past.⁴²

Indeed, Luzzatto's cultural programme does not plead for secular culture for the sake of the acquisition of pure knowledge. His cultural programme is also a survival programme that stems from a political analysis of the Jewish past and present. Like Machiavelli, he does not plead for a plain imitation of ancient histories, but he insists on renewing the ancient glory founded on knowledge, adapting it to new circumstances in order to improve the situation of the Jews.

The second reference to *fortuna*, fortune, also creates a crucial link with Machiavelli's thought. In his works, and most of all in *The Prince*, where it has a whole chapter for itself – "Fortune's Power in Human Affairs and How She Can Be Forestalled" – fortune or chance plays a pivotal role. Its power, however, is not boundless: "Nonetheless, in order not to annul our free will, I judge it true that Fortune may be mistress of one half our actions but that even she leaves the other half, or almost, under our control."⁴³ Fortune's power can be controlled; provisions can be made in order to limit its damages.⁴⁴

Luzzatto's fortune seems to have an almost unlimited power. "The vagaries of fortune"⁴⁵ can bring about the failure of mercantile enterprises; the mainland's commercial routes are safer from "the ravages of fortune";⁴⁶ Jews are pushed by their needs "to test fortune" with mercantile enterprises;⁴⁷ the possession of real estate "impedes the volatility of human fortune";⁴⁸ the Jews "extended their dominion as far as their good fortune guided them";⁴⁹ "after the fortune of the Jews had changed" the monument of national glory enshrined in the Temple of Jerusalem had become "little more than a joke, mocked by foreigners";⁵⁰ finally, after having

⁴² *Discourse*, 85v.

⁴³ Machiavelli, *The Prince* (*Chief Works*, 1:90).

⁴⁴ See, for example, Viroli on Machiavelli's idea of politics: "In his writings, politics assumes a more general significance meaning the art of dealing with contingent events, with fickle fortune, the symbol of pure, uncontrolled and unlegitimated contingency." Maurizio Viroli, *From Politics to Reason of State: The Acquisition and Transformation of the Language of Politics 1250–1600* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 127.

⁴⁵ *Discourse*, 11r.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 19r.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 19v.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 26v.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 47v.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 59v.

been “at the height of fortune,” peoples are destined to be “cast down into the abyss of oblivion.”⁵¹

These examples give an idea of the presence and influence of fortune throughout the whole of the *Discourse*, and they also show that in Luzzatto’s text the power of fortune covers the whole sphere of human life on both a personal and a collective level. From this point of view, Luzzatto takes a step further in comparison to Machiavelli. For him, men, and more specifically Jews, are virtually deprived of any active power to limit the damage that fortune may cause. I would suggest that it is possible to bring the comparison even further by suggesting that for Machiavelli, Italy was an example of the power of fortune without provisions made to counter it, while for Luzzatto, the Jewish people and its misfortunes seemed to become a demonstration of fortune’s power. However, in his time there were no provisions which could really counter it any more. In fact, the only thing that men could do when confronted with fortune was to behave as Socrates did in Luzzatto’s homonymous work. At the beginning of his defensive argument, the philosopher states rather proudly that he has always been “adamant and indifferent in facing the turmoil and the encroachments of fortune.”⁵² Indeed, in the *Socrates*, philosophical doctrines are exposed “to the blows of indifferent fortune”⁵³ like all human affairs.

This examination based on an analysis of and comparison with Luzzatto’s sources has given an interesting result. There is no criticism or condemnation of Machiavelli’s thought in the *Discourse*, nor is there in the *Socrates*. On the contrary, Luzzatto uses some of Machiavelli’s capital political concepts in order to develop his political analysis of the condition and potentialities of the Jewish people. Accordingly, Machiavelli’s influence must be carefully differentiated from the arguments based on the concept of reason of state and those fashioned by the political current labelled Tacitism.

2.2 Tacitism

The presence of Tacitist arguments permeates the whole of the *Discourse*, since in Luzzatto’s times Tacitism was very successful and political practices inspired by it were common.⁵⁴ However, in order to better understand Luzzatto’s political ap-

51 *Ibid.*, 88v.

52 *Socrates*, 120 and 121.

53 *Ibid.*, 183.

54 It will be enough here to mention some Tacitist authors whose books were published in Venice, such as Scipione Ammirato, *Discorsi del signor Scipione Ammirato sopra Cornelio Tacito* (in Venetia: appresso Matthio Valentino, 1607); Virgilio Malvezzi, *Discorsi sopra Cornelio Tacito del Marchese Virgilio Malvezzi al Serenissimo Ferdinando II Gran Duca di Toscana* (in Venetia: presso Marco Ginammi, 1635); Traiano Boccalini, *Ragguagli di Parnaso Centuria Prima* (in Venetia: Appresso Pietro Farri, 1612); *id.*, *Ragguagli di Parnaso Centuria Seconda* (in Venetia: Appresso Barezzo Barezzi, 1613); modern edition Traiano Boccalini, *Ragguagli di Parnaso e scritti minori*, ed. Luigi Firpo, 3 vols. (Bari: Laterza, 1948).

proach, it is essential to make the difference between Machiavelli's influence on the one hand and Tacitism and reason of state on the other as clear and as distinct as possible.

Contemporary scholars have nowadays gone far beyond Meinecke's statement attributing the beginning of the history of reason of state to Machiavelli.⁵⁵ In fact, they tend to assume that politics is the art of governing a state by following the principles of justice and reason, while reason of state is the art of preserving and expanding a state.⁵⁶

It would perhaps be too much to suggest that Luzzatto understood Tacitism the way contemporary scholarship has. Nonetheless, I think it would be fair to assert that when he was writing the *Discourse*, he was well-aware that Machiavelli's time, especially the time of the Republican experiment in Florence, was over and done with. The monarchies of Europe and the Venetian oligarchic system with them were moving towards the emergence and consolidation of absolutism. Accordingly, he pays homage to the tradition of the *Laus Venetiarum*, and in so doing he conforms to the pattern initiated by Gasparo Contarini in his *De magistratibus et republica Venetorum* (1551) by comparing Venice to Rome and inclining in favour of the former. Nonetheless, he is also aware that the Jews had to find a place in a state that was all but republican. The Venetian government was distancing itself from the tolerant inclinations it had had in Isaac Abrabanel's times,⁵⁷ and was shifting to a form of oligarchic absolutism, which was going to adjust itself to the upcoming European absolutism. In these new times, as Guicciardini stated, "Cornelius Tacitus teaches those who live under tyrants how to live and act prudently; just as he teaches tyrants ways to secure their tyranny."⁵⁸ This is the Tacitus that is quoted and discussed by Tacitist authors who wrote anti-Machiavellian Machiavellian litera-

⁵⁵ Meinecke, *Machiavellism*, 29. See also 41: "[Machiavelli was] the first person to discover the real nature of *raison d'état*." In fact, as Meinecke acknowledges, Machiavelli never uses the phrase "ragion di stato," which was invented by Giovanni Della Casa in his address to Charles V (*ibid.*, 46–47). The original phrase is "quell'utile che hoggi si chiama ragion di stato." Giovanni Della Casa, "Oratione di M. Giovanni Della Casa, Scritta a Carlo V Imperadore, intorno alla restituzione di Piacenza," in *id.*, *Rime et Prose di M. Giovanni Della Casa* (in Venetia: Appresso Domenico & Gio. Battista Guerra, fratelli, 1567), 166. The phrase is used with all its negative implications and in opposition to morality and civil reason.

⁵⁶ Viroli, *From Politics*, 2–3. See also Gianfranco Borrelli, "La teorica della ragion di stato," in *Il contributo italiano alla storia del Pensiero – Diritto* (2012), [http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/la-teorica-della-ragion-di-stato_\(Il-Contributo-italiano-alla-storia-del-Pensiero:-Diritto\)/](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/la-teorica-della-ragion-di-stato_(Il-Contributo-italiano-alla-storia-del-Pensiero:-Diritto)/) (accessed November 13, 2016), and the annexed, up-to-date bibliography.

⁵⁷ See also Veltri's perplexities about the *laus Venetiarum* in the *Discourse* (Veltri, *Renaissance*, 216–19).

⁵⁸ Francesco Guicciardini, *Maxims and Reflections (Ricordi)*, trans. Mario Domandi (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1970), "Maxim 18," 45. See also *ibid.*, "Maxim 13," 44: "If you want to know what the thoughts of tyrants are, read in Cornelius Tacitus the last conversations of the dying Augustus with Tiberius."

ture. In a few words, since Machiavelli had asserted the waning of the traditional medieval politics that combined Christian ethics with political action, the Jesuits approved the usage of Machiavellian political advice as long as the princes used it to preserve the state and the Christian religion at the same time.⁵⁹ Machiavellian thought pours into Counter-Reformation thought and goes through essential modifications. Among the Jesuit authors who approved and disseminated this approach are Giovanni Botero, a “gesuita d’intelletto,”⁶⁰ together with Possevino and Ribadeneyra.

Giovanni Botero is quoted without being openly mentioned in consideration XII, “The Arguments Used against the Jews by Three Kinds of People, and the Replies to Their Arguments”:

Three kinds of people argue against and antagonise the Jewish Nation: religious zealots, politicians and statesmen, and the common and vulgar people. [...]. Politicians say that it is not beneficial to tolerate a multitude of religions in the same city both because of the scandal and the bad example that one group makes for another, as well as the dissent, disunity, and hatred that can arise among the inhabitants of the city.⁶¹

The argument stems from Botero’s *Della ragion di stato*⁶² and is articulated as follows:

Farò fine il consiglio dato da Mecenate ad Augusto Cesare: Onora – dice – Dio perpetuamente, conforme alle leggi antiche, e fa che gli altri facciano il medesimo; odia e gastiga quelli, che faranno novità nelle cose divine, e ciò non solo per rispetto agli dèi, i quali però chi sprezza non farà mai conto d’altra cosa, ma perché quelli, che alterano la religione, spingono molti all’alterazione delle cose, onde nascono congiure sedizioni e conventicole; cose poco a proposito per il principato.⁶³

The fact that the Jews are included in this advice is beyond doubt, since Botero sets the subjects who belong to the Holy See apart from those who belong to a sect, and for him Judaism is a sect.⁶⁴ Luzzatto counters this argument by pointing out that

⁵⁹ For this passage, see Giuseppe Toffanin, *Machiavelli e il “Tacitismo.” La “Politica storica” al tempo della controriforma* (Naples: Guida Editori 1972 [1921]), chapter 4, “Machiavelli e la controriforma,” 87–105.

⁶⁰ Toffanin, *Machiavelli*, 100. See also Luigi Firpo, who wrote that those who came after Botero represented “la folta coorte dei teorici italiani della ragion di stato, destinata ad esaurire in sottigliezze dialettiche e in espedienti della precettistica più smaliziata l’ultimo vigore intellettuale d’una generazione in cui si spegneva una tradizione politica smagliante.” Luigi Firpo, “Introduzione” in Giovanni Botero, *Della ragion di stato con tre libri. Delle cause della grandezza delle città due Aggiunte e un Discorso sulla popolazione di Roma*, ed. Luigi Firpo (Turin: UTET, 1948), 21. The quotes from *Della ragion di stato* are taken from this edition. For Botero’s influence on Luzzatto’s concept of the development of cities in the *Discourse*, see Bachi, “La dottrina sulla dinamica.”

⁶¹ *Discourse*, 40v.

⁶² Which was originally published in Venice: Giovanni Botero. *Della ragion di stato libri dieci con tre libri delle cause della grandezza e magnificenza delle città* (in Venetia: Appresso i Gioliti, 1589).

