



Universität Hamburg

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ספקנות

Maimonides Centre for Advanced Studies

JEWISH SCEPTICISM

21-24 JULY 2024

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SCEPTICISM IN PHILOSOPHY, JUDAISM, AND CULTURE

Keynote Lecture by **Giuseppe Veltri**
Sunday, July 21, at 5 pm

with:

Richard Bett
Daniel Boyarin
Michael Della Rocca
Yehuda Halper
Zev Harvey

Ehud Krinis
Adi Louria Hayon
Diego Lucci
Diego Machuca
Yitzhak Melamed

Chiara Rover
Stephan Schmid
Johanna Schmitt
Andreas Speer
Josef Stern

Venue

**Maimonides Centre for
Advanced Studies**

Please contact MCAS for registration
and Zoom-Link.

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Monday 22 July 2024

Session I

Chair **Yoav Meyrav**

- 10:00 **Richard Bett**
Sextus Empiricus, Philosopher-Doctor: One Vocation or Two?
- 10:40 **Chiara Rover**
Hos epi to polu. Aristotelian Roots in Carneades' pithanotes
- 11:20 *COFFEE BREAK*
- 11:50 **Johanna Schmitt**
Aristotle against Protagorean Relativism
- 12:30 *LUNCH BREAK*

Session II

Chair **Hanna Gentili**

- 14:00 **Josef Stern**
Maimonides' Sceptical Critique of a Divine Intellect, or the Curious Case of Guide I:68
- 14:40 *COFFEE BREAK*
- 15:00 **Zev Harvey**
Veltri, Abayye's Mother, and Breaking Vessels
- 19:00 *DINNER*
- Restaurant "Citta Vegan Izakaya"*
Grindelhof 17, 20146 Hamburg

Tuesday 23 July 2024

Session I

Chair **Giuseppe Veltri**

10:00

Daniel Boyarin

Midrash against Theology: Hazalic Scepticism

10:40

Yitzhak Melamed

“All of the Above”: A Peculiar Rabbinic Attitude towards Uncertainty

11:20

COFFEE BREAK

11:50

Andreas Speer

The Blindness of the Intellect: Two Strategies for Overcoming Epistemic Scepticism

12:30

LUNCH BREAK

Session II

Chair **Lucas Oro Hershtein**

14:00

Ehud Krinis

Sceptical Argumentation in Judah Halevi’s “The Book of the Kuzari”

14:40

COFFEE BREAK

15:00

Yehuda Halper

Purim, the Holiday of Philosophical Scepticism: Qalonimos ben Qalonimos of Arles, Philosophical Translator and Purim Enthusiast

Wednesday 24 July 2024

Session I

Chair **Anat Schechtman**

10:00 **Michael Della Rocca**
Reasons for Action are Unintelligible

10:40 *COFFEE BREAK*

11:00 **Diego Machuca**
Is Sceptical Inquiry Possible?

11:40 *LUNCH BREAK*

Session II

Chair **Adi Luria**

14:00 **Stephan Schmid**
The Metaphysical Significance of Early Modern Scepticism

14:40 *COFFEE BREAK*

15:00 **Diego Lucci**
John Locke's Engagement with Scepticism and Judaism

Venue

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

Abstracts

Sextus Empiricus, Philosopher-Doctor: One Vocation or Two?

Richard Bett

Sextus Empiricus was a member of the Empiric school of medicine, and he was not the only Pyrrhonian sceptic to have this additional affiliation. This paper considers the extent to which Sextus's roles as a sceptic and as a doctor can plausibly be seen as connected. There is a clear methodological affiliation between Pyrrhonism and medical Empiricism: in the avoidance of theory, in the absence of any overarching system of thought, and in the accumulation of a large body of know-how about what works for the purposes at hand. This is not altered by Sextus's surprising expression of preference for Methodism over Empiricism at the end of the first book of *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*; he accuses some Empiricists of adopting a negative dogmatic stance, and he may have some justification for this, but the methodological common ground just mentioned is unaffected by this internal dispute. But to what extent does Sextus's presentation of Pyrrhonian scepticism appeal to the common ground with Empiricism; or, more generally, to what extent does it make use of a medical model? As is well known, medical analogies for philosophical practice, or for certain aspects of it, are widespread in Greek philosophy; Sextus's employment of them would be nothing new, even if his own practice as a doctor might give it an additional level of interest.

