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Edited by

Michela Torbidoni

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Samuel David Luzzatto as an Italian and a Zionist Jewish Icon

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Abstract

This essay explores how after his death, the figure of Samuel David Luzzatto quickly emerged as an icon of Jewish modernity, both in Italy and beyond. It focuses on the differing perceptions of his legacy among Italian Jews following the country's unification, as well as within twentieth-century Zionist circles. The first part of this article highlights key moments that contributed to Luzzatto's image as an Italian patriot who was supportive of Jewish emancipation—an image that has often overshadowed his loyalty to the Habsburg rule in Northern Italy and his conservative stance on the risks of modernity. The second part examines how he was later embraced as a Zionist hero, both by the labour movement and by religious nationalist scholars in Israel.

Keywords

Samuel David Luzzatto – Zionism – Italian Judaism – *Wissenschaft des Judentums* – *Risorgimento*

1 Introduction

In the eyes of his contemporaries and subsequent generations, Samuel David Luzzatto (1800–1865), also known by his Hebrew acronym Sha.Da.L. (henceforth Shadal), achieved such extensive fame that he became widely acknowledged by Jews, both within and beyond Italy, as a quintessential “icon” of Jewish modernity. However, Luzzatto's enduring intellectual legacy among international scholars was significantly surpassed by his pivotal role in the imaginary of Italian Jews, reminiscent in many ways of the prominence of Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786) in the context of German-speaking Jewish communities. The term “archetypal Jew,” which was coined by Alexander Altmann to

describe Mendelssohn, also aptly applies to Luzzatto.¹ Indeed, similarly to Mendelssohn's stature in Germany, in Italy Luzzatto's name has been used as a banner symbolising the first modern Jew, the prototype of Jewishness.

This sentiment is exemplified—and by no means uniquely—in the words of the chief rabbi of Padua Gustavo Castelbolognesi (1884–1947), who, representing a generation no longer directly connected with the master, but in the city most imbued with Shadal's memories, wrote:

Samuel David Luzzatto embodies the Jew, the Man with a capital M, the scientist, the friend of truth, the *ṣaddiq*, the God-fearer, the compassionate father of the poor, the protector of orphans, the Rabbi, a teacher in the truest sense of the word [...]. He was the greatest Jew in an era of great Jews.²

It is not surprising, therefore, that Shadal's renown as the leading figure of Italian Judaism, well beyond the nineteenth century, has ultimately eclipsed a substantive understanding of his work, or at the very least subordinated it to the desire to appropriate his image for different ideological purposes. The more than two centuries of commentary since Shadal's first entrance onto the scene of Jewish studies with his Italian translation of the Ashkenazi Siddur in 1821 have presented him in varied, often mutually contradictory roles: as an uncompromising Orthodox, such as in the portrait by Rabbi Sabato Morais (1823–1897),³ or conversely as a liberal,⁴ and even as an agnostic, at least accord-

1 Mendelssohn is described in these terms in Alexander Altmann, "Moses Mendelssohn: The Archetypal German Jew," in *The Jewish Response to German Culture: From the Enlightenment to the Second World War*, ed. Jehuda Reinharz and Walter Schatzberg (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1991), 17–30. On the image of Mendelssohn, see also Moshe Pelli, "The Image of Moses Mendelssohn as Reflected in the Hebrew 'Haskalah' Literature in Germany" [Hebrew], in *Proceedings of the Fifth World Congress of Jewish Studies*, vol. 3, div. C (Jerusalem: Academic Press of Jerusalem, 1972), 269.

2 Taken from Castelbolognesi's lecture given at the S.D. Luzzatto Cultural Circle in Padua, entitled "Samuel David Luzzatto maestro di esegesi biblica," *La rassegna mensile di Israel* 8 (1934): 416.

3 Sabato Morais, in his introduction to Shadal's *Autobiografia di S.D. Luzzatto preceduta da alcune notizie storico letterarie sulla famiglia Luzzatto* (Padua, 1882), writes that "in all his writings, Luzzatto, the believer, appears with a sharp sword to defend historical Judaism; piercing the enemies of the traditions with his right hand, repelling the heretics who philosophise with his left."

4 Peter Slymovics, "Romantic and Jewish Orthodox Influences in the Political Philosophy of S.D. Luzzatto," *Italia* 1, no. 4 (1985): 94–126, coined the term "liberal orthodox" to define the particular blend of Enlightenment values and Jewish traditional beliefs.

ing to the philosophical profile of him written by Nathan Rotenstreich (1914–1993), a prominent figure of contemporary Israeli philosophy.⁵ Luzzatto was certainly a scholar split between traditional Judaism and the adherence to the potentially corrosive values of historicism and the new methods of textual criticism.⁶ While indefectibly opposing the mystical trends in Jewish philosophy as represented in Kabbalah,⁷ throughout his oeuvre he was simultaneously a strenuous enemy of the rationalistic stances of Maimonides and Ibn Ezra.

Certain critiques of Luzzatto's work have underscored these perceived contradictions as a result of the flaws in his philosophical education and his relatively peripheral place within the networks of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*. Rotenstreich considered Luzzatto's philosophical contributions to be deficient in originality. In his book concerning the attempts of Jewish thinkers and historians from the eighteenth century onwards to reconcile Jewish tradition with modernity, he disparagingly writes that Luzzatto "lacked the metaphysical vigor to marshal the evidence [...] the lack of clarity in the elaboration of these questions stems from Luzzatto's ignorance in the philosophy of his time."⁸ And indeed, Luzzatto's training was essentially that of an autodidact, severely limited by his inadequate knowledge of German, Greek, and Latin. These gaps significantly restricted the theoretical breadth of his textual criticism of the Bible and the Septuagint. Moreover, he relied heavily on Italian and French Catholic thinkers who were notably lagging behind and resistant to post-Kantian European philosophy.⁹ According to Shmuel Feiner, in a perspective now widely accepted in most recent scholarship, Shadal was a representative of what Isaiah Berlin termed the Counter-Enlightenment, a

5 See Nathan Rotenstreich, *Jewish Philosophy in Modern Times: From Mendelssohn to Rosenzweig*, 2nd rev. ed. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994; 1st ed. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1968), 32: "The agnostic tinge in Luzzatto's religious conception is clearly apparent. Religion does not prescribe faith or belief because there is no need for such a commandment." Curiously, Rotenstreich appears to be unaware of Luzzatto's deep aversion towards both Mendelssohn and Kant when describing him as a disciple of these two philosophers.

6 This is how Luzzatto is portrayed in Morris Margolies, *Samuel David Luzzatto: Traditionalist Scholar* (New York: KTav, 1979); Shmuel Vargon, *S.D. Luzzatto: Moderate Criticism in Biblical Exegesis* [Hebrew] (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2013); and Ephraim Chamiel, *The Middle Way: The Emergence of Modern Religious Trends in Nineteenth-Century Judaism. Responses to Modernity in the Philosophy of Z.H. Chajes, S.R. Hirsch and S.D. Luzzatto*, 2 vols. (Brighton, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2021).

