

Internal Workshop

20–21 February 2024

Venue

Maimonides Centre
Jungiusstraße 11c
Seminar Room C319

PROGRAMME

Tuesday 20 February 2024

09:30–09:40	INTRODUCTION <i>Chiara Rover</i>
	<i>Chair: Chiara Rover</i>
09:40–10:20	Scepticism and Historicism: The <i>Wissenschaft des Judentums</i> <i>Susannah Heschel</i>
10:20–11:00	The Complexity of Dialogue: Moses Mendelssohn's Relation to Pierre Bayle and Immanuel Kant <i>Guillem Sales Vilalta</i>
11:00–11:20	Coffee Break (Room C315)
	<i>Chair: Stephan Schmid</i>
11:20–12:00	Scepticism and Skills in Scholastic Philosophy (1250-1650) <i>Peter Hartman</i>
12:00–12:40	Scepticism of Non-Sceptics: A Puzzling Problem <i>Carlos Levy</i>
12:40–13:30	Lunch Break (Room C315)*
	<i>Chair: Beniamino Fortis</i>
13:30–14:10	The Limits of Knowledge: Salomon Maimon's Different Meanings of Synthesis <i>Maria Caterina Marinelli</i>
14:10–14:50	New Perspectives on Strauss's Scholarship on Jewish and Arabic Premodern Philosophy <i>Chiara Adorisio</i>
18:30	Dinner (Ristorante 'Michelangelo' – Holstenwall 13 – 20355 Hamburg)

Wednesday 21 February 2024

Chair: Stephan Schmid

09:30–10:10 **Sceptical Foundations in Walter Benjamin's Theory of Experience, Language, and Literature**
Caterina Diotto

10:10–10:50 **The Dark Ground and the Rejection of Theodicy in Susan Taubes's *Lament for Julia***
Kirill Chepurin

10:50–11:10 Coffee Break (Room C315)

Chair: Giuseppe Veltri

11:10–11:50 **Scepticism in *Halakhah*: Searching for Reasons of the *Mitzvot* and *Halakhot***
Yair Lorberbaum

11:50 **CONCLUSION**
Giuseppe Veltri

Lunch Break (Room C315)*

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

ABSTRACTS

Scepticism and Historicism: The *Wissenschaft des Judentums*

Susannah Heschel

While scepticism denotes a particular movement within philosophy, its popular meaning in English carries a highly negative connotation—to wit, the dictionary synonyms. Scepticism marked the European academy's reception of nineteenth-century Jewish historiography. Jewish scholars such as Geiger, Graetz, Zunz, and Steinschneider, among others, were not at all sceptical about their claims that rabbinic texts were crucial for understanding the origins of Christianity and Islam. For them, Judaism is best defined not through religious practice or theological claims, but as a world-historical principle that created Western civilisation. Contrary to Scholem, Jewish scholarship was widely read by Christian scholars, cited in their books, and reviewed in their journals. Geiger's study of the Qur'an was hailed in Europe as a major breakthrough thanks to its demonstration of parallels between passages in the Qur'an and rabbinic literature. Yet there was resistance to the broader historical conclusions drawn from those parallels: that Christianity and Islam were not original, but rather derived from Judaism. The validity of historicism was not challenged, but there was nonetheless scepticism—not outright rejection, but distrust, suspicion, and cynicism—towards the broader conclusion regarding Judaism's foundational position for the West.

The Complexity of Dialogue: Moses Mendelssohn's Relation to Pierre Bayle and Immanuel Kant

Guillem Sales Vilalta

My goal for this internal workshop is to reflect on the two research lines that I have undertaken so far as a fellow of the Maimonides Centre. The first, on the philosophical links between Mendelssohn and Bayle traceable in Mendelssohn's early works, resulted in the article "Scepticism against Intolerance? Moses Mendelssohn and Pierre Bayle's 'Dialogue' on Spinoza in Mendelssohn's *Philosophische Gespräche* (1755)" (published in *Religions*, 15, no. 1); the second, on Kant's seemingly improper comprehension of Mendelssohn, is developed in the article "The Self as the Ultimate Substrate of Thought: Moses Mendelssohn and Immanuel Kant" (forthcoming in: *Aulestia*, M. 2004. Immanuel Kant: miradas contemporáneas sobre su filosofía. Universidad Central de Ecuador). I will present the results of these papers and connect them with the last two articles that I plan to write and publish during my remaining postdoctoral studies at the Maimonides Centre, one for each of the aforementioned research lines.

Scepticism and Skills in Scholastic Philosophy (1250–1650)

Peter Hartman

Until recently, there was a general consensus 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 this period, especially after Scotus, and even more recent research has focused on 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, they used it to constrain their theorising in specific domains. In particular, it explores the role that sceptical argument from divine omnipotence played in debates about (1) the ontological status of mental acts (whether such acts are anything more than relations), on the one hand, and (2) the nature of justification and the role of epistemic skills in knowledge acquisition, on the other.