⁶³ Botero, *Della ragion di Stato*, 136–37.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 56–57.

the mixing of Jews and Christians is actually impossible, since the former live secluded in a ghetto and have different customs and mixed marriages are severely prosecuted by law. To understand what kind of Tacitism Luzzatto had in mind, it is essential to note that the argument he counters here mixes together politics and religion. More specifically, he is answering those “politicians” who blame religious difference for political disorder. This mixture could prove itself very dangerous for the survival of the Jews in Italy in the Counter-Reformation period.

To close this discussion, it is important to point out that Tacitism, and more specifically Botero’s arguments, will surface once again at the end of the *Socrates*, where political prudence is discussed. When Socrates concludes his discussion with Cratylus, who has finally proved to him that it is impossible to obtain a knowledge with solid foundations and invited him to trust the probable, he undertakes a new examination in search of the criteria to follow in ordinary life. Prudence is the first criterion he puts under examination, and Pericles is the first politician he consults. The resort to Pericles creates an intertextual relationship with Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*,⁶⁵ where prudence – practical wisdom – is the capacity to decide which things are good and bad for men, a capacity with which Pericles was endowed. Yet Luzzatto’s Pericles is not interested in the distinction between good and bad. He has turned into a Tacitist, and as such when he answers the question about whether prudence is more needed to conquer or to keep a state, he has no doubt about the fact that a prince will need more prudence to keep it:

Some of them expressed their opinion in favour of the acquisition [of a state], but Pericles maintained strongly that in the preservation prudence would prevail much more. He put forward that renowned saying: “*difficilius est, provincias obtinere, qua facere. viribus parantur, iure retinentur.*” As if it was almost the same as saying: “*fortuna parantur, prudentia retinentur.*” Then he entered into the details of the demonstration about how much prudence would overcome fortune.⁶⁶

This approach to prudence together with the Latin quotes from Florus creates an intertextual relation with Botero’s *Della ragion di stato*.⁶⁷ Socrates, however, is not satisfied with Pericles’s answer, who after all did not give a clear definition of prudence, and moves on in the discussion, leaving Tacitism aside. At the end of the debate, a clear definition of prudence appears as unattainable as a definition of human knowledge has been. Therefore, in the businesses of life man can only follow the probable, which is pliable to human exigencies and can be used according to the requirements of each and every specific situation to establish the difference

⁶⁵ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 6.5 (1140b7–10). On this subject, see also Giuseppe Veltri and Anna Lissa, “La prudence de Simone Luzzatto dans le grand théâtre du monde,” in *La vertu des païens*, ed. Sylvie Taussig (Paris: Editions Kimé), 143–72.

⁶⁶ *Socrates*, 324.

⁶⁷ Botero, *Della ragion di stato*, 60. See *ibid.* for the details of Florus’s source.

between what is good or bad for man, a difference that can only temporarily be considered valid.

At the end of this analysis, it seems possible to suggest that Luzzatto was clear in his mind about the difference between Machiavelli's political thought and Tacitism intended as a political authority that legitimates religious authority and is somehow legitimated by it. The real danger for the Jews is not Machiavelli, but this kind of Tacitism whose authority must be confuted by resorting to the sceptical method. As for the probable, it can be used to make political decisions only if it is supported by experience and empirical knowledge purported by the practical statesmen.

3 The Experience of Ancient and Modern Human Affairs

3.1 Empirical Knowledge and the Practical Statesmen: Socrates, Aristotle, Cicero, and Tacitus

Empirical knowledge is, for Luzzatto, the premise of practical politics. A confirmation of this approach can be found in the clever advice from the practical statesmen that punctuates the *Discourse*. The main ones are Cicero, Aristotle, and Tacitus. Cicero and Aristotle are together praised for being "practical statesmen," in opposition to Socrates and Plato the "political theoreticians."⁶⁸ I have already discussed the influence of Aristotle's political thought above. As far as Cicero is concerned, Luzzatto puts him among the practical statesmen, and consequently he often and openly quotes the *On Duties*, always in the context of a discussion of practical politics. Some examples will give an idea of the role he plays for Luzzatto:

1. As Cicero wrote when discussing the subject of trade: *[I]t even seems to deserve the highest respect if those who are engaged in it, satiated, or rather, I should say, satisfied with the fortunes they have made, make their way from the port to a country estate, as they have often made it from the sea into port[.]* And he adds: *"[O]f all the occupations by which gain is secured, none is better than agriculture, [...], none more becoming to a freeman."*⁶⁹
2. The second reason is the fact that in the seventh year the goods of the earth become the common property of the entire people. Therefore, the common people and the poor could enjoy this sharing of goods as long as they desired and aspired to do so. This could not be tolerated in the political state, because, as Cicero explains: *"That speech deserves unqualified condemnation, for it favoured an equal distribution of property; and what more ruinous policy than that could be conceived? For the chief purpose in the establishment of constitutional state and municipal governments was that individual property rights might be secured. For, although it was by Nature's guidance that men were drawn together into communities, it was in the hope of safeguarding their possessions that they sought the protection of cities."*⁷⁰

⁶⁸ *Discourse*, 72v.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 11r.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 72r–v.

Clearly, the subjects are various, but all related to practical problems of government, such as trade or the safeguarding of individual property. Luzzatto's choice is also not unusual, since the *On Duties* was widely read and already being discussed by fifteenth-century Humanists.⁷¹

Yet the most interesting case is perhaps Tacitus, who, like other authors quoted in the *Discourse*, has a double identity: he behaved like a bad historian when he discussed Jewish customs and religion, but at the same time he stands among the best practical statesmen in history:

The famous Roman historian Cornelius Tacitus deserves to be counted among the earliest masters of civil government for his teachings on and experience in politics. [He has a] lively and energetic eloquence, in which he is more inclined to allusions than to concise statements, zeal in penetrating the secrets of princes, gravity of sentences, acrimony in censuring depraved actions, maturity of judgment regarding human events, and other distinguished virtues that entered into his *Histories*.⁷²

As a master of civil government, much of his practical advice is quoted by Luzzatto. For the sake of brevity, I will cite only a little of it:

1. Therefore Augustus, the excellent ruler of people and conqueror of all peoples, stated, as Tacitus has written: "*He first conciliated the army by gratuities, the populace by cheapened corn, the world by the amenities of peace.*"⁷³
2. I would present them with that famous saying of Tacitus regarding the astrologers who were sentenced to exile from the city of Rome: "*A tribe which in our state will always be both forbidden and retained.*"⁷⁴

Of course, this kind of approach to Tacitus, or to the other practical statesmen, is in keeping with a general trend of the time. Nonetheless, in Luzzatto's case these quotes deserved to be pointed out and distinguished because practical political experience plays an important role in connection with the resort to the probable in practical life, as I will show below.

3.2 Bacon and Empiricism

Bacon is never directly mentioned in the *Discourse*, but at the time when the book was published, the *Novum Organum* and the *Essays* had already enjoyed a remarkable success. Recently, Giuseppe Veltri has traced some topics Luzzatto borrowed from Bacon, namely the concept of the truth as "naked" stemming from the *Novum*

⁷¹ See Charles B. Schmitt, *Cicero Scepticus: A Study of the Influence of the Academia in the Renaissance* (Dordrecht: Springer, 1972), 15.

⁷² *Discourse*, 57v.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 32v.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 42r.

Organum,⁷⁵ which was published in Latin in 1620 and to which Luzzatto had easy access.⁷⁶ Veltri has also shown that Luzzatto borrowed the concepts of usury as a necessary sin, merchants as an integral part of the city's economic life, and antiperistasis from the *Essays*.⁷⁷ The *Essays* went through a long series of editions with corrections and additions. The ultimate version of the work was published in 1625.⁷⁸ Italian translations were also available – one published in London dating back to 1618 and the other published in Venice in 1621.⁷⁹ Yet both of these were based on partial editions. While some topics, like the distribution of riches or a Latin verse from Lucan's *Pharsalia* about usury, may have been taken from the Italian translation, other references are more complicated. The discussion of the role of merchants in the state only appears in the 1625 version. The same holds true for the reference to religion being the chief bond of human society and for the entire essay "Of Usury" discussed by Giuseppe Veltri. This evidence suggests either that Luzzatto was familiar with the 1625 English edition – possibly someone had translated it for him – or that he had had earlier access to the Latin translation of the *Essays* included in the edition of Bacon's entire opus that came out in 1638,⁸⁰ the same year the *Discourse* was published.

Going beyond the discussion of single subjects, I would suggest that Bacon might have influenced Luzzatto on a far larger scale. I am personally inclined to think that Luzzatto was indebted to him and to his *Novum Organum* on a wider philosophical level involving relevant aspects of the whole set-up of the *Discourse*. I am specifically referring to Luzzatto's usage of Bacon's inductive method based on empirical experience in the discussion of the Jewish contribution to Venetian economy. Of course, there is a fundamental difference between this method and the scientific method that was inaugurated by Galileo and based on experiments that may be reproduced in a laboratory. Yet induction proves itself to be of effective help as far as the Jews are concerned in the *Discourse*.

In Bacon's words, induction is the only way to ascertain the truth of something by "elicit[ing] axioms from sense and particulars, rising in a gradual and unbroken ascent to arrive at last at the most general axioms."⁸¹ In the *Discourse*, Luzzatto follows the direction of Bacon. In fact, he takes the profits the Jewish nation brings to the Venetian economy as a starting point of his argument and he illustrates them in detail:

75 Veltri, "Economic and Social Arguments," 26.

76 For the chronology, see Bacon, *The New Organon*, XXXI.

77 Veltri, "Economic and Social Arguments," 26.

78 See Bacon, *The Essayes*, "General Introduction," paragraph 2, "The Evolution of the Essayes," XXXI–XXXVIII, "Textual Introduction," LIII–CXV.

79 Francesco Bacone, *Saggi morali del signore Francesco Bacono*; id., *Saggi Morali di Francesco Bacchon*.

80 Francesco Bacone, *Francisci Baconis Opera moralia et civilia*.

81 Bacon, *Novum Organum*, 1:19.

However, since errors and fallacies often result from general examinations, while the truth always accompanies and follows [the focus on] details and differences, it seems to me appropriate here to turn to the individual case and to approach the calculation of the profits one can probably estimate that the government ordinarily receives annually from the [Jewish] Nation living sheltered in the city, leaving aside those dwelling in the other parts of the state.⁸²

As I will show below,⁸³ Luzzatto uses Bacon's inductive method and empiricism in order to arrive at a general and logical conclusion in favour of the Jews, since this method can be very helpful if one has the possibility of working on concrete data, as is the case with economic figures. Therefore, the extent of Bacon's influence on Luzzatto is to be enlarged from specific references to the large-scale conception and method used in the *Discourse*.

4 Scepticism

Although the *Socrates* is usually considered *the* sceptical work by Simone Luzzatto, sceptical arguments and strategies already appear in his *Discourse*, and, if carefully analysed, they turn out to play a meaningful role in the reconstruction of the evolution and extent of his scepticism. This process of reconstruction cannot but start from some solid data, namely from the sceptical sources with which the author was familiar at the time of the publication of the *Discourse*.

4.1 Sextus and Pyrrhonism

In 1638, when the *Discourse* was published, Pyrrhonian scepticism was widely known. The main sources that conveyed information about it were the works of Sextus Empiricus, first translated in 1562 and 1569.⁸⁴ Luzzatto's familiarity with Sextus can be reasonably asserted since he quotes him directly and mentions him. His name appears in consideration XV, "Considering Various Objections Brought Forward by Cornelius Tacitus against the Ancient Jewish People, and Their Resolution,"

⁸² *Discourse*, 28r.