There are certainly some places in Sextus where a medical connection is made. The most obvious is the final chapter of *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, where he speaks of "curing" the dogmatists and of adjusting the strength of the cure to the strength of the disease, as doctors do. Another is his promise at the beginning of *Outlines* (1.4) to report *historikôs* about the character of Pyrrhonian scepticism (usually translated "descriptively" or the like); *historia* was the term used by the Empiricists to refer to a report of one's medical experience, which could be passed on to others. Beyond this, however, analogies between scepticism and medicine are very hard to find in Sextus's writings. He uses medical examples not infrequently, but their point is almost always highly specific. The purgative metaphor, for example, which is sometimes regarded as a sort of symbol of sceptical practice in general, is in fact strictly limited to responses to possible charges of self-refutation.

But perhaps Sextus simply took the medical analogy for granted and rarely saw a need to mention it explicitly. Whatever the truth of this, it is worth asking whether it is fruitful for us to regard his scepticism as a quasi-medical kind of therapy. There is clearly some merit in doing so, and in this respect, scepticism is no different from many other ancient Greek philosophical schools or traditions; philosophy was widely regarded as aspiring to improve the lives of those who practised it. Nevertheless, medicine is not the only possible model for this ameliorative aspect of ancient Greek philosophy; Pierre Hadot's model of "spiritual exercises" appears to be an equally valid alternative. And in fact, with the exception of the last chapter of *Outlines*, Sextus has virtually nothing to say about helping others with his scepticism—a

theme that is prominent in both Epicureanism and Stoicism; yet this is surely a central feature of medicine on any conception. Thus, Sextus's medical background seems not to play into his philosophical scepticism as much as one might have expected, and this may perhaps point us towards a more general reassessment of the aptness of the medical analogy in interpreting ancient Greek, and especially Hellenistic, philosophy.

Midrash against Theology: Hazalic Scepticism

Daniel Boyarin

Some forty years ago, I began elaborating a thesis that the best way to explain the dichotomy between midrash and allegory, as the dominant modes of Hazalic (the classical rabbis of the second to the seventh centuries AD, producers of Talmud and classical midrash) and patristic hermeneutics respectively, was to connect this dichotomy to another apparent ontological distinction between these two inheritor groups of the Bible; to wit, on the one hand, a rabbinic monism in which the only existents are those concrete objects that we meet in the world, bodies and texts, and on the other, a Platonically inspired dualism that rendered the things we see and touch in our world pale imitations of real existents, the ideas or forms. Since bodies perform actions and words signify embodied realities, I claimed that it was natural for those Jews who were followers of Hazal (successors to the Pharisees) to insist on the literal, embodied form of the commandments of the Torah. Allegorical readers of Scripture, on the other hand, were dualists, with things in the text acting as pointers to spiritual realities. Some Jews (viz. Philo of Alexandria), Christian Jews, and then later Christians simplex, I claimed, read these embodied signs as allegories pointing to alleged spiritual realities, such as Christ and belief in him and “moral” qualities, or, in the case of Philo, to the progress of the soul. It is important from the outset to clearly recognise, moreover, that all interpretation insofar as it declares “this means that” is allegorical, since “that” is not identical with “this” and “allegory” means “other-speaking.” Midrashic reading, in contrast, generally does not make that statement, almost always accomplishing its reading by recontextualising the utterances of the Bible in new narratives and other discursive contexts and not by translating them into paraphrases of any type. I attributed that move on Hazal's part to a rejection of a Platonic dualist ontology and a commitment to a one-level universe and text; there is no Logos behind the text in an ontologically flat universe—nothing “other” for the words to mean.

In this paper, I wish to challenge my former thesis. Rather than an ontological difference between eventual Jews and Christians, I will propose an epistemological difference. Patristic thought, I will suggest, is generated out of a search for truth in theology and hermeneutics, while rabbinic thought grows out of an epistemologically sceptical position. It is not the content—as we have supposed—but the modes of justification, or not, that characterise and generate the “parting of the ways” in late antiquity.

Reasons for Action Are Unintelligible

Michael Della Rocca

In this paper, I aim to show how a limited and appealing form of rationalism leads to a powerful challenge to the coherence of the very notion of reasons for action, a notion that dominates the landscape of much of modern moral philosophy. This challenge leads to a conceptual scepticism not only about reasons for action, but also about other allied notions such as those of moral criticism, practical authority, practical normativity, and even theoretical normativity and the practical/theoretical distinction. I will also respond to popular objections to the unpopular position that results, and in so doing, illuminate and embrace the paradoxical character of this position.