7 Exemplified in his *Wiqqah 'al Hokhmat ha-Qabbalah* (Jerusalem: Carmel, 2013).

8 Rotenstreich, *Jewish Philosophy in Modern Times*, 33.

9 Irene Kajon, "L'influenza di Francesco Soave sul concetto di ebraismo di Samuel David Luzzatto," in *Samuel David Luzzatto: The Bi-Centennial of His Birth*, ed. Roberto Bonfil, Isaac Gottlieb, and Hannah Kasher (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2004), 55–77.

tradition of anti-rationalist, vitalist, and organic thinkers stemming largely from eighteenth-century philosophers, such as Giambattista Vico and Jean-Jacques Rousseau.¹⁰ And last, despite the fact that the seminary in Padua where Luzzatto spent his entire career teaching was the first modern rabbinical seminary in Europe, it remained a minor institution with little impact upon the primary centres of Jewish scholarship in the nineteenth century.¹¹ During the thirty-two years of its activity, from 1829 to 1871, it employed only three teachers aside from Shadal, and only thirty of its students were ordained as rabbis.

Despite—or perhaps because of—these inherent shortcomings and ambivalences in his work, Luzzatto attained a prominence unparalleled among other contemporary figures who contributed no less significantly to Jewish studies in Italy, such as his colleague at the rabbinical seminary in Padua, Rabbi Hillel Della Torre (1805–1871),¹² or scholars at the forefront of literary and historical research, such as the mystical rabbi of Livorno Elia Benamozegh (1823–1900),¹³ the Florentine educator David Castelli (1836–1901),¹⁴ or even Graziadio Isaia Ascoli (1829–1907), the father of modern comparative linguistics and a relative of the Luzzatto family.¹⁵

Unlike many of his contemporaries who either embraced the trends of secular positivism or remained attached to conservative standpoints, Shadal swiftly became the paradigmatic persona of the successful synthesis between steadfast adherence to Jewish tradition and receptiveness to the imperatives of modern science. This allegedly felicitous symbiosis particularly resonated with the emancipated Jews of unified Italy, who were beginning to view the religious observance of their fathers with a sense of nostalgia, yet wished to accommodate to the standards of secularism required by what were deemed to be the progressive stances of liberal societies.

10 Shmuel Feiner, “A Critique of Modernity: S.D. Luzzatto and the Anti-Haskalah” [Hebrew], in Bonfil, Gottlieb, and Kasher, *Samuel David Luzzatto*, 145–165; Isaiah Berlin, *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013).

11 Nikolaus Vielmetti, “Die Gründungsgeschichte des Collegio Rabbinico in Padua,” *Kairos* 12 (1970): 1–30; 13 (1971): 36–66. The most comprehensive work on this institution is Maddalena Del Bianco Cotrozzi, *Il collegio rabbinico di Padova. Un’istituzione religiosa dell’ebraismo sulla via dell’emancipazione* (Florence: Olschki, 1995).

12 Riccardo Di Segni, “Lelio della Torre,” *Dizionario biografico degli italiani* 37 (1989): 587–589.

13 Clémence Boulouque, *Another Modernity: Elia Benamozegh’s Jewish Universalism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020).

14 Cristiana Facchini, *David Castelli. Ebraismo e scienze delle religioni tra Otto e Novecento* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 2005).

15 Tristano Bolelli, “Graziadio Isaia Ascoli,” *Dizionario biografico degli italiani* 4 (1962): 380–384; Guido Lucchini, “Ascoli: Appunti per una biografia. Dalla linguistica comparata alla storia della lingua italiana,” in *Graziadio Isaia Ascoli, Scritti sulla questione della lingua*, ed. Corrado Grassi (Turin: Einaudi, 2008), vii–lx.

It is not within the scope of this essay to examine the full range of Luzzatto's intellectual contributions, a subject already amply covered in the existing scholarship, nor to explore the various facets of his biography and his literary persona.¹⁶ My aim is different and twofold: on the one hand, to highlight the pivotal stages that shaped Luzzatto's portrayal as an Italian patriot sympathetic to the cause of Jewish emancipation, overshadowing his acknowledged allegiance to Habsburg sovereignty in Lombardo-Veneto and his conservative views on the dangers of modernity; on the other, to examine how he was reclaimed as a Zionist hero both within the labour movement and by national religious scholars in Israel.

Before addressing these questions, it is crucial to consider the effort that Shadal dedicated to shaping his image among his contemporaries in his lifetime and his deep concern with how his memory should be preserved for future generations.¹⁷ From a young age, he signed his letters with the acronym Sha.Da.L and occasionally as Ra.Sh.DaL, despite not holding an official rabbinical title, as if he had already been recognised among the esteemed Torah giants of the past known by their acronyms. An instance of Luzzatto's characteristic self-consciousness can be found in a letter written on 17 June 1857 to the Austrian rabbi and Orientalist Saul Isaac Kämpf (1818–1892):¹⁸ "I desire future generations to know my deeds [...]. I do not seek the judgement of my contemporaries, for in most cases, their blessing is a curse in my eyes, their praise is disgraceful, and their worship humiliates me."¹⁹

In a similar spirit, he confessed to the Jewish historian Heinrich Graetz (1817–1891) on 25 January 1856:

I hope that my words will benefit future generations, for I have never written for the benefit of the moment, but all my efforts and labours are for the generations to come. Rashi and the Geonim have been forgotten, and I am not afraid that my words will be forgotten too in a hundred or two hundred years, but after my death (when envy and hatred will cease), Israel will know who Shadal was and what he accomplished.²⁰

16 Claudia Milani, "Samuel David Luzzatto," in *Oxford Bibliographies in Jewish Studies*, ed. Naomi Seidman (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming), online resource.

17 Shmuel Werses, "Samuel David Luzzatto be-'Eney 'Ašmo: 'Iyyun be-'Iggerotaw ha-'Ivriyyot," *Me'assef* 5–6 (1965): 703–715, also available in Italian translation: Werses, "Come Samuel David Luzzatto considerava se stesso," in "Nel primo centenario della scomparsa di Samuel David Luzzatto," special issue, *La rassegna mensile di Israel* 32 (1966): 42–63.

18 Meyer Keyserling and Isidore Singer, "Kaempf, Saul Isaac," in *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, vol. 7, ed. Isidore Singer (London: Funk & Wagnells, 1904), 407–408.

19 Samuel David Luzzatto, *Iggerot Shadal*, vol. 9 (Przemyśl, 1894), 1302.

20 Luzzatto, *Iggerot Shadal*, 1272–1273.

While it is certain that Shadal possessed foresight regarding his future fame, he could hardly have anticipated the intricate paths his ideas would take or the distortions his image would undergo in contexts far removed from Trieste, his birthplace, and Padua, where he spent most of his adult life, on the fringe of an already declining multicultural Austrian Empire.