⁸³ See below, "Experience and Probabilism as a Guide for Human Action and Politics," 349–52.

⁸⁴ Sextus Empiricus, *Sexti Philosophi Pyrrhontiarum hypotiposeon libri III, Quibus in tres Philosophiae partes severissimè inquiritur... Interprete Henrico Stephano* (Parisiis: Uldrici Fuggeri typographus, 1562). A few years later, Gentien Hervet translated *Against the Logicians: Sextus Empiricus, Sexti Empirici viri longe doctissimi Adversos Mathematicos. Hoc est, adversus eos qui profitentur disciplinas Graece nunquam, Latine nunc primum editum Gentiano Herveto Aurelio Interprete – Eiusdem Sexti Pyrrhontiarum Hypothiposeon Libri Tres Latine nunc primum editi, Interprete Henrico Stephano – Accessit et Pyrrhonis vita, ex Diogene Laertio: ex vulgata interpretazione, sed multis locis castigata. Item, Claudii Galeni Pergameni contra Academicos et Pyrrhontions, D. Erasmo Roterodamo interprete* (Parisiis: Apud Martinum Iuvenem, 1569).

and in the above-mentioned consideration XVI. Luzzatto did not transcribe excerpts directly taken from any of Sextus's books, but he affirms having obtained information from them without bothering to give further bibliographical details:

1. The Egyptians, who were by no means barbarians but in fact passed on many doctrines to the Greeks, took their sisters for wives, and the Ptolemaic kings set an example [of this habit] to the common people. The Persians, who enjoyed dominion over Asia and the subjugation of Greece, passed to a higher level of turpitude, permitting sons to wed their own mothers. Chrysippus, the propagator of Stoic philosophy, claimed that he was responsible for the reform of the human race, and yet he remained indifferent in the face of such a detestable practice; on the contrary, by means of some of his reasoning he sought to describe it as almost honest, as one can read in the books of Sextus Empiricus.⁸⁵
2. This is what Sextus Empiricus demonstrated, i.e. that every phenomenon and object is mixed and involved in five kinds of relations. Proceeding in his examination, he even demonstrated that it is almost impossible to grasp anything about objects other than their relation.⁸⁶

The second passage quoted above is mainly focused on the philosophical problem of knowledge and is somewhat less interesting than the first. It suffices here to say that in these lines the sceptical argument according to which a thing can be known only in relation to something else is used to counter Plato's ideas ("firm and fixed substances").⁸⁷ This reference is less literal and more a summary of *Outlines* I:15, where Sextus argues that the objects of perception are relative to those perceiving them and that the objects of thought are relative to the thinker.

The first quote is much more interesting. Here, Luzzatto uses Sextus's argument about incestuous marriages in antiquity in the context of a political discussion, where he tries to respond to Tacitus accusing the Jews of being dissolute in their carnal impulses. He dismantles the baseless accusation by using Sextus's method of opposing argument against argument. Accordingly, he says that a people as civilised as the Egyptians or the Persians had far more dissolute habits than the Jews have ever had.

The "books" Luzzatto is referring to are the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* in Henri Estienne's translation. The above-quoted lines are an accurate periphrasis of the passage of the text, where Chrysippus is also mentioned:

Whereas intercourse with a mother is forbidden in our country, in Persia it is the general custom to form such marriages; and also among the Egyptians men marry their sisters, a thing forbidden by law amongst us. [...] Chrysippus says that intercourse with mothers or sisters is a thing indifferent, whereas the law forbids such things.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ *Discourse*, 60r.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 82r: "This thing [the relation] would be so feeble and slight that the Stoics, and after them the Nominalists, would negate its existence, [by saying that] it was chimerical and imaginary, or even better, verbal."

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* I:14,152 and 160.

In Sextus's times, the sceptical arguments aimed at the Stoic doctrines of knowledge were among the main targets of Sextus's scepticism. However, in Luzzatto's time, the method and arguments handed down by Sextus were used by philosophers against Aristotle and Aristotelianism. In consideration XV, Luzzatto displaces the focus from pure philosophical debate to the political arena and uses them to counter Tacitist arguments that are brought forward by the figure of Tacitus.⁸⁹

Finally, if one were to say that Sextus was a relevant author for Luzzatto only on the basis of these two references, the argument would inevitably be lacking in precision and would therefore be weak. However, these references are relevant because they give the measure of the extent and aim of the usage of Pyrrhonian scepticism in the text. The Pyrrhonian method of opposing argument against argument is extensively used in the *Discourse* in order to undermine authority, especially human authority in the context of philosophical and political discussions. Luzzatto's main target is not only the outdated Aristotelian system, but also and above all political authority based on Tacitist arguments.

4.2 Montaigne

The presence of Renaissance and early modern authors and texts dealing with Pyrrhonian scepticism in the *Discourse* poses far greater interpretive problems than the classical ones. The only thing that can be reasonably asserted is that Luzzatto was familiar with the above-mentioned Gianfrancesco Pico's *Examen* (1520), even though he mentions him in the context of a different discussion about anti-Aristotelianism.⁹⁰ Yet in the *Discourse*, Luzzatto does not use scepticism with the same purpose as Gianfrancesco, namely to debunk philosophy and human reason and affirm the superiority of religion. Whether he does so in his later philosophical work, *Socrates*, remains, in my opinion, questionable. Officially, in the title of the work, he states that he intends to demonstrate "How feeble human intellect is when it is not directed by divine revelation." Afterwards, however, there are no further references to God, nor to divine revelation at all.⁹¹ The entire work is focused on a philosophical discussion aiming at asserting the plausibility of a sceptical attitude, whose expediency is discussed in a long debate about practical and political life in the last forty pages of the work and immediately tested in the context of the re-enactment of Socrates's trial. If a relevant influence from Gianfrancesco Pico and his usage of scepticism for religious and apologetic purposes were proved, an evalu-

⁸⁹ As I will demonstrate below see Part II, Paragraph 3, "Debunking Authority: Argument against Argument," 345–49.

⁹⁰ See above, 319–20.

⁹¹ As Ruderman already pointed out: Ruderman, *Jewish Thought*, 161–62.

ation of Luzzatto would almost inevitably confirm the general judgment of former interpreters who considered him a conservative.⁹²

On the other hand, if a direct influence from Montaigne could be proven, the previous evaluation would have to be revised and improved. In fact, not only did Montaigne make the greatest contribution to the spread of Pyrrhonian scepticism among Renaissance and early modern intellectuals, he also and most importantly opened the doors to modernity and plurality by dismissing the old assumption according to which human thought and intellect supported by metaphysical reason was able to grasp reality in its entirety. Therefore, it is essential to establish whether Luzzatto had read him and how he had understood him. Did he read him as a fideist author, or a modern one? In fact, Luzzatto's familiarity with Montaigne is still a *vexata questio*. Some scholars have felt the presence of the Sieur de Montaigne in Luzzatto's pages, but they have not been able to bring solid evidence to give some consistence to their intuition.⁹³ Such consistence can be found first of all by starting from solid facts. First of all, the French language did not constitute an obstacle for Luzzatto, since in his time both the *Essais* and the *Apologie de Raymond Sebond* were available in Italian translation and had been printed in Venice.⁹⁴

I have been able to trace two references to classical historical facts that are to be found in both Luzzatto's *Discourse* and in Montaigne's *Essais*:

1. Alexander, famed both for his victories and for the virtues of his soul, was so full of pity for Darius and his women, and yet he was so relentless towards Parmenion and Cleitus, who placed the rule of the world in his hands, and so cruel towards Callisthenes, his teacher. Julius Caesar, ferocious and inhuman in Pharsalia, was in contrast merciful towards Marcellus and indulgent towards Brutus, his murderer. Nero, a monster of humanity, at times regretted knowing how to write when he had to write death decrees for delinquents. And yet he did not mind exercising it [i.e. this prerogative] against his mother, and

⁹² See Veltri, "Individual Responsibility," in this volume, 308.

⁹³ See what David Ruderman writes about Luzzatto's *Socrates*: "Although there is no evidence to suggest that Montaigne's *Apology of Raymond Sebond* influenced Luzzatto's *Socrates*, there are several intriguing parallels between the two works." Ruderman, *Jewish Thought*, 178.

⁹⁴ Michel de Montaigne, *Discorsi morali, politici e militari: del signor Michiel di Montagna: tradotti dal sig. Girolamo Naselli dalla lingua francese nell'italiana, con un discorso se il forastiero si deve admettere alla administratione della Republica* (Ferrara: appresso Benedetto Mamarello, 1590); id., *Saggi di Michel Sig. di Montagna*; id., *Apologia di Raimondo di Sebonda saggio di Michiel Signor di Montagna nel quale si tratta Della debolezza, & incertitudine del discorso Humano Trasportato dalla lingua Francese nell'Italiana, per opera di Marco Ginammi* (In Venetia: Appresso Marco Ginammi, 1634). The first translation is something of an anthology based on the translation of passages from the original French. The Venetian edition prepared by Ginammi is more interesting, since it is a complete translation, followed in the space of one year by the edition of the *Apologie*. Furthermore, since both books had been published in Venice, it seems highly plausible that Luzzatto might have read them. Ginammi's press enjoyed remarkable success in that time as it published unusual and controversial texts. See Maria Napoli, *L'impresa del libro nell'Italia del Seicento* (Naples: Guida editori, 1990).

his teacher Seneca. He was a friend of virtue and learning, but he hated these attributes in others. For this reason, Lucan, the wittiest poet that ever lived, lost his life.⁹⁵

2. To these people, that wicked saying of Lisander the Lacedaemonian would apply: “*To cheat boys with knuckle-bones, but men with oaths.*”⁹⁶

The second passage about Lisander is not very meaningful. It appears in the *Essais* 2:18, where Montaigne discusses and condemns the most common vice of his time: lies. On the other hand, Luzzatto quotes it while discussing impiety, which is always accompanied by lies and credulity. Although he might have read the passage in Montaigne’s *Essais*, the contexts in which the quote is used are too different to constitute indisputable evidence.

However, when one moves on to examine the first passage, the result will be quite different. It is included in consideration XI, where Luzzatto tries to demonstrate that the human character is changing and unfathomable. In the essay “De l’inconstance de nos actions,” Montaigne returns to this subject and shows how contrary the human character can be:

1. Et qui croirait que ce fût Néron, cette vraie image de la cruauté, comme on lui présentât à signer, suivant le style, la sentence d’un criminel condamné, qui eût répondu: “Plût à Dieu que je n’eusse jamais su écrire,” tant le cœur lui serrait de condamner un homme à mort.⁹⁷
2. Il n’est point de vaillance plus extrême en son espèce que celle d’Alexandre – mais elle n’est qu’en espèce: ni assez pleine partout, et universelle. Toute incomparable qu’elle est, si a-elle encore ses taches. Qui fait que nous le voyons se troubler si éperdument aux plus légères soupçons qu’il prend des machinations des siens contre sa vie, et se porter en cette recherche d’une si véhémence et indiscrete injustice, et d’une crainte qui subvertit sa raison naturelle. La superstition aussi, de quoi il était si fort atteint, porte quelque image de pusillanimité: Et l’excès de la pénitence qu’il fit du meurtre de Clitus est aussi témoignage de l’inégalité de son courage.⁹⁸

The similarity between Luzzatto’s and Montaigne’s passages must not be based on a literal comparison. It is not a literal quote. The message conveyed by both authors is, however, very similar, and all the more so for the conclusion. Montaigne and Luzzatto seem to agree on the basic premise: the inconstant, even contradictory, characteristic of human nature. This premise is at the origin of their works, and in Luzzatto’s case it has relevant implications for the judgment of the Jewish people.⁹⁹

Is it enough to affirm that Luzzatto had read Montaigne and understood him as a sceptical, modern author? I am personally inclined towards a positive answer,

⁹⁵ *Discourse*, 36v–37r.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 67r.