Purim, the Holiday of Philosophical Scepticism: Qalonimos ben Qalonimos of Arles, Philosophical Translator and Purim Enthusiast

Yehuda Halper

The Qalonimos ben Qalonimos of Arles who translated Averroes's Middle Commentaries on Aristotle's *Topics*, *Sophistcs*, *Physics*, and *Metaphysics* was also the apparent inventor of "Purim Torah" in his *Mesekhet Purim*, a facetious talmudic tractate concerning Purim themes that mocked the Talmud itself and talmudic reasoning in particular. While Qalonimos's serious translations are not funny, his comical works also contain serious themes. In addition to his *Masekhet Purim*, he also wrote a humorous rhymed prose compilation, *■Eben Boḥan*, with sections dedicated to the holidays and to social criticism of various segments of the Jewish population. In his discussion of Purim, Qalonimos describes the epitome of the holiday as expressed by the talmudic adage *■Ad De'Lo ■Yada■*, referring to drinking until one does not know. This is a kind of sceptical ideal which, as Qalonimos makes known, is not apparent in fourteenth-century Jewish society, where the learned show off medical, rabbinic, and even scientific knowledge without having actual knowledge. Indeed, I will argue that one should read *Mesekhet Purim* in light of the principle of the holiday, of not knowing, as a critique of the very possibility of knowledge. The Talmud, philosophy, science, and everything else must be put aside on Purim, Qalonimos says, in order to celebrate the crowning achievement of all, not knowing; that is, scepticism. For Qalonimos, Purim is not only a religious pursuit, but also a truly philosophical one, albeit a sceptical holiday.

Veltri, Abayye's Mother, and Breaking Vessels

Zev Harvey

Giuseppe Veltri once remarked that "the best definition of scepticism is not that of Pyrrho, but that found in the advice of Abayye's mother recorded in BT Yoma 78b" (cf. Veltri, *Magie und Halakhah*, 1997, 230–38). According to her, one educates children by teaching them to break

things. Abayye became a great dialectician, Abraham broke idols, Moses broke the tables of the Law, and God destroyed worlds before He created ours. Shlomo Pines argued that the task of the scholar is largely one of “destruction” or “casting doubt.” What is this connection between scepticism and breaking? What kind of iconoclasm is scepticism?

Sceptical Argumentation in Judah Halevi’s “The Book of the Kuzari”

Ehud Krinis

Written around 1140, Judah Halevi’s treatise, best known under the title “The Book of the Kuzari,” presented the first systematic attack on the rationalistic trends that reigned supreme in discourse in his Jewish-Andalusian milieu in particular and in the Judeo-Arabic culture of the period in general. In this lecture, I will show how Halevi effectively strengthens and enriches his anti-rationalistic polemic by inserting sceptical argumentation into it.

John Locke’s Engagement with Scepticism and Judaism

Diego Lucci

John Locke’s engagement with scepticism and Judaism was multifaceted. Although agnostic about the nature of the external world, he openly rejected scepticism about the existence of the external world perceived in sensory experience. He did indeed give “concurrent reasons” supporting sensitive knowledge; he highlighted the connection between sensory experience and pleasure or pain in order to demonstrate that sensitive knowledge is not liable to practical doubt; and he argued that scepticism is self-undermining. Moreover, he deemed morality demonstrable. However, he was pessimistic about the actual possibility of demonstrating moral ideas. Therefore, he turned to the Bible, which he regarded as an infallible and sufficient source of moral truth. However, while maintaining that the Law of Moses included the God-given, rational, universal, and eternal Law of Nature, he dismissed the Mosaic Law for being excessively demanding, lacking incentives for moral conduct, distorted over the centuries, and eventually superseded by the Christian Law of Faith. Nevertheless, while limiting salvation to Christians who follow the Law of Faith, he still described Jews and other non-Christian believers as capable of morality, and hence tolerable, in the context of a theory of toleration informed by a sort of political scepticism that nevertheless does not entail religious scepticism. Locke was actually a committed Christian, but he abhorred the use of “force and compulsion” in matters of faith because he saw most religious beliefs as matters of opinion (and not knowledge) and thus was sceptical about the possibility of perfectly comprehending and effectively communicating religious truth in its entirety. In conclusion, although Locke was an anti-sceptic in epistemological matters, his views on morality and toleration, and thus his engagement with Judaism, were conditioned by an essentially sceptical attitude.

