

Workshop

Sceptical Trends in the European Universities of the Early Modern Period

14–15 August 2023



Abstract

While René Descartes and Michel de Montaigne, who are often associated with early modern scepticism, both worked outside of an institutional context, scepticism was a prevalent theme in European universities during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. From Iberian Jesuits to Parisian Thomists and secular professors in Italy, scholars engaged with scepticism in various ways, including discussions on certitude in sense perception and reflections on religious fideism, as well as sceptical attitudes inherent in the complex reception dynamics of the medieval intellectual heritage and the Aristotelian sciences. This workshop will delve into these issues with presentations on the sixteenth-century reception of Sextus Empiricus, sceptical trends in commentaries on the *Summa Theologica* and in the *Commentarii conimbricenses*, and theories of intelligible species as a *locus* of expressing sceptical tendencies. Through these individual talks and ensuing discussions, we aim to gain new and insightful perspectives on the intricate connection between the intellectual pursuits of early modern universities and the long-standing tradition of European scepticism.

Convenor

- Micheal Engel (Universität Hamburg)

Participants

- Michael Della Rocca (Yale University)
- Antonella Del Prete (Università di Torino)
- Amos Edelheit (Maynooth University)
- Daniel Heider (University of South Bohemia)
- Simona Langella (Università di Genova)
- Hélène Leblanc (UCLouvain)
- Zita Tóth (King's College London)

Funded by

Monday, 14 August 2023

Welcoming Remarks

09:45 **Giuseppe Veltri**, *Head of the Maimonides Centre for Advanced Studies*

Session I

Chair **Ilaria Briata** (*Universität Hamburg*)

10:00 **Giovanni Cottunio and the Subject Matter of Natural Philosophy: A Case of Implicit Sceptical Tendencies?**
Michael Engel (*Universität Hamburg*)

11:00 *COFFEE BREAK*

11:30 **Perceptual Error in Second Scholasticism**
Daniel Heider (*University of South Bohemia*)

12:30 *LUNCH BREAK*

Session II

Chair **Ran Segev** (*Universität Hamburg*)

13:30 **Some Background to Suárez's Scepticism about the Argument for an Unmoved Mover**
Zita Tóth (*King's College London*)

14:30 *COFFEE BREAK*

15:00 **Limiti del sapere teologico nei commentari alla Summa Theologiae di Tommaso d'Aquino nelle università spagnole del XVI secolo: fra fideismo e scetticismo** [In Italian, English version will be circulated in advance]
Simona Langella (*Università di Genova*)

19:00 *DINNER*

Tuesday, 15 August 2023

Session I

- Chair* *Ze'ev Strauss (Universität Hamburg)*
- 10:00 **Sceptics in Coimbra – Mapping References to Scepticism in Early Modern Scholastic Logic**
Hélène Leblanc (UCLouvain)
- 11:00 *COFFEE BREAK*
- 11:30 **Scholastics Against Aristotle? Scepticism and Other Things We Can Learn from Gianfrancesco Pico**
Amos Edelheit (Maynooth University)
- 12:30 *LUNCH BREAK*

Session II

- Chair* *Stephan Schmid (Universität Hamburg)*
- 13:30 **A Problematic Balance: Faith, Reason and Scepticism in Gijsbert Voetius (1589-1676)**
Antonella Del Prete (Università di Torino)
- 14:30 *COFFEE BREAK*
- 15:00 **Spinoza's Anti-Dualism as the Source of His Anti-Scepticism and His Scepticism**
Michael Della Rocca (Yale University)

Venue

Universität Hamburg
Maimonides Centre for Advanced Studies (MCAS)
Jungiusstraße 11c | 20355 Hamburg
3rd Floor, Room C319

Abstracts

Michael Engel

Giovanni Cottunio and the Subject Matter of Natural Philosophy: A Case of Implicit Sceptical Tendencies?

My talk will concentrate on the 17th c. Paduan philosopher Giovanni Cottunio (d. 1658). I will examine one quaestio in particular, found in his commentary on Aristotle's *Physics* and dedicated to the subject matter of natural philosophy. I wish to claim that this quaestio expresses an (implicit) sceptical methodology employed by Cottunio, targeting the usefulness of terminological distinctions within the realm of natural philosophy. I also argue that this may be a 'softer' version of the more pronounced sceptical attitudes expressed by early modern thinkers concerning the medieval Aristotelian terminological heritage.

Daniel Heider

Perceptual Error in Second Scholasticism

In several of his treatises, Aristotle seems to endorse a barely plausible claim according to which one can never err in the perception of proper sensible objects. He says that sight cannot go wrong in the apprehension of a colour, the sense of hearing cannot be mistaken in the perception of a sound, and so on. As the Stagirite suggests, in this feature, the apprehension of special perceptibles differs from the perception of common and incidental perceptibles. While sight cannot go wrong in the apprehension of a colour, it is often mistaken about the size, shape, and motion or rest of a coloured object, or (even more frequently) about whether a white object is Peter or Paul. Clearly, this general statement is at odds with our everyday experience. When we see the colours of the rainbow, we do not see real colours, but apparent ones; when we are sick, the sweet food on our tongue tastes bitter, and so on. Assuming that Aristotle cannot be taken as endorsing the impossibility of this perceptual error tout court, what does he mean by his claim? In order to make his statement plausible, how can the impossibility of sensory deception be qualified? What are the conditions under which this assertion might be true? And how should we understand the special sensibles mentioned in this claim: Should they be construed only according to their common features (colour as such, sound as such), or according to their particular traits (this kind of colour, this kind of sound)? And given that deception exists about the proper sensibles construed as particulars of a certain kind, how do we arrive at the perception of these (nonexistent) objects? Do we sense them through their own species, or through the likeness of real objects? In other words, do we see the apparent colour of a rainbow through the species of real colours, or through the likeness of light? And, as a matter of fact, why are we more prone to error when perceiving the common sensibles rather than when apprehending the special perceptibles? In my talk, I will focus on some answers to these questions as formulated by some Second Scholastics who discuss these sceptical issues in more detail than other contemporaries. My aim is to show how these questions motivated by the implausible (and unclear) formulations in Aristotle's *De anima* are treated by the following figures: two Jesuits—namely, Francisco de Toledo (1532–1596) and Antonio Rubio (1548–1615)—the Thomist John Poinset (1589–1644), and the Scotistic author pairing of Bartolomeo Mastri (1602–1673) and Bonaventura Belluto (1600–1676).

