

Internal Workshop

8–9 November 2023

Venue

Maimonides Centre
Jungiusstraße 11c
Seminar Room C319

PROGRAMME

Wednesday 8 November 2023

09:30–09:40	Introduction <i>Giuseppe Veltri and Stephan Schmid</i>
	<i>Chair: Stephan Schmid</i>
09:40–10:20	Defining (Jewish) Scepticism <i>Giuseppe Veltri</i>
10:20–11:00	A Contended “Sceptic”. In Search of Carneades among his Followers <i>Chiara Rover</i>
11:00–11:20	Coffee Break (Room C315)
	<i>Chair: Giuseppe Veltri</i>
11:20–12:00	Scepticism and Skills in Scholastic Philosophy (1250-1650) <i>Peter Hartman</i>
12:00–12:40	Spinoza and the Problem of Falsity <i>Stephan Schmid</i>
12:40–13:30	Lunch Break (Room C315)*
	<i>Chair: Beniamino Fortis</i>
13:30–14:10	“Philosophische Täuschung”: The Ground Concept of S. Maimon’s Critical Scepticism <i>Maria Caterina Marinelli</i>
14:10–14:50	The Art and Science of Philosophising: Jewish Modern and Pre-Modern Sources of Leo Strauss’ Scepticism <i>Chiara Adorisio</i>
18:30	Dinner (Restaurant ‘Il Siciliano’ - Johannes-Brahms-Platz 11 - 20355 Hamburg)

Thursday 9 November 2023

Chair: Chiara Rover

09:45–10:25 **An unknown source of scepticism? The influence of Pierre Bayle's Dictionnaire historique et critique (1697) on Moses Mendelssohn's Philosophische Gespräche (1755) and its religious implications**
Guillem Sales Vilalta

10:25–11:05 **The Place and Role of Scepticism in Mendelssohn's Aesthetics**
Anaïs Delambre

11:05–11:25 Coffee Break (Room C315)

Chair: Beniamino Fortis

11:25–12:05 **Sceptical Foundations in Walter Benjamin's Theory of Experience, Language and Literature**
Caterina Diotto

12:05–12:45 **The Dark Ground and the Absent God: Negative Theodicy in Jacob and Susan Taubes**
Kirill Chepurin

12:45–13:30 Lunch Break (Room C315)*

* MCAS will offer a lunch buffet (vegetarian/vegan) on both days and invite you to dinner on Wednesday evening.*

Defining (Jewish) Scepticism

Giuseppe Veltri

As in every other sector of philosophy and cultural history, a sceptical approach usually consists of dismantling every definition of a thing. Hence, the main question is whether the contradiction in the title of “defining scepticism” does not lead to infinite questioning; namely, from the platitude “scepticism is a sceptical attitude” to the tragic philosophical sentence that since nothing is definable, scepticism is also undefinable. Are we then ending with the perfectly staged “cognitive suicide” of the philosopher?

My enquiry addresses some definitions of scepticism, sceptics, and sceptical vectors in the history of philosophy, focusing especially but not exclusively on Jewish sources. I will begin with Philo of Alexandria and his direct and indirect definitions of scepticism, continue with Sextus Empiricus and Saadia Gaon, and end with a look at the modern definitions that have influenced and still influence the view on this topic. The choice of the historical study area and of the authors involved in it is, of course, arbitrary. A painstakingly illustrative examination of all the possible definitions of scepticism is neither intended nor wanted, nor even useful. The analysis will show that a definition is either historical or dialectical, either based on the history of the (self)-definition of what we call “scepticism” or on building or destroying the elements of it.

A Contended “Sceptic”: In Search of Carneades among His Followers

Chiara Rover

The most renowned debate that occurred within the Academy was sparked by Antiochus of Ascalon’s shift from the New Academy to the “Old” Academy (*vetus Academia*, see esp. Cic. *Varro* 4.13). However, this debate encompasses a multitude of internal, often intricate sceptical disputes that can be quite challenging to fully grasp. In this context, the apparently minor disagreement among Carneades’s followers regarding whether the wise individual should provide their assent and formulate opinions becomes particularly intriguing. Notably, all those engaged in this debate, including Metrodorus of Stratonicea, Clitomachus, Philo of Larissa, Carneades the son of Polemarchus, and other relatively obscure Academics (see Phld. *Index Acad.*, *PHerc.* 1021, cols. XXII–XXVI, XXX–XXXIII Dorandi), claimed to have strong reasons to support their distinct (and incommensurable) interpretations of the Master’s “teachings.”