2 Shadal as a Jewish Icon in Italy

After his death, Shadal's spiritual legacy in Italy was entrusted to his colleagues, followers, and family members who contributed to his becoming a legend and symbol for many generations of Jews in Italy. Among Samuel David Luzzatto's sons, Isaia (1836–1898) was the most faithful and affectionate to preserving his father's memory.²¹ In addition to his profession as a notary, Isaia devoted himself throughout his life to organising his father's vast manuscript and book collection. He meticulously catalogued the works,²² undertook the publication of unpublished or difficult-to-find writings,²³ and diligently gathered papers, testimonies, and surviving correspondence from individuals who had known or been associated with his father on an international scale.²⁴

Giuseppe, the third of Samuel David Luzzatto's four children from his second marriage to Elena Lea Segre (1809–1879), also dedicated decades of assiduous effort to publishing works and letters that Luzzatto had not managed to publish during his lifetime.²⁵ He undertook the task of editing his father's correspond-

21 Isaia was the youngest of the three children born to Samuel David Luzzatto and his first wife, Bella (Bilha) Bersabea Segre, whom he married in 1826 and who passed away in 1841. For a comprehensive family tree of the Luzzatto lineage, consult Markus Brann's work, "Die Familie Luzzatto," in *Samuel David Luzzatto: Ein Gedenkbuch zum Hundersten Geburtstag*, ed. Verband der Vereine für Jüdische Geschichte und Literatur in Deutschland (Berlin: Albert Katz, 1900), 48.

22 Isaia Luzzatto, *Catalogue des ouvrages édités et inédites [sic] de feu Samuel David Luzzatto* (Padua, 1877), followed by Luzzatto, *Catalogo ragionato degli scritti sparsi di Samuele Davide Luzzatto con riferimenti agli altri suoi scritti editi ed inediti* (Padua, 1881).

23 Isaia took charge of reprinting and annotating his father's autobiography (Luzzatto, *Autobiografia di S.D. Luzzatto*). He supplemented it with additional testimonies from those who knew him or his students, such as Samuel Vita Zelman and Sabato Morais. Similarly, he compiled a new edition of his father's scattered poems found in *Kimor Na'im—Poesie ed epitaffi, opera postuma* (Padua, 1879), as well as a collection of writings entitled *Scelta di scritti sparsi ebraici* [Hebrew], ed. Eisig Gräber (Przemysl, 1888).

24 Under Isaia's editorship, Samuel David Luzzatto's *Iggerot Shadal* were published in Hebrew in Krakow and Przemysl by Eisig Graeber between 1882 and 1894.

25 On Giuseppe Luzzatto, see Asher Salah and Clotilde Pontecorvo, eds., *Diari risorgimentali*

ence in languages other than Hebrew.²⁶ Additionally, he compiled and published the catalogue of his father's library in French, targeting overseas scholars of Jewish studies as potential buyers.²⁷

Shadal's death prompted extensive celebrative discourses from leading figures of the Italian Jewish community, as well as from prominent Christian personalities, such as the priest Stefano Kocjancic (1818–1883) of Gorizia and Giuseppe De Leva (1821–1895), a professor at the University of Padua.²⁸ Since then, public conferences and printed texts have regularly commemorated various anniversaries associated with Luzzatto's birth and death,²⁹ featuring contributions from foremost scholars of the time.³⁰ Additionally, besides his children, several specialists have worked diligently to publish previously unreleased texts from Luzzatto's extensive *Nachlass*.³¹

This frantic celebratory activity paved the way for a cult around the personality of Shadal that reached its height with the establishment of a monument in

di due giovani ebrei, Libro delle Cronache di Giuseppe Luzzatto e Giornale Ebdomadario di Amalia Cantoni (Livorno: Belforte, 2017).

- 26 While the endeavour is attributed only to "Luzzatto's son," without specifying the name, it is clear from the preface that Giuseppe was the [main driver/instigator] of the project: see Samuel David Luzzatto, *Epistolario italiano francese latino* (Padua, 1890).
- 27 Joseph Luzzatto, ed., *Catalogue de la bibliothèque de littérature hébraïque et orientale de feu Samuel David Luzzatto de Trieste* (Padua, 1868).
- 28 *Discorsi ed elegie in morte di Samuel David Luzzatto da Trieste, professore nell'Istituto convitto rabbinico in Padova* (Padua, 1865), with discourses by Lelio della Torre, Marco Tedeschi, Leone Osimo, and several disciples such as Abraham Lattes of Venice, Abramo Mainster of Rovigo, Isacco Pardo of Verona, and Marco Mortara of Mantua. See also Marco Tedeschi, *Due discorsi in morte del professore Samuel David Luzzatto detti uno a Padova e l'altro a Trieste* (Trieste, 1866). On Luzzatto's relationship with Kocjancic, see Marco Grusovin, "Il carteggio ebraico tra Stefano Kocjancic e Samuel David Luzzatto," *Materia giudaica* 7 (2002): 385–395; Giuseppe De Leva, "Commemorazione fatta da Giuseppe De Leva alla Accademia di Padova," in "Nel primo centenario della scomparsa di Samuel David Luzzatto," 277–286.
- 29 One of the recent events took place at the Italian Synagogue in Jerusalem, organised under the auspices of the Dahar Center at Bar-Ilan University in Ramat Gan on 27 and 28 March 2017.
- 30 Verband der Vereine für Jüdische Geschichte und Literatur in Deutschland, *Samuel David Luzzatto*, with essays by Simon Bernfeld, Markus Brann, W. Bacher, Abraham Berliner, and Meyer Kayserling; Eude Lolli, *Un'eco della commemorazione tenuta a Berlino il 22 agosto 1900 pel centenario della nascita di S.D. Luzzatto* (Padua: Tip. Dei Fratelli Gallina, 1902); "Nel primo centenario della scomparsa di Samuel David Luzzatto," which contains articles by Elio Toaff, Ariel Toaff, Josef Klausner, and Dante Lattes; Alfredo Ravenna, "Alcune osservazioni sulla personalità di S.D. Luzzatto," *Annuario di studi ebraici* (1964–1965): 131–134; Bonfil, Gottlieb, and Kasher, *Samuel David Luzzatto*.
- 31 Such as Samuel David Luzzatto, *Discorsi storico-religiosi agli studenti israeliti* (Padua, 1870; repr. Parma: Unione Tipografica Parmense, 1912).

his memory at the Jewish cemetery in Padua in 1895.³² Alongside the canonisation of Shadal's oeuvre—which, however, never resulted in a complete edition of his collected works, highlighting a structural weakness in Italian Jewry in implementing a cohesive and comprehensive cultural policy—there was also a corresponding trend towards hagiographical depictions of his personality.

This tendency extended well beyond Italy, with translations of Luzzatto's writings into the main European languages and his inclusion among the most notable Italian Jews of the century. In the introductory text to Shadal's Hebrew letters, David Kaufmann (1852–1899), a prominent figure of the Central European *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, compares Shadal to no less a person than Dante: “In all of Italy, there has not been a mind as great and powerful since Dante's time as that of Shadal, whose spirit was as vast as his heart, which was as wide as the entrance of the Temple.”³³ In the initial biographical accounts of Shadal, emphasis predominantly fell on his “Jewish” virtues, including his dignified acceptance of poverty, his steadfast compassion matching his moral teachings, and his staunch advocacy of the use of the Hebrew language.³⁴ However, subsequent portraits began to explore a political dimension to his work in alignment with the values of Italian Risorgimento and Jewish emancipation.