⁹⁷ Montaigne, *Essais*, 2:1 “De l’inconstance de nos actions.”

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ For a full discussion of the issue, see below Part II, Paragraph 5 “The Verdict and the Probable Portrait of the Jewish People,” 352–56.

and I think that future research will rather confirm this answer by bringing further references to the surface than contradict it.

4.3 Probabilism: The Sources

The problem of the sources and usage of the concept of the probable in Luzzatto's works is possibly more intriguing than the usage of Pyrrhonian sceptical strategies. In the *Discourse*, Luzzatto writes the following declaration of intent: "Political matters are full of alterations and contingencies, and in this Discourse, I intended that I would follow the probable and the plausible, just as a new academician would, and not as a mathematician who follows the absolutely demonstrable and undeniable."¹⁰⁰

With these lines, Luzzatto positions himself and his Italian works under the influence of sceptical philosophy and, most significantly, he does so by explicitly evoking the image of the new academician as well as the concept of the probable and the plausible. He will only mention Sextus later on, without any explicit reference to Pyrrhonian scepticism. Is this because, as Charles B. Schmitt maintained, Renaissance thinkers did not distinguish between the two orientations and used the term *academici* in the general sense of sceptics *tout court*?¹⁰¹

Although the mention of the new academician can be found in Sextus's *Outlines* (I:226), I am more inclined to think that Luzzatto had been an attentive reader of Cicero's *Academics*. Cicero mentions the new academy clearly and plainly in *Academics* I:44–46, where he explains that the *academia nova* follows Arcesilaus's teaching according to which nothing can be known "the senses are limited, the mind feeble, the span of life short, and that truth (in Democritus's phrase) is sunk in an abyss." Therefore:

No one must make any positive statement or affirmation or give the approval of his assent to any proposition, and a man must always restrain his rashness and hold it back from every slip, as it would be glaring rashness to give assent either to a falsehood or to something not certainly known, and nothing is more disgraceful than for assent and approval to outstrip knowledge and perception.¹⁰²

In the *Discourse* and the *Socrates*, Luzzatto seems to have assimilated this teaching and to have understood Cicero's academic scepticism as an invitation to hold oneself back from rashness, which is at the origin of false knowledge, and as an exhortation to follow probable opinions without assenting to them. At the same time, however, when one tries to evaluate precisely what Luzzatto means when he refers to the probable and the plausible, one finds what I would call an intriguing convergence, for lack of a better word, between Cicero and Aristotle. Cicero drew the con-

¹⁰⁰ *Discourse*, 30r.

¹⁰¹ Schmitt, *Cicero Scepticus*, 8.

¹⁰² Cicero, *Academics* I:44–45 See also Schmitt, *Cicero Scepticus*, 21–22.

cept of the probable from Carneades and translated the original Greek word *pithanon* into the Latin *probabilis*, and therefore as “persuasive.” Yet in the original Italian text, Luzzatto speaks of both “probabile et verisimile,” that is, “truth-like.”

Aristotle in his turn had also discussed the concept of *pithanón*, i.e. the probable, as an epistemological category.¹⁰³ As Stefania Tutino skilfully points out, for Aristotle the probable somehow stands in opposition to mathematical proofs. In fact, it can produce a kind of knowledge of human affairs that is different in nature from the absolute truth that issues from mathematical proofs and can produce scientific knowledge (*epistēmē*).¹⁰⁴ In the above-quoted lines, Luzzatto evokes the very same epistemological opposition: probable vs. absolute certainty, new academician vs. mathematician.¹⁰⁵ Furthermore, the Aristotelian definition of “probable” was taken as an authoritative source by early modern probabilists. Francesco Patrizi, a Humanist from Siena (1413–94) who also showed an interest in the *Academics*,¹⁰⁶ referred to the Aristotelian concept of *pithanón* and translated it with *vero simile* (i.e. truth-like).¹⁰⁷ I would suggest that all these sources converge in the *Discourse*.

As for the question of whether Luzzatto was able to make a distinction between academic and Pyrrhonian scepticism, it seems to me that he was. I do not need to point out here that current research into academic scepticism and the influence of the *Academics* in the early modern period has confuted Schmitt’s thesis about the almost absolute relevance of Pyrrhonian scepticism to the disadvantage of academic scepticism and also about the lack of differentiation between the two sceptical orientations.¹⁰⁸ Furthermore, Luzzatto must have been aware of the fact that in his *Outlines*

103 See Aristotle, *Rhetoric* I:2 (1356b27–1357a7 and 1357a23–b23): “What is persuasive is persuasive to someone; and something is persuasive either because it is directly self-evident or because it appears to be proved from other statements that are so”; “A probability is a thing that happens for the most part – not, however, as some definitions would suggest, anything whatever that so happens, but only if it belongs to the class of what can turn out otherwise, and bears the same relation to that in respect of which it is probable as the universal bears to the particular.”

104 See Stefania Tutino, *Uncertainty in Post-Reformation Catholicism: A History of Probabilism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 11–12. For the influence of Aristotle’s probable on Cicero’s idea of the probable, see *ibid.*, 15.

105 An identification with Sextus’s mathematicians or professors (see the *Contra Mathematicos/Against the Professors*) can therefore be excluded.

106 Schmitt, *Cicero Scepticus*, 49–50.

107 Francesco Patrizi, *Della retorica dieci dialoghi* (In Venetia: Appresso Francesco Senese, 1562), 61a. The author reports Aristotle’s interpretation of Plato’s *Phaedro* where Plato intended the word *pithanón* as *vero simile* i.e. truth-like. Furthermore, the fact that the book was published in Venice may suggest that Luzzatto was familiar with it.

108 Accordingly, see Carlos Levy, *Cicero Academicus. Recherches sur les Académiques et sur la Philosophie Ciceronienne* (Rome: École Française, 1992); Brian Inwood and Jaap Mansfield, eds., *Assent and Argument Studies in Cicero’s Academic Books* (Leiden: Brill, 1997); Walter Nicgorski, *Cicero’s Scepticism and His Recovery of Political Philosophy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Plínio Junqueira Smith and Sébastien Charles, eds., *Academic Scepticism in Early Modern Philosophy* (Switzerland: Springer, 2017).

(I:226–231), Sextus had argued against the probable, since the sceptic lives without dogmas and therefore also without following the probable. Furthermore, the different contexts in which Luzzatto resorts to academic and Pyrrhonian scepticism, together with the precise technical language drawn from each of them, appear to confirm this fact. First, the sections in which he discusses the probable in both the *Discourse* and the *Socrates* are separate from those in which he dismantles knowledge and authority using Sextus's *tropoi*. Finally, he is very precise in his choice of technical terminology. It suffices here to report the several places of the *Discourse* where he refers to what is probable and therefore persuasive: “it would be not persuasive [argument],” “one can say, and even confirm as very probable,” “it is not persuasive,” “it is even more unpersuasive.”¹⁰⁹

The relevance of the *Academics* to the *Discourse* is further confirmed by their being the starting point of Luzzatto's philosophical and political speculation, and especially in Cicero's appraisal of Socrates as the first philosopher who displaced the focus of philosophy from pure metaphysical speculation towards the exploration of ordinary life.¹¹⁰ On the basis of Cicero's presentation, Luzzatto introduces Socrates in the *Discourse* as a master of civil life: “They say that the great master of civil life, Socrates, brought philosophy, which was wandering high up in the heavens, back into human society and that he opened the cities' gates to it.”¹¹¹

This is the first time Socrates appears in Luzzatto's Italian works, and his presentation as a master of civil life is neither astonishing nor incompatible with his attitude and thought in the *Socrates*. In fact, in the very opening of the work, Luzzatto immediately affirms that Socrates had been judged the wisest of men by the Delphian oracle precisely because he knew that he knew nothing,¹¹² which is a reference to *Academics* I:16. Furthermore, throughout the dialogues in which he dismantles the speakers' arguments, he keeps to Cicero's formula of making no affirmation of his own, but refuting other people and saying that he knows nothing except just that.¹¹³ Yet Socrates finds himself on trial not because of the affirmation of his ignorance, nor because of his conclusions in favour of the suspension of judgment, but because he decided to spread the suspension of judgment to other people. For this reason, he is accused of wanting to subvert human knowledge,¹¹⁴ which after

109 *Discourse*, 39v, 41v, and 42r respectively.

110 Cicero, *Academics*, 425: “It is my view and it is universally agreed, that Socrates was the first person who summoned philosophy away from mysteries veiled in concealment by nature herself, upon which all philosophers before him had been engaged, and led it to the subject of ordinary life, in order to investigate the virtues and the vices, good and evil generally, and to realize that heavenly matters are either remote from our knowledge or else, however fully known, have nothing to do with the good life.”

111 *Discourse*, 35v.

112 Luzzatto, *Socrates*, 109.

113 See Cicero, *Academics* I:16.

114 Luzzatto, *Socrates*, 111.

all is more a political accusation than a philosophical one. The parallel of wanting to subvert human knowledge as the populists attempted to do in the Roman Republic is already present in *Academics* I:14, and it is a polemical stance aimed at the academic attack on human knowledge.

At the end of this discussion, it can be reasonably stated that Luzzatto is indebted to the *Academics* because of his interpretation of Socrates as a master of civil life and at the same time as the philosopher who laid the foundations of scepticism. Nonetheless, I would suggest that in his usage of the probable as an epistemological category, he is possibly much more indebted to Cicero.

These remarks notwithstanding, it remains to be ascertained whether and how Luzzatto's probabilism is related to early modern probabilism.¹¹⁵ It is usual to consider the Spanish theologian Bartolomé de Medina (1528–80) as the founder of early modern probabilism,¹¹⁶ and his pupil, the Cistercian bishop Juan Caramuel (1606–82), as the one who mostly developed the version of it that was adopted as a moral theory by the Jesuits.¹¹⁷ Nonetheless, it would now be difficult to identify the early modern probabilist or probabilists who influenced Luzzatto on the basis of traceable sources. I shall therefore make some general remarks in the second part of this essay without claiming a direct and demonstrable influence.

Part II

Philosophical Scepticism and Political Thought in Luzzatto's Italian Works

1 The Problem of Knowledge at the Origin of the *Discourse* and the *Socrates*

In order to develop the defence of the Jewish people and of Socrates, Luzzatto must first of all analyse and eventually debunk the trustworthiness of the knowledge that common people have about the Jewish people in the *Discourse* and the reliability of human knowledge in the *Socrates*. In other words, the first problem he must confront is the problem of truth.

Already in his time, the historian Heinrich Graetz highlighted that sincerity and love of truth constitute an important thematic continuity and connection between

115 For the debate about the relationship between Cicero's idea of the probable and early modern probabilism, see Tutino, *Uncertainty in Post-Reformation*, 15 ff.

116 See Tutino, *Uncertainty in Post-Reformation*, 39 ff.; Sebastian Simmert, *Probabilismus und Wahrheit: Eine Historische Analyse zum Wahrscheinlichkeitsbegriff* (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2017), 21 ff.