In my presentation, I aim to address this dispute with a dual purpose: (i) to clarify how the principles of ἐποχή περὶ πάντων (the universal suspension of assent) and ἀκαταληψία (the inapprehensibility of all things) advocated by Arcesilaus intersect in this debate and what might be at stake, and (ii) to delve into the various interpretations of Carneades to determine whether it is possible to identify the historical one. Did the historical Carneades consider πιθανότης/*probabilitas* as a form of “qualified” truth, a truth ὡς ἐπὶ τὸ πολὺ (“for the most part”), as suggested by Sextus Empiricus (*M* 7.175)? Or, conversely, did he rule out the possibility of πιθανότης ever *touching* the truth? As a result, did he modify (and moderate) the Stoic definition of assent (συγκατάθεσις), or did he develop a form of *probatio/adprobatio* whose scope was fundamentally different from that of the Stoic συγκατάθεσις?

Scepticism and Skills in Scholastic Philosophy (1250–1650)

Peter Hartman

Until recently, the general consensus was that scholastic philosophers were not worried about scepticism. Thanks to recent work, we now know that this is quite wrong and that there were several different sceptical arguments that developed during the scholastic period, especially after Scotus, and even more recent research has focused on the scholastic philosophers' responses to such sceptical arguments. Building on this research, my project—part of a broader book project on moral and cognitive abilities in scholastic philosophy (1250–1650), roughly from Aquinas to Suárez—explores two cases where philosophers took the sceptical challenge seriously, but rather than defusing it, used it to constrain their theorising in specific domains. In particular, I will explore the role played by the sceptical argument from divine omnipotence in debates about (i) the ontological status of mental acts (whether such acts are anything more than relations) on the one hand and (ii) the nature of justification and the role of epistemic skills in knowledge acquisition on the other.

Spinoza and the Problem of Falsity

Stephan Schmid

While the sceptic typically denies that we can have knowledge, Spinoza – presumably the most radical anti-sceptic of the 17th century – seems to face exactly the opposite problem, that is, accounting for how we can *fail* to have knowledge or true ideas in general. The main difficulty lies in the fact that Spinoza conceives of ideas as identical with what they are about. And if one also considers that, for Spinoza, “he who has a true idea at the same time knows that he has a true idea” (*Ethics* 2p43), it is particularly hard to see how a disagreement between ideas and their objects can ever occur – consequently preventing truth and the formation of knowledge.

In this talk, I will briefly explain how the problem of falsity arises for Spinoza and sketch out how I think he intended to solve it.

“Philosophische Täuschung”: The Fundamental Concept of S. Maimon’s Critical Scepticism

Maria Caterina Marinelli

This research aims to analyse the concept of “Täuschung” in S. Maimon’s works, with the overarching goal of achieving two key outcomes. First, it seeks to delineate Maimon’s primary sceptical tool against the unproven grounds of Kant’s transcendental philosophy, as well as any form of dogmatic assumption. Second, it endeavours to illuminate Maimon’s distinctive and controversial intention to combine his sceptical doubt with an endorsement of Kant’s critical project, often referred to as “critical scepticism.” As this study will reveal, the concept of “Täuschung” elucidates the origins of the necessary illusion of the certainty of these foundations, while also defining the extent to which critical philosophy can be developed.

Although the notion of “Täuschung” is present in all of Maimon’s major essays and articles, it has yet to receive a comprehensive, in-depth examination that would clarify its role within his entire philosophical framework. Reconstructing the meaning of this concept not only explains the viability of Maimon’s project, which seeks to harmonise scepticism in its broader sense with critical philosophy within a unified system, but also defines his most formidable sceptical strategy against any uncertain argumentation. This strategy maintains its relevance beyond the limits of Maimon’s own time.

The Art and Science of Philosophising: Jewish Modern and Pre-Modern Sources of Leo Strauss's Scepticism

Chiara Adorisio

Thanks to new discoveries in physics and quantum mechanics, we know that philosophy and physics are equally obligated to tend to the so-called truth, to the knowledge or comprehension of what we call "reality" (even though we are aware that this knowledge can be ever-changing and never complete). For physicists, as for philosophers, a certain sceptical attitude towards reality seems to be the only method that will ever enable us to rethink reality and to change the language in which we speak of it. Leo Strauss (1899–1973)—one of the most important German-Jewish philosophers of the epoch of the (so-called crisis of the) Weimar Republic—described scientific scepticism as the basis of philosophy, as a rigorous science, and as a method that had already been used by the philosophers of the past, from antiquity to medieval and early modern times.

Central to the topic of this project is a complete examination of scepticism in Strauss's work. To achieve this, it will systematically examine and reconstruct all the modern, pre-modern, and ancient influences that shaped his scepticism, thereby particularly considering his Jewish sources, which are generally the most neglected by Strauss scholars. This project intends to reconstruct Strauss's scepticism in its various aspects both as a method of knowledge and a way of life.