Shadal's personal stances on both issues remained somewhat ambiguous throughout his lifetime, and they never occupied a central position in his intellectual pursuits.³⁵ His apprehension regarding the assimilation risks that could result from the dissolution of the legal barriers separating Jews from the surrounding society led him to employ strong language against the bur-

32 The funds for the erection of this monument had already started to be raised via subscriptions for the publication of the *Discorsi ed elegie in morte di Samuele David Luzzatto*. The event was commemorated with a seventy-seven-page booklet edited by Vittorio Castiglioni titled *Scidali monumentum, quo libro continentur historia monumenti in tumulo Professoris S.D. Luzzatto* (Krakow, 1895).

33 Luzzatto, *Iggerot Shadal*, 10.

34 Luzzatto's Hebrew grammar, *Grammatica della lingua ebraica* (Padua, 1853), is considered one of the earliest, if not the earliest, works to recognise Rabbinic Hebrew as a separate field of study, and his *Prolegomeni ad una grammatica ragionata della lingua ebraica* (Padua, 1836) is an important early work on the history of Hebrew scholarship that has been translated as Luzzatto, *Prolegomena to a Grammar of the Hebrew Language*, trans. Aaron D. Rubin (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2005).

35 The strong reservations towards emancipation are examined by Salo W. Baron, “The Revolution of 1848 and Jewish Scholarship,” *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 18 (1948–1949): 1–66, and Baron, “Shadal and the 1848 Revolution” [Hebrew], in *Sefer Assaf: Jubilee Volume for Prof. Šimḥa Assaf*, ed. Umberto Cassuto, Joseph Klausner, and Yehoshua Gutman (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1953), 40–63.

geoning emancipatory efforts on behalf of the Jews in Europe. In a poem dated 1837, Luzzatto vehemently criticised what he called “the excrements of emancipation,” which, in his view, undermined “the not-yet-fully extinguished national sentiments of Italian Jews” [i sentimenti nazionali degli ebrei italiani non ancora del tutto spenti].³⁶ By “national sentiments,” he meant the attachment of Jews to their traditions, adherence to the Torah, and their identity as a people, rather than their alignment with the values of the Italian national cause.

Marco Tedeschi (1817–1869), the chief rabbi of Trieste and a fervent supporter of Italian unification, which earned him the title of “Cavour’s Rabbi,” acknowledged that “Luzzatto never openly appeared an active and enthusiastic advocate of emancipation.” However, in his funeral eulogy, Tedeschi was driven to emphasise the exact contrary: “There is no doubt that deep in his soul, he desired that longed-for emancipation that would end centuries of unjust oppression and grant equal status to all Israelites as citizens alongside others.”³⁷ In considering a potential but unproven divergence between Luzzatto’s public declarations and his private convictions, Tedeschi may have been suggesting that his master had pragmatic political considerations. He implicitly hinted at Luzzatto’s prudence-driven avoidance, of confronting the Austrian authorities and their harsh censorship of any expression of support of Italy’s allegedly more liberal policy towards the Jews. If this is correct, however, then Tedeschi downplayed the fact, acknowledged by Luzzatto himself,³⁸ that Austria was the most outspoken champion of Jewish emancipation, at least since the Patent of Toleration issued by Joseph II in 1781 that granted religious freedom to non-Catholics living in the crown lands of the Habsburg monarchy. This contrasted starkly with the discrimination imposed on Jews in other Italian states including the Kingdom of Savoy, which withheld the Jews’ civil and political rights until 1848.

Nevertheless, in the eyes of many of Luzzatto’s disciples and of most of the Italian Jews of the time, the quest for Italian independence was intricately linked with the pursuit of Jewish emancipation. Luzzatto’s intellectual openness to the standards of modern scientific methods had to be mirrored in his

36 ויעש גלוליו אימנציפאציון. These verses were cited in a letter from Shadal to his disciple Vita Zelman dated 5 December 1837 in Luzzatto, *Epistolario*, 239. Dedicated to Giuseppe Almanzi, they were reprinted in the second part of Luzzatto’s *Kinnor Na'im* (Padua, 1879), 241.

37 Tedeschi, *Due discorsi*, 78.

38 Luzzatto, *Autobiografia*, 30: he writes of the Jews of his ancestral community in San Daniele del Friuli that “they are always grateful to the lofty House of Austria, who granted them asylum [after their expulsion from the Venetian territories in 1777].”

views of modernity *tout court* in order to transform and elevate him as a flawless symbol of successful Italian-Jewish integration, showing that the attachment to Jewish heritage could coexist with the requirements of citizenship in the Italian nation. For instance, in line with this narrative, Giuseppe Luzzatto stressed the dual aspect of his father's legacy in the preface written for his edition of Shadal's correspondence: "All of Shadal's efforts were always directed toward these two interwoven goals: the sake of enhancing Judaism and that of glorifying the Italian name."³⁹

In the diary of the young Giuseppe, penned during the momentous years of the Italian independence wars in 1860 and 1861, one can discern the sympathy for the Italian Risorgimento cause that pervaded the Luzzatto household. Nevertheless, this sentiment did not contradict his father's loyalty towards the Habsburg monarchy, a stance that Shadal both publicly and privately reaffirmed to all his correspondents. His allegiance is further underscored by a collection of celebratory poems he composed in honour of various members of the Habsburg royal family.⁴⁰ This proclivity towards the "House of Austria" embarrassed one of his strongest admirers, Sabato Morais, a rabbi born in Livorno who was a Freemason and a political exile in the United States, where he was among the founders of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York. In a footnote in the 1882 edition of Shadal's autobiography, Morais attempted to justify his political views, linking them to the particular freedom Jews enjoyed in Trieste under the Habsburgs.⁴¹

Even in the letter that is most frequently cited in support of Shadal's Italian patriotism—the one written in Hebrew to his friend David Schwarz in Budapest on 13 April 1848, where he enthusiastically describes the successes of the Piedmontese army—he takes care to underscore that "I have always been a faithful lover of the Austrian kings."⁴² However, it is precisely on the basis of

39 See Giuseppe Luzzatto's preface to Luzzatto, *Epistolario*, iv.

40 The earliest known literary work by Shadal to receive the honour of publication was a poem dated 24 August 1819, written to commemorate Crown Prince Ferdinand's visit to the synagogue in Trieste.