117 See Robert Aleksander Maryks, *Saint Cicero and the Jesuits: The Influence of the Liberal Arts and the Adoption of Moral Probabilism* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2008).

the *Discourse* and the *Socrates*.¹¹⁸ Knowledge is, or at least should be, the knowledge of truth. Luzzatto's idea of truth is already evident in the first pages of the *Discourse*, namely in the dedication of his treatise "To the Lovers of Truth." Luzzatto seems to make Aristotle's definition of truth his own.¹¹⁹ Thus, truth is *invita*, i.e. independent from volitional activity because no one can escape the alternative between falsehood and truth.

In Luzzatto's time, however, the Aristotelian definition of truth had become problematic. Appearances can be misleading. This problem also concerns the Jewish people as a whole and the Venetian Jewish community in particular. Accordingly, he writes: "I have thought it improper that an inaccurate portrait should obtain greater patronage than the original ever achieved over a long period of time."¹²⁰

The author opposes the inaccurate portrait of the Jewish people to the Jewish people itself, suggesting that the trustworthy source of knowledge concerning this people should not be the portrait, but the original. This pictorial metaphor is not a simple baroque rhetorical device. On the contrary, it underlies a severe criticism of the Aristotelian concept of truth, which is at the very core of the *Discourse* and plays a pivotal role in Luzzatto's thought. In fact, he is referring here to the sceptical argument aimed at the Stoic theory of general notions that can be gained from resemblance since their origin is something that stands before the subject who is attempting to acquire the knowledge. This argument, brought forth by Sextus Empiricus in his discussion concerning the standard by which objects are judged, draws attention to the gap between the external objects and their presentation based on sensory feelings that are apprehended and judged by the intellect. In order to make the criticism clearer, Sextus resorts to the example of Socrates's portrait: "Just as someone who does not know Socrates but has looked at a picture of him does not know whether the picture is like Socrates."¹²¹

At this point, he concludes, once the arguments in favour of or against the standards of truth are set up in opposition, they will all turn out to be plausible. This process leads to the suspension of judgment.

In modern times, Montaigne took up Sextus's above-quoted argument and wrote in the *Apologie de Raymond Sebond*:

Et de dire que les passions des sens rapportent à l'âme la qualité des sujets étrangers par ressemblance, comment se peut l'âme et l'entendement assurer de cette ressemblance, n'ayant de soi

¹¹⁸ Graetz, *Geschichte*, 10:150–51.

¹¹⁹ See *Discourse*, 3r n. 2 and annexed sources.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 3r.

¹²¹ The whole passage reads as follows: "So then the presentation will be that of the affection of the sense, which is different from the external reality. [...]. And if this affection differs from the external real object, the presentation will not be that of the external reality but of something else which is different therefrom. [...]. Nor, again, is it possible to assert that the soul apprehends external realities by means of the affections of sense owing to the similarity of the affections of the senses to the external real objects." Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* II:7,72–74.

nul commerce avec les sujets étrangers? Tout ainsi comme, qui ne connaît pas Socrate, voyant son portrait, ne peut dire qu'il lui ressemble. Or, qui voudrait toutefois juger par les apparences.

“Who,” Montaigne asks, “would want to judge on the basis of untrustworthy appearances?” This is the point that stands at the very core of the conception of the *Discourse*. Following Sextus, and possibly also Montaigne, Luzzatto’s comparison puts into question the general notion of the Jewish people based on its inaccurate portrait, whose original, he implies, has remained unknown to the majority of his readers. Ignorance about the religion, culture, and customs of the Jews causes Christians to act wrongly towards them. In other words, Luzzatto names ignorance, understood as a lack of knowledge, as the origin of the misfortunes and evils of the Jews. This is a variation of the Maimonidean concept of evil, also understood as a lack and privation of knowledge of God and therefore of wisdom.¹²²

Yet Luzzatto’s above-quoted passage can and possibly must also be read from the point of view of academic scepticism inspired by Cicero. Through this lens, it sounds like a realisation that the portrait of the Jewish people is inaccurate because it is a product of a rash approach to it. Furthermore, this portrait does not produce knowledge, but only false and dangerous opinions.

Almost fifteen years after the publication of the *Discourse*, the metaphor of the painting resurfaces again in the *Socrates*. This time, however, it concerns human knowledge, which appears, to Socrates, as deceptive as a painting: “Human knowledge is like a well-executed scenographical painting, accurately adjusted to the rules of perspective, since it deceives the sight and appears as if it were far away, but if one gets closer to it, one realises that it is a flat surface.”¹²³

These words are uttered by Socrates himself almost at the end of his philosophical investigation. In comparison with the *Discourse*, the problem is enlarged here since it concerns human knowledge as a whole, which is deceptive and deprived of a solid foundation. In his self-defence, Socrates explains that after a long investigation and long debates with the most educated philosophers of his time, he has come to the conclusion that “the apprehended objects exist because our mind has attributed a form and an appearance to them.”¹²⁴

Once again, rashness has brought about the false belief of possessing a knowledge that is actually impossible to achieve. Once again, the only viable alternative is to resort to probable opinions which can guide human action for the time being, until something more comes to light.

122 See Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, trans. Maurice Friedländer (Skokie, IL: Varda Books, 2002), 267: “All the great evils which men cause to each other because of certain intentions, desires, opinions, or religious principles, are likewise due to non-existence, because they originate in ignorance which is the absence of God ... For the knowledge of truth removes hatred and quarrels, and prevents mutual injuries.”

123 *Socrates*, 341.

124 *Ibid.*, 120.

In both of Luzzatto's Italian works, Pyrrhonian scepticism functions as a *pars destruens* of knowledge and authority, while the resort to academic scepticism and probabilism allows him to establish a *pars construens* where the probable can guide human action in practical as well as political life.

2 *Theatrum Mundi* and Sceptical Strategies

“Every renowned and generally accepted lie holds some seed of truth from which it originates and grows.”¹²⁵ This is the premise and foundation of the entire set of arguments Luzzatto uses to dismantle Tacitus's lies about the Jewish people in consideration XV. Truth should be the main object to which intellectual research is devoted, yet in modern times, it has become mixed with lies. This is one of the points where Luzzatto's scepticism becomes modernised and he distances himself from ancient scepticism, focused as it was on the philosophical debate about epistemology. In the seventeenth century, scepticism extends beyond the philosophical arena and encompasses the multifaceted aspects of human life. This also happens in Luzzatto's works.

A close examination of the text will prove that the *Discourse* itself can be read as a stage on which Luzzatto is playing the attorney, the Jews are on trial but are also the object of a problematic knowledge, and the Christian public is the jury. The philosophers and politicians in their turn are briefly called on stage to play different parts. Accordingly, Aristotle's practical political advice is relevant, but his philosophical system must be put under scrutiny and eventually debunked. Tacitus is counted among “the earliest masters of civil government for his teachings on and experience in politics.” Yet “when referring to the origins and customs of the Jews [...] he was so overcome with hatred for the Jewish religion and contempt for the Jewish Nation that he was eventually excessively neglectful in investigating their true origins and events from their history.”¹²⁶ Therefore, it would be pointless to look for comprehensive coherence in the work, and not because Luzzatto was writing an apology and pragmatically using only the arguments he needed, but because he was familiar both with the theatrical approach to life and with human vagaries, and apprehending them with the ironical smile of *Democritus ridens*.

The whole structure of the *Socrates* features this same theatrical approach, where the author creates the theatrical illusion of an academy located in Delphi in the temple of Apollo whose main purpose is the reformation of human knowledge. Suddenly, a letter is found, written by human reason, which is protesting because human authority is keeping it imprisoned and preventing it from free investigation. Thus, the academy decides to open a box where everybody can report all the ab-

¹²⁵ *Discourse*, 58v.

¹²⁶ *Discourse*, 57v–58r.

surdities that that could possibly put human doctrines in danger. As a consequence, someone accuses Socrates of wanting to subvert human reason, and the members of the academy decide to put the philosopher on trial. In Luzzatto's text, the trial is a representation that takes place on stage. On this stage, ancient and modern philosophers and poets appear with their doctrines and are mixed so that he can create the illusion of the process being new and real and at the same time taking place in a sort of dimension that is outside of historical time and space. It is possible that for the conception of the work Luzzatto took inspiration from the *Ragguagli di Parnaso* by Traiano Boccalini,¹²⁷ who created a similar theatrical illusion of an inn opened on Mount Parnassus where Apollo is the governor and the judge. Before him come many ancient and modern authors and politicians, whom he has to judge. In this way, Boccalini wrote a satire of Spanish power and politics. Luzzatto did not intend to write a satire, yet his irony emerges from Socrates's words whenever he recalls and discusses doctrines that are either obsolete or simply absurd. Furthermore, in the title of the work, the author labels it "a semi-serious exercise" (*seriologico*, literally "serious and facetious") and in so doing he prevents his readers from taking it completely seriously because it is only an exercise, as if he were suggesting that the final and ultimate version of the work was still supposed to appear. Nonetheless, the adjective "semi-serious" could also be a reference to the genre of the work, implying that a tragedy, such as the real trial of Socrates, becomes a comedy since it here finds a happy ending in which the philosopher's life is saved.

If, however, the theatrical illusion can result in a happy ending by means of the sceptical phrases "non-assertion" and "I suspend judgment," in the real and practical dimension of politics, suspension of judgment is insufficient. In the *Discourse*, Luzzatto must counter the inaccurate portrait of the Jewish people since appearances may not only be deceiving, but also and most of all dangerous to rely on. Who would want to judge or be judged on the basis of appearances? This is what Luzzatto felt about the Jewish people. This is the moment when sceptical reflection is activated. It intervenes precisely in the gap between *les choses et les mots*, i.e. the gap between the external thing and the (political) judgment formulated about it. As far as the arguments in defence of the Jewish people are concerned, scepticism is therefore understood as a reflection on language. The formulation of a judgment, or its suspension, stems from handling scepticism not only as a philosophical concept, but also as a linguistic literary tool. In Sextus's formulation, sceptical language becomes the expression of an internal affection. Sceptical phrases are "the

127 Traiano Boccalini, *Ragguagli di Parnaso*, Centuria Prima (in Venetia: appresso Pietro Farri, 1612); id., *Ragguagli di Parnaso*, Centuria Seconda (Venezia: Barezzo Barezzi, 1613); for a modern edition, see Traiano Boccalini, *Ragguagli di Parnaso e scritti minori*, ed. Luigi Firpo, 3 vols. (Bari: Laterza, 1948). See also Luigi Firpo, "Boccalini, Traiano," in *Dizionario Bibliografico degli italiani*, vol. 11 (1969), available online at [http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/traiano-boccalini_\(Dizionario-Biografico\)/](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/traiano-boccalini_(Dizionario-Biografico)/) (accessed February 25, 2017).

announcement of a human state of mind which is apparent to the person experiencing it.”¹²⁸ The act of speaking does not necessarily involve the active formulation of a judgment, but the passive formulation of how a thing impresses the speaker without expressing an intellectual evaluation. To achieve this result, Luzzatto must first of all play down his own authority. He must try to oppose the inaccurate portrait of the Jewish people with something else which has to be more accurate, but also different in the way it is put into words and argued:

Therefore, with the smallest amount of talent that the Divine Majesty has granted me, I brought myself to compose a concise but truthful account of this Nation’s principal rites and most commonly shared opinions, which are not in conflict with those that are universal. In performing this task, I tried with all my might, even though I belong to the same Nation, to abstain from any sympathy or passion that could make me deviate from the truth.¹²⁹

This declaration of intent must not be read simply as an assertion of neutrality and honest accuracy, *sine ira et studio*. I am inclined to read it as a formulation made in a sceptical language. Everything Luzzatto will write about the Jewish people will not be mediated by an intellectual evaluation. Instead, it will be a passive formulation of how it appears to him and how it impresses him. He is the passive recipient of impressions (*kata to phainomenon*, “quid de quaque re videatur”) and he transmits them like a chronicler (*historikos*, “historico quodam more”) to his readers. The account can be a sceptical tool allowing its author to avoid the formulation of dogmatic judgments. In Sextus’s formulation: “We simply record each fact, like a chronicler, as it appears to us at the moment.”¹³⁰

What is true at the moment must be something that is unmediated. There then arises the next question: how to formulate this account? It must be formulated based on Sextus’s strategy: “To every argument an equal argument is opposed.”¹³¹ Therefore, in the pages of the *Discourse*, Luzzatto proceeds in his account by opposing his arguments to those that go against the Jewish people.