An Unknown Source of Scepticism? The Influence of Pierre Bayle's *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (1697) on Moses Mendelssohn's *Philosophische Gespräche* (1755) and Its Religious Implications

Guillem Sales Vilalta

The goal of this project is to argue (i) that Moses Mendelssohn's *Philosophische Gespräche* (1755) are driven by a sceptical attitude that is indebted to Pierre Bayle's *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (1697), and (ii) that such a sceptical attitude can be seen as a rhetorical strategy for facing religious oppression. I am currently about to finish the project's first and most basic article, which aims to show Bayle's presence in and relevance for Mendelssohn's *Gespräche*. In connection to the project's aforementioned goals, I will argue for the three following theses: (i) that Mendelssohn's *Philosophische Gespräche* offer a rehabilitation of Spinoza's philosophy in explicit opposition to the stigmatisation that he suffered at the time; (ii) that the entry for "Rorarius" in Bayle's *Dictionnaire* is a crucial source for Mendelssohn's critical strategy to rehabilitate Spinoza; and (iii) that by making recourse to Bayle's sceptical remarks, Mendelssohn establishes a hitherto unexplored link between two philosophical figures belonging to religious minorities oppressed in their time.

The Place and Role of Scepticism in Mendelssohn's Aesthetics

Anaïs Delambre

This research aims to shed light on the contribution of Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786) to German aesthetics, in this case through his conception of beauty, as it emphasises his original role as a Jewish philosopher doing German philosophy. More precisely, Mendelssohn's position on beauty can be studied and understood as an articulation between rationalism and scepticism. In other words, without being a sceptic himself, Mendelssohn adopts a sceptical approach: by overturning sensualism, he denies reason's ability to fully access beauty.

I have therefore organised my research into two parts. The first part is devoted to understanding and defining Mendelssohn's scepticism, or rather what might be called his sceptical strategy. This strategy aims to define the limit of rational knowledge by recognising the inability of reason to ensure certainty about certain objects in favour of other faculties (sensibility and/or approval). Then, in the second part, I will examine the concept of beauty to see if and how Mendelssohn applies a sceptical strategy that aims to redefine the scope of reason in the field of aesthetics. This will also be a matter of studying the faculty of approval (*Billigungsvermögen*), which gains the autonomy to become a third faculty alongside understanding and sensibility, to find out once again whether Mendelssohn is using a sceptical strategy to investigate the epistemological implications of his aesthetics.

Sceptical Foundations in Walter Benjamin's Theory of Experience, Language, and Literature

Caterina Diotto

The concept of experience (*Erfahrung*) was one of the first theoretical efforts made by the young Walter Benjamin during his years of cultural activism in the German Youth Movement. In 1913, he started his reflections with a Platonic distinction between "experience" and the ideal dimension, which is "grounded within itself": "the true, the good, the beautiful" are "inexperienceable." His position softened over time, and the concept of *Unerfahrbare* transformed into *Ausdruckslose*, shifting the problem from the denial of experience *in toto* to the connection between the (im)possibility of expressing experience and communication, language, and literature. How one can maintain an "authentic" connection becomes one of the most fertile points of his philosophical development.

The main hypothesis of this study is that scepticism—the impossibility of knowledge—lies at the core of Benjamin's reflections, aiming to analyse how the negation of the possibility of generating knowledge directly from experience allows the creation of a different theoretical structure based on the expression of indirect, oblique access to the core of reality. My second hypothesis is that this dialectic finds its structure thanks to the intensive exchange between Benjamin and the Jewish cultural *milieu* from 1913 on.

The Dark Ground and the Absent God: Negative Theodicy in Jacob and Susan Taubes

Kirill Chepurin

This presentation will introduce my project at MCAS, which seeks to advance a philosophical reconstruction and genealogy of the concept of "negative theodicy" through Jacob and Susan Taubes. It brings together their respective critiques of theodicy from the early 1950s onwards, arguing that, although they often have divergent inspirations, a shared negative and sceptical core can be recognised, which allows talking about a "negative theodicy" as a concept that is common to both. Jacob and Susan Taubes rethink theodicy as generating a sceptical emphasis on questions over answers and hesitation and darkness over certainty and light, and also a sceptical strategy of questioning and resisting the imposition of truth, order, or authority from above. In the first part of my presentation, I will outline the results of my research into the notion of the "dark ground" of theodicy in Jacob Taubes. In the second part, I will focus on my ongoing reading of Susan Taubes's philosophical and literary texts as uniquely refracting the conceptual nexus of theodicy, Gnosticism, and scepticism from a twentieth-century perspective.