41 Note by Sabato Morais in Luzzatto, *Autobiografia*, 40.

42 "The Piedmontese army has already arrived to help us and there is hope that in a day or two they will enter Verona and expel the Germans [Ashkenazim, meaning the Austrians] therefrom. I am sending you a poem in Latin that was printed here yesterday, from which you will see that all of Italy, united to a man, is imbued with the divine spirit to shake off the foreign yoke. To you, men of Hungary to whom God gave hearts appreciative of liberty and nationality, as well as to all Germans who are now arising to strengthen their own national bonds, it is fitting to refuse the despots your help, if they should insist upon sending an army of Vandals to convert a beautiful land into a desert. For certainly no strangers will rule over Italy anymore, unless they exterminate all her inhabitants": Luzzatto, *Iggerot Shadal*, 1051.

this letter that the image of Shadal coagulated into that of “a genuine Italian patriot” with “deep-seated Italian loyalties,” in the words of Salo W. Baron, who was instrumental in introducing this portrait into the historiographical mainstream of the last century.⁴³ Only recently, mindful of the ambivalences in Luzzatto’s posture, has Alessandro Grazi sought to correct this overly one-sided image of his Italian patriotism by emphasising the importance of distinguishing between his pride in his Italian cultural identity and his scepticism and disillusionment with the revolutionary goals of the Risorgimento after 1848.⁴⁴

This did not prevent the overemphasis of Luzzatto’s support of emancipatory trends within unified Italy. The fact that Massimo D’Azeglio (1798–1866) mentioned Luzzatto in his work *Dell’emancipazione degli israeliti* (Florence, 1848) was seen by many as evidence of his influence on the Risorgimento leaders advocating for Jewish emancipation.⁴⁵ In line with this position, the German scholar and rabbi Ismar Elbogen (1874–1943), teacher at the Rabbinical College in Florence, wrote of Luzzatto that “his moral theology benefited the Jews of Italy by securing their civil emancipation.”⁴⁶ This image became so deeply ingrained in the imagination of Italian Jews that in a writing composed for the centenary of his birth, the then rabbi of Trieste Vittorio Castiglioni (1840–1911) portrayed Luzzatto as a man “who did not hesitate for a moment to align himself with those who fought for study, progress, freedom; in a word, for truth.” Castiglioni described Luzzatto to future generations as “the epitome of the true model Israelite, the perfect Jew who could be presented to the civilised world as the most absolute and sincere embodiment of pure Judaism.”⁴⁷

Adorned with a semblance of civic sanctity, it should come as no surprise that Samuel David Luzzatto became the subject of numerous biographical sketches in works dedicated to highlighting the Jewish contribution to Italian and European civilisation. Among the eight Italian Jews out of thirty people who “contributed with all the power of their intellect to the development of sci-

43 Baron, “The Revolution of 1848,” 56 and 58. The letter to Schwarz is also quoted in Gadi Luzzatto Voghera, “Primavera dei popoli ed emancipazione ebraica: Due lettere dell’aprile 1848,” *La rassegna mensile di Israel* 64 (1998): 83–86, and in Monica Miniati, *Italian Jewish Women in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Century* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 18.

44 Alessandro Grazi, “Divergent Jewish Approaches to Italian Nationalism and Nation-Building,” *Annali d’italianistica* 36 (2018): 261–282.

45 For example, Giuseppe De Leva, in his commemoration of Shadal at the Academy of Padua in April 1866.

46 Ismar Elbogen, “S.D. Luzzatto. Commemorazione,” in *Relazione sul biennio 1899–1900 del Collegio rabbinico italiano* (Florence: Galletti & Cassuto, 1901), xx–xxi.

47 Vittorio Castiglioni, “L’ideale di Samuel David Luzzatto,” in “Nel primo centenario della scomparsa di Samuel David Luzzatto,” 292.

ences, letters, and arts,” Flaminio Servi (1841–1904), editor of the foremost Jewish newspaper in the Kingdom of Italy, the *Vessillo Israelitico*, named Samuel David Luzzatto and his son Filosseno (1829–1854) as the finest examples of “patriotic virtue and religious commitment,” who should serve as inspirational figures for the “young Israelites of the now liberated beautiful country.”⁴⁸ In the gallery of one hundred “eminent Israelites” compiled by Henry Samuel Morais (1860–1935), the son of the aforementioned Rabbi Sabato, Samuel David Luzzatto and Filosseno stand out once again among the nine Italians mentioned.⁴⁹ And finally, in his volume aimed at “the Israelite youth,” Guglielmo Lattes (1857–1928) expresses the hope that “all of Italy would come together in a solemn manner to honour Samuel David Luzzatto and Elia Benamozegh.”⁵⁰

However, once Samuel David Luzzatto had ascended to the ranks of the greatest Italian Jews by the turn of the century, his fame in Italy began to wane rapidly. The demise of that “little ancient world,” as it was called by Antonio Fogazzaro in his novel set during the Italian independence wars,⁵¹ a world where Luzzatto had been a revered figure, was definitively sealed by the First World War. Italian Jews increasingly assimilated into broader society, embracing ideologies such as Zionism, socialism, and fascism, which were entirely foreign to Luzzatto’s political background. Umberto Saba (1883–1957), a poet and writer who descended from Luzzatto on his mother’s side, captured the spirit of this cultural shift in a short story written in 1919. Saba depicted his ancestor with affection and admiration, yet also with a touch of irony, reminiscent of characters from a vanished Trieste ghetto, out of step with the evolving world around it:

Samuel David Luzzatto, whom his students later called “the great Shadal,” pondered this anagram to himself, with which he already envisioned signing his future works that would surely change the face of Judaism. These works, with God’s help, would restore Judaism to its original dominion in the religious world.⁵²

48 Flaminio Servi, *Gli Israeliti d’Europa nella civiltà: Memorie storiche, biografiche, e statistiche dal 1789 al 1870* (Turin, 1872), 218–224.

49 Henry Samuel Morais, *Eminent Israelites of the Nineteenth Century: A Series of Biographical Sketches* (Philadelphia, 1880), 211–220.

50 Guglielmo Lattes, *Cuore d’Israele. Libro di lettura per i ragazzi israeliti* (Casale: Tip. Rossi e Lavagno, 1908), 96.

51 Antonio Fogazzaro, *Piccolo mondo antico* (Milan, 1895).

52 “Samuele Davide Luzzatto, quello che fu detto poi dai suoi scolari ‘il grande Sciadal,’ vagliava fra sé e sé questo anagramma, col quale pensava già allora di firmare le sue future opere, che avrebbero certo cangiata la faccia del giudaismo; lo avrebbero—con l’aiuto di

In the notes accompanying Saba's 1952 reissue of the text, the tone has grown sharply sarcastic and merciless. To introduce Shadal to a new generation of readers of his stories, Saba mentions that he had two wives, which is correct, but completely invents that one of them tragically met her death after throwing herself out of a window due to her husband's "extreme devotion to the virtue of thriftiness" [estremo amore alla virtù del risparmio]. Regarding Shadal's sons, he describes Filosseno as being "destined—as everyone said—to become another luminary of Judaism." But here too, Saba felt the need to add a detail from his own imagination: that Filosseno died of a venereal disease contracted in Paris. The world that still appeared to Saba as "marvellous" [meraviglioso] in 1919 had turned "frightening" [spaventoso] in the immediate post-World War II years.⁵³ There was no reaction to what would have been considered a crime of *lèse majesté* against Luzzatto half a century earlier. Not even the official journal of Jewish studies in Italy, *La rassegna mensile di Israel*, despite the fact that the daughter of its director and founder, Dante Lattes (1876–1965), had married one of Shadal's grandsons, dedicated the slightest reference to the 150th anniversary of his birth, which was instead celebrated in the Israeli press. From this moment onward in Italy, the figure of Shadal would primarily attract academic interest, and no public tribute would be held to his memory.