Zita Tóth

Some Background to Suárez's Scepticism about the Argument for an Unmoved Mover

As is relatively well known, when Suárez demonstrates the existence of God in the *Metaphysical Disputations*, he criticises Aquinas's first way on two grounds: first, that it rests on the false metaphysical principle of *omne quod movetur ab alio movetur*, and second, that even if this principle were true, it could not establish the intended conclusion. Suárez supports the first criticism by referring to some popular examples, such as the cooling of water or the falling stone, while he supports the second by claiming that an argument from physical change could never go beyond the physical and establish an immaterial first mover. In this paper, I would like to examine both of these criticisms more closely, especially some of their later medieval background. As it will emerge, Suárez's first criticism only stands if we understand the principle in question in a particular way, which is arguably not the way in which Aquinas would have understood it. It will be illuminating to pay attention to the way in which authors dealt with the famous problem of the reduction of water in this respect. Moreover, the second criticism stands only if one assumes a particular relationship between efficient and final causes, which again, is arguably not the way in which Aquinas thought of this relationship. As I will argue, the explanatory force of the Unmoved Mover underwent a remarkable change in the period under consideration.

Hélène Leblanc

Sceptics in Coimbra – Mapping References to Scepticism in Early-Modern Scholastic Logic

The *Commentarii conimbricenses* (1592–1606) have earned a dual reputation. On the one hand, this famous Jesuit manual has been described as having been influenced by Renaissance Humanism, with a wide range of references to ancient authors. On the other, it is one of the most widespread early modern Scholastic commentaries: the doctrine it contains is a canon for a Scholasticism in revival which comes back to an orthodox Aristotelianism, interpreted according to medieval authorities (Thomas Aquinas, in the first instance). In this context, my presentation will examine the following question: What is the nature of the references to scepticism in the *Commentarii conimbricenses*? In other words, I propose to map the references to both ancient and early modern authors who can be related to sceptical philosophy in order to observe which are mere historiographical references whose status is mainly cosmetic and which are used for serious philosophical purposes. For the sake of feasibility, I will limit this mapping of sceptical references to the *Logic of the Cursus Conimbricensis* (Sebastião do Couto's *Dialectica*, 1606); namely, the last volume published, which is incidentally also the first part studied by every student.

Amos Edelheit

Scholastics Against Aristotle? Scepticism and Other Things We Can Learn from Gianfrancesco Pico

Can we distinguish between Scholastic philosophy and Aristotle? In this paper, I will focus on Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola's 1520 *Examen Vanitatis*, mainly book 4, chapters 9 and 10, where we find a discussion of the criticisms of Aristotle on various issues made by different Church Fathers and Scholastic masters. The basic question I want to raise is: Can Scholastic philosophy, with its theological and Christian orientation, be "saved" from Gianfrancesco's

criticism, which was deeply inspired by Sextus Empiricus and ancient scepticism on the one hand and by Savonarola on the other?

Antonella Del Prete

A Problematic Balance: Faith, Reason and Scepticism in Gijsbert Voetius (1589-1676)

In addressing the issue of the interplay between faith, scepticism, and rational optimism in the Reformed Netherlands during the seventeenth century, we should consider not only specific theological and dogmatic factors, but also the diversity of the Dutch university scene. On the one hand, therefore, we find a constant effort on the part of Orthodox theologians to respond to challenges coming from other confessions; namely, from Catholic apologetics, but also from the Protestant world (specifically Remonstrants and Socinians) and even from the Reformed context. On the other hand, although they share a common educational structure, based on a basic teaching of philosophy that was preparatory to accessing the higher faculties (medicine, law, and theology), they nevertheless pursued different cultural policies that largely reflect the choices of the elites governing the different provinces. We thus find different shades of Ramism and Aristotelianism, but also of Cartesianism, if we move from Leiden to Utrecht, Groningen, or Franeker: this variety is also reflected in the relationship between faith and reason. As a case study, I will present the position of Gijsbert Voetius, a long-lived and influential Utrecht theologian, aligned from his youth against Remonstrants and Socinians, who became a bitter enemy of Cartesian philosophy and sharply opposed to Johannes Coccejus and his influence in Reformed theology.

Michael Della Rocca

Spinoza's Anti-Dualism as the Source of His Anti-Scepticism and His Scepticism

In this paper, I seek to explain the source of Spinoza's aversion to scepticism, especially in the Ethics and the Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect. I will locate this source in Spinoza's aversion to a certain form of dualism. The rejection of this form of dualism is also (and obviously) at work in Spinoza's critique of Cartesian mind-body dualism and (more surprisingly) in his critiques of a dualism between the intellect and the will, of a distinction between theology and philosophy, and of any duality in the sources of our actions. Identifying this anti-dualistic origin of Spinoza's anti-scepticism also, I will argue, puts us in a position to appreciate the way in which his anti-dualism also leads him to embrace a different and very radical form of scepticism.