3 Debunking the Authority: Argument against Argument

As I have demonstrated above, the authority Luzzatto is attacking in the *Discourse* is essentially a political authority whose principles and actions are inspired by the

128 Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* I:17, 203.

129 *Discourse*, 5r.

130 Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* I:1, 4. The Latin version Luzzatto must have read is the following: “Sed quid de quaque re nobis nunc videatur, historico quodam more narrantes exponere.” Sextus Empiricus, *Sexti Philosophi Pyrrhonianum hypotiposeon libri III*, 405.

131 Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* I:18. The English word “argument” translates the Greek *logos*. The Latin version Luzzatto must have read is the following: “Omni oratio aequalis opponitur” (Sextus Empiricus, *Pyrrhonianum Hypotiposeon*, 53).

kind of Tacitism according to which religion – the Catholic religion, as it happens – must guide political action. This kind of political authority is extremely dangerous for the Venetian Jews. Therefore, Luzzatto tries to counter it by resorting to the sceptical strategy of opposing argument against argument.

To confirm this statement, I will switch to a discussion of consideration XV, “Considering Various Objections Brought Forward by Cornelius Tacitus against the Ancient Jewish People, and Their Resolution,” the longest in the *Discourse*. Questions have been asked as to why Luzzatto chose to discuss Tacitus’s arguments and who was possibly hiding behind him.¹³² Abraham Melamed has given highly useful starting points for the understanding and evaluation of this consideration.¹³³ According to him, the focus on Tacitus’s slanders was unusual in Jewish apologetics, and Luzzatto was the first Jewish author to devote an entire discussion to him.¹³⁴ Furthermore, he demonstrates that this discussion is not really focused on the Roman historian himself, since Luzzatto is here giving a Jewish interpretation of late Renaissance Tacitism¹³⁵ and therefore he is not formulating apologetics, but engaging in a discussion about political thought.¹³⁶

I would suggest that in the pages of consideration XV, Luzzatto’s sceptical strategy deployed to dismantle Tacitus’s slanders against the Jews is particularly relevant. I would even go so far as to suggest that this consideration should be regarded as a *virtuoso* performance of the strategy of argument against argument.

First of all, it must be noted that all seven slanders of which Tacitus accuses the Jews are related to customs and rites:¹³⁷ the adoration of a statue of a donkey in the Temple of Jerusalem; carnal dissolution; compassion for their fellow tribesmen and hatred for all others; the alleged adoration of Bacchus; the custom of abstaining from pork meat because of risk of leprosy infection; an inclination to superstition; and idleness and sloth. For the sake of brevity, I shall not dwell on all Tacitus’s slanders and Luzzatto’s counter-arguments, but only on the most substantial ones for the purposes of my essay.

The first slander, Luzzatto writes, concerns the consecration of a donkey’s head in the inner chambers of the Holy Temple of Jerusalem. He quotes Tacitus’s passage and then explains it:

That is, [he claims that] when the Jews were wandering the desert, a place deprived of water and therefore dominated by thirst, they eventually came upon a flock of wild donkeys. From

132 According to Ravid (*Economics*, 21–22), Luzzatto’s apologetic intents are directed against Senensis and Buxtorf.

133 See Melamed, “Simone Luzzatto on Tacitus.”

134 *Ibid.*, 152

135 *Ibid.*, 144.

136 *Ibid.*, 152.

137 As a matter of fact, the Christian public in the seventeenth century was highly interested in the issue of Jewish customs, ceremonies, and rites. See Veltri, *Renaissance Philosophy*, chapter 8, “Ceremonial Law: History of a Philosophical-Political Concept,” 169–94.

this, Moses inferred that a spring must be near. Thus he followed [the flock] until he discovered the desired water. The water restored the people and quenched their thirst. As a consequence, and to remember such a propitious event, they consecrated an effigy or skull of [one of] these animals, which was ultimately preserved in the inner chambers of the Temple.¹³⁸

With a move of a consummate strategist, Luzzatto mentions the fact that this slander has already been confuted by the Christian apologist Tertullian almost *en passant*, as if it were universally known and acknowledged.¹³⁹ Then, he adds that “the Scripture makes no mention of this event, which shows that the story is untrue,” as if he wanted to imply that one can obviously doubt the writings of a heathen historian, but not the word of the Scripture. Finally, he switches to the sceptical confutation of the slander.

First of all, it must be noted that Luzzatto’s counter-argument is introduced by and punctuated with sceptical phrases – “But let me tell you what my intuition suggests, in the form of a conjecture – without persisting in asserting it too tenaciously,”¹⁴⁰ “it could very well be,”¹⁴¹ and so on. Then, he turns the alleged adoration of the donkey’s head into a custom based on a usage sanctioned and approved by Scripture: “I have observed in the Holy Scripture that many things such as the means and instruments of miracles or victories were commemorated and consecrated in holy places in memory of divine favours.”¹⁴² He subsequently finds the origin of this custom in a biblical story:

It could very well be that the donkey’s head relates to Samson, the strongest of men and a distinguished leader of the Jews. Having defeated a thousand Philistines with a donkey’s jaw, Samson became extremely thirsty. He turned to God, and from the jaw sprang forth a great abundance of water, which he drank and which restored him, as recounted in the book of Judges, chapter 19. An effigy of a donkey’s jaw with water pouring from it was placed in the Temple in commemoration of this most valorous feat, where everything occurred miraculously and not by means of simple human strength.¹⁴³

In Luzzatto’s interpretation, superstition plays no role, as Tacitus suggested. There is no adoration of a donkey’s head, but only the custom, approved by Scripture, of preserving objects related to Samson’s ancient glorious feat. This custom has possibly been misunderstood because of the ceaseless changes and upheavals of human fortunes: “Subsequently, after the fortune of the Jews had changed, that monument of glory became little more than a joke, mocked by foreigners, and it gave rise to the fable that donkeys had led the Jews to the source of water.”¹⁴⁴

138 *Discourse*, 58v.

139 *Ibid.*: “Tacitus’s lies about these events have already been identified by a number of sages, in particular by Tertullian.”

140 *Ibid.*, 59r.

141 *Ibid.*, 59v.

142 *Ibid.*, 59r

143 *Ibid.*, 59v.

144 *Ibid.*

The entire argument is essentially sceptical since in Sextus's formulation, a custom is the "joint adoption of a certain kind of action by a number of men, the transgressor of which is not actually punished."¹⁴⁵ If opposed to another custom, law, or dogmatic opinion, there appears to be so much divergence in objects that "we shall not be able to state what character belongs to the object in respect of its real essence, but only what belongs to it in respect of this particular rule of conduct, or law, or habit."¹⁴⁶ The preservation of the effigy or skull of the donkey in the Temple is only a custom or habit, and as such it has no more and no less authority than the other customs. Furthermore, ancient scepticism encounters early modern scepticism when Luzzatto mentions the change of fortune that is among the main themes of the latter; it will suffice to think of the role fortune and its vagaries play in Montaigne's *Essais*.

To confute the second slander describing the Jewish nation as dissolute in its carnal impulses, Luzzatto uses the very same method. First of all, he points out that carnal dissolution is explicitly forbidden and punished in the Bible. Then, he mentions heathen customs and laws that purposely allow what the Bible forbids as carnal dissolution. This is the case with marriage between sisters and brothers, permitted in Egypt, or marriage between mothers and sons, permitted in Persia. As I have shown above, this is also the passage where Sextus is explicitly mentioned as a source in the *Discourse*.¹⁴⁷

It seems pointless here to dwell on the confutations of all seven slanders. It is much more important to point out that this consideration is aimed at the confutation of authority, namely the much-reputed authority of Tacitus as a historian: "If the courteous reader has gained nothing from the aforementioned matters other than the knowledge that the simple authority of great men is not the real cement of truth, then he should be thankful for what has been said."¹⁴⁸

Sextus's sceptical method of opposing customs to laws, dogmatic opinions, or other customs debunks an authority that is only and wrongly founded on reputation and celebrity. Even if they do not mention it explicitly, these lines of the *Discourse* are already aimed against the *ipse dixit* that human reason puts under attack in the *Socrates* published almost thirteen years later. Furthermore, in this confutation the Bible too plays a very important role, since Luzzatto opposes the exact knowledge and quotation from Scripture to Tacitus's inaccurate knowledge of the Jewish people and its customs and laws.

At the same time, however, Luzzatto continues to consider Tacitus one of the greatest practical statesmen, since "those authors who were most accurate on one subject could be extremely negligent with respect to another, and that the same

145 Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* I:14, 146.

146 *Ibid.* I:14, 163.

147 See 333.

148 *Discourse*, 73r.

truth can be infiltrated by falsehood that tries to force its way into truth.”¹⁴⁹ In Luzzatto’s time, truth and lies are mixed, and one needs great accuracy to distinguish between them. The same can be said about human character, which can be very contrary and contradictory, careful while analysing one subject and negligent while dwelling on another. This is another sceptical argument Luzzatto will use in defence of the Jewish people in consideration XI, “Referring to the Difficulties in Describing the Customs of the Jews in General, and That Their Misdemeanours Could Easily Be Prevented.”

4 Experience and Probabilism as a Guide for Human Action and Politics

The *Discourse* and the *Socrates* can ideally be divided into a *pars destruens* and a *pars construens*. In the *pars destruens*, Luzzatto debunks the reliability of knowledge and of the authority who tries to formulate a judgment based on it. True scientific knowledge – what Aristotle would call *epistēmē* – remains beyond human reach. At this point, however, Luzzatto would be entangled in all-encompassing doubt, preventing him from taking any decision or action. Yet in both works, adjusting one’s life to the criterion of *apraxia* – and therefore refraining from action in practical and political life – would be dangerous and even impossible. In fact, the shadow of the trial and the pending judgment of the Venetian Jews in the *Discourse* and of Socrates in the *Socrates* makes *apraxia* a non-viable option.

Therefore, here comes the *pars construens*: the resort to the probable. If well-founded knowledge remains unattainable, one must resort to probable opinions. What these probable and plausible opinions are, Luzzatto does not explicitly say in either the *Discourse* or the *Socrates*, but a definition may be obtained from an analysis of his usage of the concept.

I shall begin with the *Socrates*, since it is there that Luzzatto strives to outline what the probable is and is not. After long philosophical debates, Socrates finally concludes that human knowledge is nothing more than an illusion. Then he begins an examination of the criteria men should follow in their practical lives. Abiding by the criterion of the probable is the sole answer Socrates finds when faced with the vagaries of chance and fortune:

The observation of the uncertainty, the instability, the vicissitudes, and the unpredictable contingency of human affairs pushed me towards these considerations and thoughts. What kind of certain conjectures could I ever draw about our affairs? For they are brought about by our will that is steady only in following its own changing fickleness and is often guided and directed by the wild chance alone.¹⁵⁰

149 Ibid.

150 *Socrates*, 338.