3 Shadal as a Zionist Icon

Concomitantly with the waning of his renown among Italian Jews, however, from the early twentieth century onward, Shadal began to enjoy a new wave of popularity within Zionist circles. This may explain why he is the only nineteenth-century Italian Jew to have streets named after him in at least eight Israeli cities, an honour not bestowed on any of his contemporaries such as his mentor Isaac Samuel Reggio (1784–1855), his pupil Marco Mortara (1815–1894), or his opponent Elia Benamozegh, whose names are not remembered in any public space in the Jewish state.

The first modern Hebrew writer to cite Shadal as a model for the new generations of Hebrew authors was Micha Josef Berdyczewski (1865–1921). In his

Dio—restituito al suo primitivo dominio del mondo religioso": Umberto Saba, "Un letterato ebreo," in Saba, *Opere*, ed. Linuccia Saba (Milan: Mondadori, 1964), 31–43.

53 Saba, "Un letterato ebreo," 43. For Saba's complex relationship with Judaism, one can refer to Gianna Gardenal, "L'ebraismo in Umberto Saba," *Studi novecenteschi* 35, no. 76 (2008): 401–412.

brief publication “On the Books of Shadal,” Berdyczewski ascribes to Shadal the following merits:

Shadal, the first and only among the sages of Israel in recent times (after Ranaq) [Rabbi Nahman Krochmal (1785–1840)], who in all his investigations and teachings sought to find the root of the soul of Israel. [...] despite all his mastery of every aspect of the written and oral Torah, he never forgot that the soul, the spirit that animates all these stones, is Israel, the foundation of all of them.⁵⁴

In other words, in Berdyczewski’s eyes, Shadal’s greatness rested precisely on his placing the people of Israel at the centre of his philosophy, subordinating the Torah itself to Israel’s national vocation.

The greatest contributor to the establishment of the perception of Shadal as the harbinger of the national Jewish Renaissance in the land of the forefathers was undoubtedly Joseph Klausner (1874–1958), a Lithuanian-born Israeli historian and professor of Hebrew literature in Jerusalem. This is what he writes in his collected essays *Judaism and Humanity*, which forms the basis for all he subsequently wrote on Shadal in his monumental work *A History of Modern Hebrew Literature (1785–1930)*, published in London in 1932: “A great national Jew like Shadal could not not be a ‘Zionist.’ Someone who loved the people of Israel, the Torah of Israel, and the language of Israel like Shadal could not fail to also love the land of Israel [...]. He loved the land of Israel with all his heart.”⁵⁵

Of course, within Israeli society, Shadal did not enjoy the same level of popularity in every circle, certainly not amongst the ultra-Orthodox, who considered him nothing less than a heretic for his maskilic connections and for having dared to submit the Torah itself to textual criticism. Answering a question as to whether Shadal’s writing could be read by God-fearing Jews, Rabbi Aharon Yehoshua Stern (1952–2024), a prominent figure at the Ponevezh yeshiva in Bnei Brak, wrote in the ultra-Orthodox journal *Nezer ha-Torah* that Shadal was a “complete Maskil” [*maskil gamur*] and therefore his works “should not be read, especially by young students who may not be aware of the context of their composition.”⁵⁶

In contrast, he was greatly appreciated across the Israeli political spectrum, from the right to the left. Thanks to the database available on the National

54 Micha Yosef Berdyczewski, *Yisra'el we-'Orayta be-Sifrey Shadal* (Krakow, 1892), 4.

55 Joseph Klausner, *Yahadut we-'Enošyyut—Judentum und Menschtum* (Warsaw: Tuschia, 1910), 90.

56 *Nezer ha-Torah* (2009–2010), 367.

Library's Historical Jewish Press website,⁵⁷ it is possible to analyse both the frequency of citations of Samuel David Luzzatto's name and the specific newspapers in which he is most recurrently mentioned, along with the context of these citations. A search for Shadal's name in the two most common spellings (לוצאטו and שמואל דוד לוצטו, the latter being much less frequent) within the Hebrew press before and after the founding of the state of Israel yields the following data.

Out of 156 mentions between 1893 and 1992, two notable peaks coincide with major anniversaries related to Luzzatto: eight mentions in 1950 for the 150th anniversary of his birth and fifteen in 1965 for the centenary of his death. Excluding the years with reviews of his newly reprinted works, the annual average number of citations of his name is approximately three to four mentions. There is a noticeable increase in frequency between the two world wars and from 1945 to 1965, followed by a substantial and rapid decline.

Excluding brief mentions of Shadal in repetitive lists of prominent figures in nineteenth-century Jewish studies and concise bibliographical references, approximately one-third of the total references to him, major Israeli newspapers like *Ha'aretz*, *Davar*, or *Ma'ariv*,⁵⁸ highlight his Zionist sentiments and his deep affinity for the Hebrew language. Israel Zmora (1899–1983), a distinguished Israeli literary critic, writer, and translator, succinctly encapsulates Shadal's contribution to Hebrew culture:

What was Shadal's main goal in all his life? Undoubtedly, it was Hebrew literature; this was his greatest spiritual pleasure above any other, it was his priority and his primary moral obligation; because Shadal was sensitive to the harbingers of the imminent revival of the Israeli nation [*ha-ummah ha-yisre'elit*], and this feeling arose from his awareness, which was obvious to him and because of which he was not connected to the Jews of Italy, just as all the sages of the nation in the past were not connected to a small group of Jews, but to Judaism in general.⁵⁹

Zmora therefore obliterates Shadal's Italian background in order to include him among the forefathers of the Israeli nation.

In another instance, there is an attempt to erase Shadal's strong Orthodox commitment and to stress instead his courage in dismantling the authority of

57 <https://www.nli.org.il/en/discover/newspapers/jpress>.

58 *Ha'aretz*, founded in 1918, is the longest-running newspaper currently in print in Israel. *Davar* was a daily newspaper published between 1925 and 1996; the still-running *Ma'ariv* was founded in 1948.