Is Sceptical Inquiry Possible?

Diego Machuca

One can think of at least three different kinds of radical sceptics: the sceptic who claims to lack all (first-order) beliefs in one or more specific domains, the sceptic who reports that he lacks any belief whatsoever, and the sceptic who reports that he lacks all beliefs except those about the various ways in which he is appeared to. It is plain that the first kind of radical sceptic can engage in inquiry, for he conducts his investigations by relying on the beliefs he holds in domains other than the targeted one(s). But is inquiry feasible for the latter two kinds of radical sceptic? For surely any inquirer has to use his cognitive capacities and explicitly or implicitly believe that they are reliable. Does he not have to endorse, overtly or tacitly, certain norms of inquiry? Does inquiry not necessarily imply understanding, and, if so, is understanding not a species of knowledge? In sum, are the radical sceptics in question not forced to admit, *malgré eux*, that they hold beliefs of various sorts? My aim in this talk is to examine whether sceptical inquiry is possible, by which I mean whether the radical sceptics in question can engage in truth-directed inquiry in a way that is consistent with their scepticism. Given that Pyrrhonists are the only actual, practising sceptics who describe themselves as being involved in continuing investigation, my examination of whether sceptical inquiry is possible will focus on their brand of scepticism. In fact, among Pyrrhonists, we seem to find the two kinds of radical scepticism under consideration.

“All of the Above”: A Peculiar Rabbinic Attitude towards Uncertainty

Yitzhak Melamed

In this paper, I will discuss a common rabbinic attitude towards situations of uncertainty; that is, the attempt to exhaust *all* logical possibilities about which one is in doubt. I will focus on the biblical commandment to blow a shofar on the Jewish New Year and the uncertainties accompanying the proper performance of this commandment.

Hos epi to polu: Aristotelian Roots in Carneades’s *pithanotes*

Chiara Rover

In *Adv. Math.* 7.175, Sextus Empiricus discusses Carneades’s concept of the *pithane phantasia* (“persuasive impression”), describing it as one that tells the truth (*aletheuousa*) “for the most part” (*hos epi to polu*). This intriguing qualification, along with Sextus’s language in the sections of his writings on Carneades, evokes Aristotle’s *enthymema*, a cornerstone of rhetorical reasoning that primarily operates on “probables” (*ta eikota*), premises considered valid *hos epi to polu* (e.g., *Rhet.* 1.2.1357a 30–33).

I will propose two possible explanations for this apparent Aristotelian influence. The first is that the influence is solely a product of Sextus’s interpretation, or, more precisely, his

source's understanding of Carneades's *pithanotes*. If Sextus's source was Antiochus of Ascalon's *Kanonika*, then the presence of Aristotelian elements could be due to Antiochus's incorporation of Aristotelian doctrines into his *vetus Academia*. Even if the source were Aenesidemus of Cnossos, Antiochus might still be the primary influence, using Aristotelian elements to undermine the Academics and highlight their contradictions.

The second explanation suggests that Carneades himself might have drawn inspiration from Aristotle, or alternatively, from Aristotle through the mediation of the Stoics (from whom Carneades might have borrowed the very concept of the *pithanon*). If this is the case, we must consider which Carneades we are referring to: the one portrayed by Clitomachus, or the one defended by Metrodorus of Stratonicea, Philo of Larissa, and other pupils of Carneades. In my talk, I will explore the potential and the limitations of these hypothesis, providing an opportunity to examine the philosophical intersection between Aristotelian and Carneadean thought.

The Metaphysical Significance of Early Modern Scepticism

Stephan Schmid

While it is widely recognised that early modern scepticism played a crucial role in prompting philosophers to re-examine the justification of knowledge claims in novel and profound ways, the metaphysical significance of early modern scepticism has often been overlooked. In this paper, I will contend that the radical doubts articulated and employed by influential thinkers like René Descartes and David Hume paved the way for unprecedented forms of metaphysical idealism in Western philosophy, which continue to shape contemporary worldviews. Notably, in the humanities, various forms of constructivism are now widely embraced, which can be seen as varieties of the forms of early modern idealism that authors of this time developed in response to the sceptical considerations articulated in this era.