Scepticism of Non-Sceptics: A Puzzling Problem

Carlos Levy

Scepticism would be a much less interesting concept if, alongside the official sceptics—in other words, those of the Neopyrrhonian scepticism elaborated by Aenesidemus—there were no thinkers whose works included passages or allusions that were sceptical or close to scepticism. In some cases, even the struggle against scepticism can be a means of acquiring a deeper knowledge of the concept. The most famous is that of Descartes, who thought that the discovery of the *cogito* could be the end of scepticism. Before him, Augustine had tried to dispose of Academic “scepticism,” a word he never used, though he probably knew something about Neopyrrhonism thanks to his master Ambrose. Moreover, in antiquity itself, there was a huge doxographical effort, at least in the New Academy, to create a genealogy of the Academic suspension of assent (*epochè*) by considering as sceptics those thinkers in whom there were only some traces of the philosophy of doubt. The most impressive sceptical doxography of this kind is the one we find in Cicero’s *Lucullus*.

The main purpose of this research project will be the evaluation of the exact role of non-sceptics in the history of scepticism. The modality of their influence is manifold: opposition, the use of sceptics by non-sceptics, the use of non-sceptics by sceptics, conscious or incidental contradictions, and so on.

The Limits of Knowledge: Salomon Maimon’s Different Meanings of Synthesis

Maria Caterina Marinelli

Maimon’s philosophical standpoint proves challenging to grasp and sustain. Beyond merely delineating the boundaries of knowledge more extensively than Kant, he advocates for a seemingly counter-intuitive and radical position: he asserts that real knowledge is confined to the realm of mathematics, dismissing everything else, including natural sciences and physics, as “pseudo-knowledge.” This stance raises several inquiries: How does the inherent sceptical doubt about knowledge avoid devolving into dogmatism? Is Maimon proposing a form of new Platonism, affirming that only mathematical objects exist? Conversely, is this simply scepticism about empirical reality?

In my presentation, I aim to show that Maimon’s scepticism towards any form of knowledge outside mathematics is not inconsistent, but rather responds to a specific question: the conditions for the validity of science. I will posit that the resolution of this issue lies in comprehending the significance of the different meanings of his concept of synthesis.

New Perspectives on Strauss's Scholarship on Jewish and Arabic Premodern Philosophy

Chiara Adorisio

Leo Strauss has been considered as a philosopher who, despite making great use of texts of medieval Arabic and Jewish philosophy, thereby re-evaluating classical political philosophy just as Maimonides did for his Arabic sources, in doing so manipulated this same philosophical tradition in an unsound way. His interpretations have been criticised as not being philologically or historically founded. Today, thanks to new acquisitions and sources, these critiques of Strauss's reading of premodern Arabic and Jewish philosophical rationalism can be contradicted. Strauss did know both Arabic and Hebrew; he could read the original manuscripts, as his lifelong friend and Arabist Paul Kraus did, and he was also very familiar with the nineteenth-century Orientalists and scholars of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*' critical and philological studies of Arabic medieval philosophers. Recognising this fact is the first important step in an objective re-evaluation of Strauss's scholarship and for understanding his concept of philosophy and his scepticism alike.

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

Caterina Diotto

The concept of experience (*Erfahrung*) was one of the focal points of the young Walter Benjamin's first theoretical efforts 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 dimension of the ideal, which is "grounded within itself": "the true, the good, the beautiful" are "inexperienceable." His position softens over time, and the concept of *unerfahrbare* is 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. The main hypothesis of this study is that scepticism lies at the core of Benjamin's reflections and theories in the years 1913 to 1919. However, what kind of scepticism? In this second internal workshop, I will consider different authors who shaped the history of this approach in order to compare them to Benjamin's text.

The Dark Ground and the Rejection of Theodicy in Susan Taubes's *Lament for Julia*

Kirill Chepurin

This presentation will introduce my article on the rejection of theodicy in Susan Taubes's philosophical and literary works, which is a work in progress. I will begin by sketching the overall framework of my ongoing MCAS project, entitled "The Dark Ground and the Absent God: Negative Theodicy in Jacob and Susan Taubes," particularly highlighting Jacob Taubes's understanding of theodicy as legitimating the imposition of divine world order on the dark chaotic ground preceding creation. I will then turn to Susan Taubes's critique of Simone Weil's "negative theodicy" as a critique of the redemption narrative that in Taubes's view, Weil constructs in her philosophical-theological justification and even divinisation of suffering. Finally, I will outline my reading of Susan Taubes's novella *Lament for Julia* as staging, in its very form, a refusal of any redemption narrative or theodical conciliation in a world devoid of God and a mystical dwelling with the dark ground that cannot be narrated in worldly terms.

Scepticism in *Halakah*: Searching for Reasons for the *Mitzvot* and *Halakhot*

Yair Lorberbaum

This research proposal is for a topic within scepticism in halakah. Scepticism is connected to various issues in jurisprudence in general and in halakah in particular. The focus of this project will be scepticism about the possibility of discovering the reasons for the commandments. This form of scepticism does not appear in the legal and halakic discourse in biblical, Second Temple, and talmudic literature, yet it is expressed by halakists and thinkers from the late Middle Ages on. It should be emphasised that the need to decipher the reasons for the commandments is salient, not only for intellectual purposes, but also for religious purposes, as well as for the practical application of halakah. A recently published article differentiates between four types of “reservations” about the pretence of searching for the reasons for the commandments: “halakic religiosity of mystery and transcendence,” “halakic religiosity of obedience and servitude,” “theistic voluntarism,” and “jurisprudence of rules.” Some of these reservations are connected to scepticism about the human ability to discover the reasons for divine laws. This project aims to study the features of the scepticism that underlies these reservations and to understand their impact on halakic life and discourse. It will focus on four outstanding halakists: Maimonides, R. Shlomo b. Adret, R. Yosef Karo, and R. Moshe Sofer.