59 Israel Zmora, "Samuel David Luzzatto (150 šanah)," *Ha'aretz* (10 November 1950), 5.

the Bible through textual criticism, making him a sort of harbinger of Jewish secularism. In a presentation on the impact of the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls on biblical scholarship, which was written for a non-specialist audience and published in *Ha-Boqer*, the newspaper of the General Zionist party printed in Tel Aviv between 1935 and 1965, the writer and translator Barukh Krupnik (1889–1972) writes: “The moderate critics, such as Samuel David Luzzatto, who dared to make some slight corrections where the text of the Bible is clearly corrupted, were right. In contrast, the ultra-conservatives who forbid the changing of a single letter are wrong.”⁶⁰ Meanwhile, David Zakkai (1886–1978), one of the most significant figures in Jewish journalism of his time, did not hesitate to amplify Shadal’s boldness in his relationship to the Bible, completely ignoring his role as a man of faith and a sharp opponent of the biblical criticism that developed in Germany in the nineteenth century: “Samuel David Luzzatto is one of the pioneers of biblical criticism in the Hebrew language. He identified the flaws and inconsistencies in the text of the Bible and was very skilled in correcting them. He did not hesitate to allow any correction.”⁶¹

With these premises, the foundations were laid for reappropriating the figure of Shadal within the context of socialist Zionism. The newspaper *Davar*, as the official organ of the Histadrut—Israel’s largest and foremost workers’ union—served as the principal advocate of this movement. With twenty-seven occurrences, *Davar* features Shadal’s name more frequently than any other publication in the Jewish press of the twentieth century. Among the most explicit efforts to transform him into a pioneer of Labour Zionism is the work of Alexander Ziskind Rabinovitz (known as Azar) (1854–1945), a Hebrew writer and a pioneer of Hebrew socialist literature:

As a great scholar in the fields of Hebrew linguistics, biblical hermeneutics, and Hebrew poetry, Samuel David Luzzatto knew and recognised the greatness of labour and the feelings of the worker, on whose toil the whole world subsists, although sometimes he does not have even a carob to eat from one Sabbath to the other. And this is nothing new. Wasn’t Shadal’s father a poor carpenter, and did he not see him struggling to support his family and educate his sons in hardship? This was Shadal’s good fortune, that despite his father’s poor condition, he rose to become a professor in Padua.⁶²

60 Barukh Krupnik, “What Have the Dead-Sea Scrolls Revealed” [Hebrew], *Ha-Boqer* (14 April 1950).

61 David Zakkai, “Old Wine in a New Bottle” [Hebrew], *Davar* (10 April 1970).

62 Alexander Ziskind Rabinovitz, “The Song of the Workers for Shadal” [Hebrew], *Davar* (1 February 1929).

However, alongside this portrayal of Shadal as a labour advocate sensitive to the workers' cause, another contrasting version emerged, depicting him as a precursor of religious Zionism. With twenty-four occurrences, only slightly fewer than *Davar*, the newspaper that dedicated the most attention to Shadal, featuring twenty-two editorials, is *Ha-Şofeh* [The Observer], which was founded by Rabbi Meir Bar-Ilan (1880–1949), one of the leaders of the *Mizrahi*, a religious Zionist movement.⁶³ Shadal is presented as “a man who integrated the science of his time into his hot heart, which beat in the rhythm of the hearts of the Jews in every time and never bent over the Haskalah.”⁶⁴ In his view, Luzzatto “used all his intelligence to defend the purest faith against hostile investigations, with the philosophy of the heart against the philosophy of the mind.”⁶⁵ All of these descriptions emphasise that Shadal was a man of science and faith, a modern scholar as well as a guardian of tradition, in the spirit of the national religious commitment to engaging with the challenges of modernity without making concessions to secularism.

The best example of the predominant attitude towards Shadal's reception within national religious groups is provided by the Talmudist and Hebrew literature scholar Zvi Meir Rabinovitch (1908–1991):

Shadal's ways, imbued with the love of truth and with the adherence to the faith and to the Torah, always fill the reader with a spirit of elevation. Although his works were written over a hundred years ago, they are relevant even today and reflect the spirit of the great Jewish vision that once was in the heart of this Jewish people. He foresaw the collapse of European culture and the decline due to Jewish assimilation and to the oblivion of Torah [...]. It would be worth making Shadal's oeuvre known among the youth of our time. The teachings of this *national-religious* genius have the power to encourage and strengthen the weak.⁶⁶

Rabinovitch's hopes were answered, because Shadal's commentaries on the Torah were published shortly thereafter in Israel by Pinchas Schlesinger, a national-religious rabbi, and many of his other Hebrew works were reprinted in modern editions.⁶⁷ The enduring interest in Shadal's work is currently evi-

63 Mikael Tossavainen, “Heroism, History, and the Holocaust: The Religious Israeli Press between Judaism and Zionism,” in *The Holocaust on Post-War Battlefields: Genocide as Historical Culture*, ed. Klas-Göran Karlsson and Ulf Zander (Malmö: Sekel, 2006), 75–102.

64 *Ha-Şofeh* (19 April 1946).

65 *Ha-Şofeh* (12 December 1952).

66 Zvi Meir Rabinovitch, “Talpiyyot,” *Ha-Şofeh* (4 May 1951) (my emphasis).

67 Samuel David Luzzatto, *Peruř Shadal: 'al Ĥamiřah Ĥummeřey Torah* (Padua, 1871; repr.

dent in Israel through the efforts of Jonathan Bassi, himself a descendant of Luzzatto, who has reissued his most significant exegetical and philosophical works in refined critical editions, often incorporating previously unpublished manuscripts.⁶⁸

Despite the various political appropriations of Shadal's image in the main Jewish press outlets, the common denominator across these perspectives remains the Zionist interpretation of his work. While his 1848 letter to David Schwarz served the purpose of demonstrating his infallible support for Italian independence among Italian Jews, in the Israeli context, there are two letters that are primarily cited as proof texts in support of his proto-Zionist sentiments, whose significance is such that the originals were displayed in an exhibition devoted to him at the Jewish National Library in commemoration of the centenary of his death. In the catalogue, Baruch Yaron, the curator, explained this choice, referring to Luzzatto's warnings "against the relinquishment of an independent Jewish culture, a sign of which would be neglect of the Hebrew language" and express and expressed his opinion that "Jews should settle in the land of Israel and labour with their hands."⁶⁹

The first of these documents is Shadal's letter to Moritz Steinschneider of 18 June 1847, where he defended the Jews' right to exist as a people, although not in terms of a Jewish national independence, but rather as the particular mission that the Jewish people is expected to fulfil among the nations, while the second was translated into English due to its importance in proving his sympathy towards the Jews' return to their ancestral land. This letter was addressed to Nachman Nathan Coronel (1810–1890), a Jerusalemite Sephardi scholar, on 26 October 1849 and reads:

And the second thing to cause Israel to return to the work of their fathers, and to live by the labor of their hands and especially by work on the land which was a glory to all the nations, and if they will undertake this work

Jerusalem: Horev, 1993); Luzzatto, *Peruṣey Shadal 'al Yirmeyah, Yehezqel, Mišley we-'Iyyov* (Lemberg, 1876; repr. Jerusalem: Hoša'at Maqor, 1969); Luzzatto, *Peruṣ Shadal 'al Sefer Yeša'yah* (Padua, 1855; repr. Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1970); Luzzatto, *Sefer Yesodey ha-Torah* (Lemberg, 1880; repr. Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1957); Luzzatto, *Ohev Ger* (Vienna, 1830; repr. Jerusalem: Maqor, 1974; Jerusalem: Bassi, 2022).

68 Among the works of Luzzatto that have been edited and republished by Jonathan Bassi are *Wiqquah 'al Hokhmat ha-Qabbalah* (Jerusalem: Karmel, 2013); *Peruṣ Shadal la-Torah* (Jerusalem: Carmel, 2015); and *Ohev Ger*. It should be noted that these editions are tailored for a religious Zionist audience.