The only answer is to try to see something that approaches the truth. This is what Socrates says at the end of his discussion with Cratylus, after the impossibility of attaining knowledge has been finally agreed upon: “I therefore conclude,’ Cratylus said, ‘my reasoning. If we cannot know the authentic truth, like Argos Panoptes, we must be satisfied that we are just able to see something that resembles it, like one-eyed Polyphemus.’”¹⁵¹

This is what Cratylus can surmise about truth. Socrates agrees with him, but only up to a certain point. These lines introduce the search for this thing that resembles truth. The best possible candidate is the probable, which, in order to be properly handled, needs to be properly defined. But here, a difficulty emerges. As was the case with the inaccurate portrait of the Jews and with knowledge compared to a portrait that is deceptive precisely in its striving to be similar to reality, in the following lines Luzzatto resorts once more to the metaphor of the portrait to argue that the definition of the probable first and foremost excludes any attempt to resemble the truth:

But if I were asked about the degree of certainty the probable can arrive at, and if I were to answer the objection that truth is impossible to attain, how can one argue that the probable retains at least some resemblance to truth? For since the original to which truth is compared is hidden from us and impossible to perceive with our senses, there is no way we can state that the truth we have is similar to this original or corresponds to it in some way. A painter who does not know Pericles will never be able to paint his portrait.¹⁵²

Once again, the problem of obtaining a portrait that is as close as possible to the original arises. Yet this original remains unknowable. Therefore, the probable itself cannot be known or defined. Such an attempt would immediately expose itself to the criticism of the sceptical method. The only thing Luzzatto can do is to report what the probable is not:

I exhorted my friends and family to follow the directions of the probable in the businesses of life. For the probable is neither obstinate nor quibbling. On the contrary, it is pliable to life events, it acts more than it talks, and even if in the vicissitudes of moral life...it does not draw close to truth, at least it does not incur the risk of unhealthy and mad obstinacy.¹⁵³

The probable can only be sketched out by resorting to *empeiria*, i.e. experience of past and present things, as Machiavelli taught, and empirical knowledge, as Bacon taught. Therefore, it does not aspire to be fixed and imprisoned in the form of a knowledge that is valid for all eternity. It only offers a provisional knowledge, valid for the time being and able to deal with the necessities of the moment. In other words, this knowledge is under the control of time and human history. Accordingly,

151 Ibid., 323.

152 Ibid., 395–96.

153 Ibid., 394–95.

the probable cannot be defined and must be agreed upon by examining each and every individual case in each and every moment of human history. For this same reason, the probable eludes the control of the principle of authority:

Upon addressing questions of a philosophical nature or Scholastic debates, after challenging the reasons, it is customary to resort to the inexorable and occasionally invincible arms of authority. Thus, I believe that someone who is unable to confront the above-mentioned matters will attempt to argue using the weapons of example and authority. They [will] argue that if the Jews brought so many benefits, why did the most prudent princes and most sagacious republics exclude them from their states, as Spain, France, and England did, and as many cities in Germany as well as not a few in Italy have also done? To this question, one could respond that in political matters, an argument based on example carries little weight. Just as it is futile to turn to authority in mathematics, since such proofs are evident and certain by themselves, it is absurd to argue political matters on the basis of authority, because of the contingency and diversity of individual occurrences.¹⁵⁴

Empirical knowledge also stands against general observations. It needs the accuracy Luzzatto pleaded for in consideration XV while discussing Tacitus's slanders. If, for example, one goes back to the *Discourse*, and more precisely to consideration VIII, "On the Detailed Calculation of Profits and Benefits Yielded by the Jewish Nation," it will be possible to see how Luzzatto handles the concept of the probable. First of all, as he already states in the title of the consideration, the discussion is focused on a *detailed* calculation, as he wrote in the above-quoted passage.¹⁵⁵ Thus, the probable alone cannot give trustworthy answers; in order to do so, it needs to be used together with experience of individual cases in the past and present. Then, Luzzatto enters into an analysis of the issue. In Venice, he says, there are about six thousand Jews; the tax raised from their food and clothing amounts to forty-eight ducats per year; the Jews employ around four thousand artisans for their personal services and those related to commerce, which amounts to thirty-two thousand ducats per year for the public revenue; they pay import-export taxes on the activities related to their commerce up to forty-seven ducats. To this, one must add the taxes on the provisions of the loan-banks – eight thousand ducats – and the obligation to provide lodgings for princes and ambassadors, amounting to eight hundred ducats per year. The sum of the annual public revenue is 205,000 ducats. To this, one must add occasional extraordinary taxes, eleven thousand ducats, and the tax of a quarter of the rent, six thousand ducats.

The final sum is 220,000 ducats, and here Luzzatto proudly states: "There are provinces, usually considered as duchies, that do not generate such high revenue."¹⁵⁶ The Jewish community is worth more than a province, and at far less expense. This is possibly the most important economic argument Luzzatto brings forward.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁴ *Discourse*, 86r.

¹⁵⁵ See above 332.

¹⁵⁶ *Discourse*, 30v.

¹⁵⁷ Accordingly, see also Ravid, *Economics*, 87.

In the following consideration, “On the Three Loan-Banks for the Poor Established by the Jews,” Luzzatto strengthens his argument by explaining that the Sere-nissima, in order to “favour the poor and to alleviate their conditions,”¹⁵⁸ ordered the Jews to open three loan-banks in which they had to practise a five per cent interest – “an amount so low that the expenses of leases on the buildings, managers, agents, and other requirements exceed the total of such low interest rates.”¹⁵⁹ In the light of all these facts and figures, one cannot but conclude that:

it is no less honourable for the Venetian prince to exercise protection towards the Jewish Nation than it is profitable, because of the aforementioned gains resulting from the entrance fees. These profits not only help to increase the treasury he must share with private citizens, but [his engagement in protecting the Jews is especially honourable] for bringing glory, which is the personal attribute of princes and great monarchs.¹⁶⁰

Of course, Luzzatto is trying to protect the Jewish community, but he is not simply formulating, nor is he only bringing forward arguments in favour of the Jewish community; he is basing his argument upon a philosophical-theoretical foundation: the sceptical criterion of the probable, associated with and implemented by empirical data and experience.

5 The Verdict and the Probable Portrait of the Jewish People

After having debunked the false pretences of an authority that was claiming to be in possession of true and well-founded knowledge, and after having revealed his idea of the probable and the truth-like, Luzzatto tries to sketch a probable and truth-like portrait of the Jewish people. This portrait does not aspire to absolute and everlasting truth. It simply aspires to be plausible and probable, in such a way as to be considered reliable, but not ultimately authoritative or everlasting. Therefore, Luzzatto only says what can be said in his time and with his information.

From a practical and economical point of view, he has already demonstrated that Jews are useful, and for this reason he has been considered, with some amount of plausibility, the first Jewish thinker to make use of this concept.¹⁶¹ It only remains to point out that the idea of the utility of the Jews, based as it is upon empirical data and credible and truth-like conclusions, is in itself something of a sceptical concept since it does not demand well-founded knowledge, but only probable opinions, and since it remains valid only for the time being, like the suspension of judgment.

¹⁵⁸ *Discourse*, 32v–33r.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 33r.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 35v.

¹⁶¹ See Pierre Birnbaum, ed., “*Est-il des moyens de rendre le juifs plus utiles et plus heureux?*” *Le concours de l’Académie de Metz (1787)* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2017), “Introduction,” 10–12.

What else can be said about the Jewish people with some amount of plausibility and truth-likeness? This is what Luzzatto asks himself in consideration XI, “Referring to the Difficulties in Describing the Customs of the Jews in General, and That Their Misdemeanours Could Easily be Prevented.” If one compares the length of the *Discourse* to what can be said about the Jewish people, one will find that the portrait Luzzatto sketches is very concise. The nation has no political independence and no military value, nor does it aspire to acquire them. The Jews do not care about the present course of things and they are unaware of their universal interests, nor are the majority of them interested in learning languages. Yet they preserve their faith and study the Bible with the greater scrupulousness and are held together by a great sense of solidarity. They are always submissive to the members of other religions and do not have a tendency towards serious or dangerous crimes.¹⁶²

The concise terseness of this portrait has a practical historical reason and a philosophical foundation. From a practical historical point of view, it is difficult to say much more that can be held valid for the whole Jewish nation because, in Luzzatto’s own words, “dispersed as it is throughout the world, so that it is impossible to say anything certain and reliable about it.”¹⁶³ The Diaspora is at the origin of some differences between the Jews, who “are scattered around the whole world like a river running through a long stretch of countryside, whose waters receive an impression from the quality of the various lands through which they pass.” Jews do not become mixed with other nations; on this subject, Luzzatto is quite clear, yet

162 *Discourse*, 37v–38v: “Nonetheless, should someone still wish to investigate the universal habits [they share], one could say that they are a Nation of fainthearted, cowardly, and half-hearted spirit, incapable in their present situation of any political government, preoccupied with their particular interests, quite – if not completely – unaware of their universal ones. Their parsimony amounts to avarice. They greatly admire antiquity, and yet they are quite unobservant of the present course of things. Many of them are coarse in their customs, not often applying themselves to studying and to learning languages. According to other people they have a tendency to an exaggerated scrupulousness when observing their own laws. Against their flaws one could set down other qualities worthy of some observation: a firmness and inexpressible tenacity in the observance of their faith and a uniformity of dogma regarding their beliefs during the course of 1,550 years of dispersion in the world. This is a remarkable steadfastness, if not in encountering dangers then at least in bearing calamities. They have acquired an unrivalled knowledge of Holy Scripture and its interpretation. They can be characterised by human charity and hospitality towards any member of their Nation, even if he is an outsider and foreigner. The Persian Jew empathises and sympathises with the hardships of the Italian Jew. The distance between them causes no disunion among them, since they share the uniformity of religion. With regard to carnal vices, [they practise] great abstinence. They are careful and mindful to preserve their lineage, unmixed and uncontaminated. They are able to deal with any difficult business whatsoever. They usually display submission and respect towards anyone not belonging to their religion. Their errors and offences are almost always more spineless and wretched than atrocious. When it happens (as it often does with any nation) that one of their members commits a crime, and transgresses the edicts of the Prince, the remedy and relief are very simple.”

163 *Ibid.*, 37v.

they “acquire different ways from the nations in which they settle.”¹⁶⁴ In fact, the idea of mixing is at the very foundation of consideration XI and gives a philosophical and anthropological explanation for the impossibility of saying anything certain and reliable about the Jewish people.

The idea of mixing in relation to human nature itself is already evoked in the first lines of the consideration and is attributed to Socrates:

After having thoroughly investigated himself and penetrating the most hidden recesses and obscure corners of his soul, he announced that he did not know whether there was but one animal dwelling in his soul or a multiplicity of different animals, wrapped around each other and entangled with themselves. Indeed, he found in himself the virtues, vices, excesses, and moderation – traits that the Stoic doctrine called animals – entwined with one another.¹⁶⁵

Giuseppe Veltri has already highlighted the relevance of this passage, especially in relation to classical sources, namely the Stoic doctrine, ascribed to Chrysippus, according to which psychic processes are endowed with autonomous life and can therefore be considered animals.¹⁶⁶ Immediately thereafter, Luzzatto states: “For if one were to carefully consider the impulses of the soul, one would witness the appearance of a universal mixture of infinite things.”¹⁶⁷ This, i.e. the varied nature of the human soul, as Veltri has skillfully pointed out, is the real point Luzzatto wants to make, and for this same reason he evokes the Aristotelian catalogue of opposing emotions¹⁶⁸ and compares the human soul to a mosaic:

The internal image of our soul is composed of a mosaic that appears to form a single idea. Upon approaching it, however, one sees that it is made up of various fragments of cheap and precious stones put together. In the same way our soul is, for the most part, composed of different and discrepant pieces, each of which on various occasions takes a distinct appearance. Thus, the description of a single man’s nature and condition is a very arduous and difficult endeavour. It is even more difficult and arduous to relate all of his actions to a single rule and idea.¹⁶⁹

As I have shown above, the reference to Nero’s and Alexander’s characters are very similar, if not actually drawn from Montaigne.¹⁷⁰ This means that Luzzatto is not simply interested in presenting a static appraisal of the human soul where the opposites co-exist, as happens in Aristotle’s catalogue. As an intellectual writing in the early modern age, he sees the human soul and the human character as full of nuances more than static opposites, very contradictory, changing, and even contrary. In

164 Ibid.

165 Ibid., 35v–36r.

166 Veltri, “Individual Responsibility,” 295 and annexed sources.

167 *Discourse*, 36r.