Aristotle against Protagorean Relativism

Johanna Schmitt

Aristotle is often thought to be aware of diverse sceptical ideas, but not to deem them worthy of a response. If this is right, then it remains an open question whether he is able to respond to sceptical challenges. Moreover, if he has no response, sceptical ideas would pose a serious threat to Aristotelian philosophy, whether Aristotle acknowledges it or not. I will argue that we find resources in Aristotle's metaphysics and theory of perception that allow us to construct an answer to a particular sceptical challenge; namely, Protagorean relativism, according to which all perceptions are true. In responding to this challenge, Aristotle defends a realist position according to which there are mind-independent perceptible objects in the world.

The Blindness of the Intellect: Two Strategies for Overcoming Epistemic Scepticism

Andreas Speer

In the fifth book of his *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, Bonaventura speaks of a wondrous blindness of the human intellect, which does not recognise what is most obvious. In doing so, he takes up a motif from the beginning of the second book of the *Metaphysics*, where Aristotle compares our intellect, the *nous*, to the eyes of night owls. Both do not see the obvious: the eyes of the night owls do not see the light of day, while the *nous* does not see that which by its nature is most obvious among everything else (*Met.* 2.1.993b9–11). In his *Commentary on the Metaphysics*, but also in his two *Summae*, Thomas Aquinas took this adagium as an opportunity to reflect, like Bonaventure, on the limitations of the human intellect. But unlike Bonaventure, who sought a way out of this sceptical dilemma throughout his entire life, for Thomas, the limits and the resulting limitations of the human intellect seem to be an inescapable fact. For the two protagonists, Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure, whose 750th death anniversary we commemorate in 2024, this results in very different strategies for dealing with the sceptical reservation and trying to overcome it.

Maimonides's Sceptical Critique of a Divine Intellect, or the Curious Case of *Guide* 1.68

Josef Stern

Guide 1.68 has perplexed readers since Maimonides's medieval commentators. In recent scholarship, Shlomo Pines pointed to the apparent contradiction between Maimonides's advocacy of negative theology in the preceding chapters (1.57–60) and his affirmative description of God as an intellect—indeed, an intellect like a human's—in 1.68, leading him to ask which opinion is Maimonides's own and which a smokescreen. More recent scholars have pointed to the apparent contradiction between Maimonides's use of the identity—call it Principle I—that God is intellectual subject, intellection, and *intellectum* (or, alternatively, knowledge, knower, and known) in his *Commentary on the Mishnah* and *Mishneh Torah*, where he interprets it to mean that we have no understanding of God's knowledge or intellect, and his use of Principle I in *Guide* 1.68, where he seems to think that we (scientifically) understand it as well as we understand the human intellect and its activity. All of these interpretations assume that *Guide* 1.68 expresses a view that Maimonides puts forth as his own. Following up on earlier work (Stern 2007, 2013), I shall argue that Principle I, as Maimonides describes it, is the “dictum” of “the falasifa,” not his own view, that the problem that concerns Maimonides in *Guide* 1.68 is a different problem than the nature and content of God's knowledge, and that *Guide* 1.68 is a sceptical critique of the representation of the One God as intellect. To identify Maimonides's own view of the nature and content of God's knowledge, one must look at *Guide* 3.16 and 19–21, chapters that have been entirely ignored in all recent discussions, where Maimonides presents the view that we have no scientific

understanding of God's intellect or knowledge, the same general view proposed in the *Commentary* and *Mishneh Torah*. As for *Guide* 1.68, I shall argue that rather than contradicting what Maimonides says about categorial negations of privations, aka negative attributes, it continues (what I have argued is) his critique of all such representations, both negative attributions and Principle I, focussing on the way in which they respectively represent God as a composite being. Furthermore, I shall argue that the apparent sole distinction between the human and the divine intellects that Maimonides draws employing the potentiality/actuality distinction can easily be seen to be no more than the kind of "confusion of intellectual representation with imagination" against which he cleverly warns the reader at the end of *Guide* 1.68. Finally, I will close by arguing that Maimonides's critique of representations of God as an intellect manifests, anticipating Hume in his *Dialogues*, the deepest error of anthropomorphism. If what distinguishes the human being from all other creatures is her intellect, what could be more distinctively anthropomorphic than conceiving of God as an intellect?