168 See Veltri, “Individual Responsibility,” 296–97.

169 *Discourse*, 37r.

170 See above 335–36.

fact, I am inclined to think that the very same image of the mosaic and its tesserae as a metaphor for the human soul and character stems from Montaigne. He opened his *Essais* with the acknowledgement of the changing human nature and the impossibility of elaborating a well-founded judgment of it: “Certes c’est un sujet merveilleusement vain, divers et ondoyant, que l’homme: Il est malaisé d’y fonder jugement constant et uniforme.”¹⁷¹ Accordingly, he says that human actions are like fragments – “Notre fait, ce ne sont que pièces rapportées”¹⁷² – that we are all made of fragments in such a way that every moment must be considered on its own account – “Nous sommes tous de lopins, et d’une contexture si informe et diverse que chaque pièce, chaque moment, fait son jeu”¹⁷³ – and that finally each and every human action must be judged independently from the others: “A nous au rebours, autant d’actions autant faut-il de jugements particuliers.”¹⁷⁴

Faced with such a nuanced heterogeneity, Luzzatto can only suspend his own judgment and state at the very end of the *Discourse* in consideration XVIII that the Jewish people is characterised by an “identity in essentiality.”¹⁷⁵ This identity in essentiality is the result of a historical process, the Diaspora, and, as Veltri points out, if one tries to understand what the essentiality is, one is only left with a history that has fashioned the Jewish people as it is.¹⁷⁶ About the substance of this essentiality, Luzzatto says nothing more, and, in my opinion, he does this intentionally, because nothing more can be said. Once again, as was the case with the dispute about Daniel’s messianic prophecy and with Socrates’s trial, sceptical silence is invoked. We cannot know anything more, we cannot say anything more, and therefore we cannot but suspend judgment.

From this philosophical and anthropological conclusion in favour of sceptical silence and the suspension of judgment stems the final judgment on the Merceria robbery as far as the Jewish nation is concerned. Only the few individuals involved in the crime, Luzzatto argues, must be judged, and always by keeping in mind that theirs is a petty crime not involving any danger to the preservation of the political integrity of the Serenissima. The Jewish people must be therefore absolved and be allowed to play its part in society and the world along with all the other peoples. Here, the metaphor of the mosaic and the fragments returns with a much more provocative comparison with Democritus’s atoms:

While the Stoics, renowned among ancient philosophers, dared to declare that the sun, the moon, and the other stars nourish and feed themselves from the vapour of our low, earthly sphere, in the same way Democritus and Leucippus ventured to say that this great and ornate

171 Montaigne, *Essais*, 1:1 “Par divers moyens on arrive à pareille fin.”

172 Montaigne, *Essais*, 2:1 “De l’inconstance de nos actions.”

173 *Ibid.*

174 *Ibid.*

175 *Discourse*, 89r.

176 Veltri, “Identità nell’essentialità,” 330–31.

world has indivisible and impassive particles among the elements that compose it. This opinion was condemned, but because the two philosophers asserted the casual coupling of small bodies, not because of the absurdity of the conception. Likewise, the Jewish Nation should be allowed to compare itself to Democritus's atoms in representing one particle of a very numerous population, and to a tenuous and earthly exhalation that contributes to paying tribute and maintaining public revenue.¹⁷⁷

I am not inclined to interpret this passage as a display of knowledge of ancient theories of nature considered as a harmonious book that shows and demonstrates God's wonderful accomplishments.¹⁷⁸ This is another example of Luzzatto's rhetorical strategy. As usual, he begins with references to doctrines that are generally approved – the Stoic theory of nature – in order to switch to the real and possibly provocative point he wants to make. The real point here is the comparison of the Jewish nation to Democritus's atoms as “representing one particle of such a numerous population.” Atomism describes a world deprived of a vertical hierarchy of beings and instead based on a group of atoms that are all equals and arranged in a horizontal, non-hierarchical disposition. This is not a neutral erudite reference, since it has relevant political and social implications: all the peoples put on the same plane must be allowed to play their part in the world. Together with the sceptical resort to silence until we know more, the atomistic reference becomes the philosophical foundation for peaceful coexistence and tolerance of Jews in a Christian society.

6 Conclusion: Luzzatto's Probable Portrait

Luzzatto was not only a rabbi and an intellectual with multifaceted interests ranging from the Jewish sacred texts to secular philosophy and literature, with a special talent for mathematics.¹⁷⁹ Accordingly, as he himself states in the following passage from a letter he addressed to his master Jacob Heilbronn, he strived to find the time for both the Torah and “the other things,” as he eventually calls his secular studies:

For at the moment I am busy with other things. [...]. And I promise by the name of the Eternal that I am so absorbed in my other studies that I cannot leave them, not even for a short hour... And so help me God that after Sukkot I will make love to our holy Torah, as Your Honour will testify, since now I have no leisure of time.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁷ *Discourse*, 7r.

¹⁷⁸ See Ruderman, *Jewish Thought*, 157–58.

¹⁷⁹ Josef Solomon Delmedigo praised his knowledge of mathematics. See Benjamin C. I. Ravid, “Biblical Exegesis à la Mercantilism and Raison d'État in Seventeenth-Century Venice: The *Discorso* of Simone Luzzatto,” in *Bringing the Hidden to Light: The Process of Interpretation. Studies in Honor of Stephen A. Geller*, ed. Kathryn F. Kravitz and Diane M. Sharon (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2007), 169.

¹⁸⁰ Simone Luzzatto, “Letter,” in Jacob ben Elchanan Heilbronn, ed., *Naḥalat Ya'aqov* (Padova: Gasparo Crivellari, 1622), 41v–42r (my translation).

Understanding the nature and subject of these “other studies” is one of the most demanding tasks for scholars who want to understand Luzzatto’s thought. The present essay has perhaps shed some more light on his studies and thought.

He was a rabbi and at the same time a philosopher, a Pyrrhonian sceptic as far as the challenge to authority was concerned and a probabilist as far as human action and politics were concerned. Much has been written about the possibility that he was a fideist whose Maimonidean vision involving the intervention of Providence still remained intact.¹⁸¹ I am personally inclined to consider him nearer to those early modern probabilists such as Juan Caramuel. He belonged to a religious order, but at the same time he was a probabilist, convinced as he was that God, understood as the source and origin of the laws that governed humankind, remained unattainable. Yet the criterion of the probable implemented by the experience of ancient and contemporary human affairs allows these laws to be ceaselessly re-elaborated.¹⁸² I think that this aspect is crucial and allows us to better understand Luzzatto’s activity as a rabbi and his philosophical thought. This remark also enhances and brings to the fore the coherence that links together the verdict about Daniel’s prophecy related by Morosini, the probable portrait of the Jewish people and its absolution as a collective, and the suspension of judgment connected with a resort to the probable as a guiding star in human life evoked in the *Socrates*.

Two last aspects deserve to be mentioned. The first is Luzzatto’s discreet “flirting” with atomistic theories,¹⁸³ confirmed by his mention of Democritus in the above-mentioned strategic point of the *Discourse* and his references to Machiavelli, who was one of the earliest transcribers of Lucretius’s *De rerum natura* and whose works were known both by Montaigne and Bacon. To Democritus/Machiavelli/Montaigne, Luzzatto is indebted for his ideas about chance, fortune, and necessity.¹⁸⁴

The second and last aspect deserving to be mentioned is the episode related by René Pintard in his renowned study *Le libertinage érudit*, where he reports that Charles de Valliquerville, who came to Venice in 1646, went to visit the most learned rabbis of the time. Among them, there was “Rabbi Simon Luzzati.”¹⁸⁵ Valli-

181 See the discussion of Baer’s fideist interpretation of Luzzatto in Veltri, “Identity of Essentiality,” 7–8; Ruderman, *Jewish Thought*, 183.

182 Pastine, *Juan Caramuel*, 13–14.

183 He would not be the only Jewish intellectual to be interested in atomistic philosophy: see, for example, Tzvi Langermann, “Yosef Shlomo Delmedigo’s Engagement with Atomism: Some Further Explorations into a Knotty Problem,” in *Jewish Culture in Early Modern Europe. Essays in Honor of David B. Ruderman*, ed. Richard I. Cohen, Natalie B. Dohrmann, Adam Shear, and Elchanan Reiner (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2014), 124–33.

184 Alison Brown, “Lucretius and the Epicureans in the Social and Political Context of Renaissance Florence,” *I Tatti Studies* 9 (2001): 11–62; *id.*, *The Return of Lucretius to Renaissance Florence* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), especially 68–70 and annexed bibliography; Stephen Greenblatt, *The Swerve: How the Renaissance Began* (London: Vintage, 2012).

185 René Pintard, *Le libertinage érudit dans la première moitié du XVIIe siècle* (Geneva: Editions Slatkine, 2000 [1943]), 370. Unfortunately, in this edition the author does not give further information about his source.

quierville was a complicated personality. Pintard describes him as a *frondeur*, a libertine with a penchant for conspiracies, who nonetheless used to follow the principles of Pyrrhonian prudence.¹⁸⁶ Furthermore, indulging the fashion of the time, he had some knowledge of Hebrew and the Kabbalah and was acquainted with Pythagorean doctrines.¹⁸⁷ Until now, the issues Valliquierville and Luzzatto may have discussed remain unclear; however what has recently been made clear are the relationships and cultural interchanges that took place in the ghetto between Christian intellectuals and eventually libertines and the admiration that Valliquierville had for Luzzatto.¹⁸⁸

Perhaps not all has been said and done about Luzzatto, not yet. I would suggest that his interest in atomism and his relationship with libertines and members of the *Accademia degli Incogniti* are potential topics for further research.

186 See *ibid.*, 369–71.

187 In the wake of Pintard's research, other scholars of Jewish studies mentioned the encounter, arguing that Valliquierville wanted some lessons about the Kabbalah. See François Secret, *I Cabalisti Cristiani del Rinascimento*, trans. PierLuigi Zoccatelli (Rome: Arkeois, 2001 [1964]), 130. Gershom Scholem suggested a less generous interpretation, since he considered Valliquierville a Christian kabbalist *tout court*, who was taught by Simone Luzzatto. See Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalistes chrétiens* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1975), 82. The episode is mentioned again in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* without any reference to the Kabbalah. It is merely stated that Luzzatto agreed to give some lessons to the French mystic Valliquierville. See Cecil Roth, "Simone Luzzatto," *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 1st ed., 11:557, and *id.* and David Derovan, "Simone Luzzatto," *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., 13:287. More recently, see Anna Lissa, "La zooantropologia scettica," 94.

188 See Giuseppe Veltri and Evelien Chayes, *Oltre le mura del Ghetto. Accademie, scetticismo e tolleranza nella Venezia Barocca* (Palermo: New Digital Press, 2016) 121–46.