69 Baruch Yaron, ed., *Exhibition on the Occasion of the 100th Anniversary of Samuel David Luzzatto's Death: Catalogue* [Hebrew and English] (Jerusalem: Heb. and Eng., 1966), iii–iv.

it too will gradually give its strength to them and it will again be as in days of yore a land flowing with milk and honey. And if the land will give of its yield, then also your other labors will succeed, and will enrich those engaged in them. But this is a long story.⁷⁰

This could be read as a premonitory vision of the Zionist project of the redemption of the land through labour in line with the later ideology of “Hebrew work” developed by Aaron David Gordon (1856–1922), the founder of the *Ha-Po’el ha-Ša’ir*, to promote physical labour and agriculture as a means of uplifting Jews spiritually. However, it also contained a messianic afflatus that could please the supporters of the national religious movement. Unsurprisingly, the letter to Coronel would be much quoted by subsequent Zionist leaders and intellectuals, such as the American scholar and fervent Zionist Richard J.H. Gottheil (1862–1936)⁷¹ and Joseph Klausner, together with two other letters Shadal sent one to Markus Jost and the other to Albert Cohn, in support of his sympathy for the project of establishing a Jewish state in the Holy Land.⁷² Luzzatto’s notion of the Jews as a nation has led some modern scholars to interpret him as a proto-Zionist.⁷³

Nevertheless, it can easily be contended that Shadal did not see the Jews’ return to the Land of Israel as a political project, but rather as the natural fulfilment of the spiritual promises of the holy writs. He insisted on dissipating any doubts about this in his book *Il giudaismo illustrato nella sua teorica, nella sua storia e nella sua letteratura* [Judaism, Illustrated in Its Theory, History, and Literature], which was published in the fateful year 1848, but composed a decade earlier:

The hopes of the Jews are not political hopes, but religious ones [...]. And the establishment of a Jewish kingdom in the land of Israel under the auspices of the nations would not constitute the fulfillment of the prophecies and the realisation of their hopes for the Jews [...]. And in any case, the Jews have no other homeland but the one in which they were born, or the one in which they have established a permanent home.⁷⁴

70 Yaron, *Exhibition*, vi.

71 Richard J.H. Gottheil, *Zionism* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1914), 52.

72 Also reviewed in “Zionistisches von Samuel David Luzzatto,” *Die Welt* 22 (31 May 1901): 4–5.

73 Israel Abrahams, “Samuel David Luzzatto as Exegete (Continued),” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 57 (1967): 195–196.

74 Samuel David Luzzatto, *Il giudaismo illustrato nella sua teorica, nella sua storia e nella sua letteratura* (Padua, 1848), 25.

Luzzatto was therefore very careful not to use the term “state” when discussing the national character of the Jewish people. In his *Lezioni di teologia morale*, he explicitly rejected the claim that the Jews constituted a “state within a state” [uno stato entro lo stato], their aim being solely to preserve their condition as a “religious corporation” [corporazione religiosa], nothing more than a small family within the larger social bond uniting all citizens of the same state.⁷⁵

To conclude this brief survey of the reception of Shadal’s image among Italian Jews and within the various Zionist movements in the twentieth century, it is clear that the renown he achieved in Jewish studies ultimately endowed him with a high symbolic value. This value has been contested and occasionally instrumentalised in defence of concepts and political interests that either had not yet been articulated during Shadal’s time or had substantially different meanings from those acquired in the century following his death.

This overview does not aim to establish which interpretation of Shadal’s life and work is the most accurate and credible. His thought, which is characterised by inherent ambiguity and a clear lack of systematisation—both of which were influenced by his decision to rely, like Pascal, on the intuitions of the heart rather than the truths of reason—likely allowed for and even invited an open and flexible hermeneutic approach. Furthermore, we should not dismiss Ephraim Chamiel’s assertion that Luzzatto’s worldview was based on the assumption of a double truth.⁷⁶ Nonetheless, it now seems timely to address a fracture that has emerged in studies devoted to Luzzatto’s intellectual output, which stems from the fact that his thought is predominantly conveyed in two languages, Italian and Hebrew. Approaching the study of Shadal without proficiency in both languages hinders one’s ability to piece together the various elements that comprise the complexity of his legacy. This legacy draws its strength precisely from his continuous dialogue with Italian culture and the sources of Jewish tradition.

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75 Samuel David Luzzatto, *Lezioni di teologia morale israelitica* (Padua, 1862), 22.

76 Chamiel, *The Middle Way*.

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Rabbi Raphael Berdugo's Reshaping of Maimonides's Thirteen Principles of Faith

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Abstract

The issue of principles of faith has been extensively discussed within Jewish thought over the centuries, and significant academic scholarship has been devoted to the subject. This study seeks to expand the academic discourse to the North African diaspora—a region that has received only minimal attention in this context—by focusing on the writings of Rabbi Raphael Berdugo (1747–1821). A close reading reveals Berdugo's dialectical approach to Maimonides's thirteen principles of faith. While he adopted Maimonides's basic doctrine, he unhesitatingly proceeded to propose a different order to the principles, to offer different interpretations, and even to challenge the status of some. In pinpointing and framing Berdugo's powerful affinity to Maimonides's *Guide of the Perplexed*, I suggest that his reading of it represents a direct continuation of the medieval and post-Spanish-expulsion discourse, in contrast to the European Enlightenment's concurrently developing modern reading of the *Guide*.

Keywords

Raphael Berdugo – principles of faith – Maimonides – Morocco – *Guide of the Perplexed* – early modern period

1 Introduction

The principles of faith were a topic of extensive discussion in Jewish thought from the Middle Ages, through the early modern period, and into the late modern era.¹ A great deal of academic scholarship has been dedicated to clarifying

¹ For a discussion of the approach that the fundamental principles of Jewish faith can already be found in biblical and post-biblical literature, see David Neumark, *The History of Dogmas in Israel* [Hebrew] (Odessa: Moriah, 1913).

diverse approaches to them and to exploring various disputes.² In the following, I will seek to expand the academic discourse to the North African diaspora, a region that has thus far received only incidental and minimal attention in this context, with a particular focus on the discussions of R. Raphael Berdugo (1747–1821).

Berdugo, a prominent North African rabbi of his era, was also known by his epithet “The Angel Raphael.”³ Serving as a *dayyan* in Meknes, Morocco, he contributed to the establishment of numerous ordinances for the community.⁴ In the course of his career, Berdugo authored works in a variety of fields: *Mey Menuhot*—sermons on the Torah (two parts: Jerusalem, 1910; Djerba, 1942); *Rav Peninim*—sermons for special occasions and eulogies (Casablanca, 1970); *Mesammehei Lev*—a brief and comprehensive commentary on the twenty-four books of the Bible (Jerusalem, 1990);⁵ *Šarvit ha-Zahav*—novellae on the Talmud (two parts, Jerusalem, 1975 and 1978);⁶ *Roqeah Merqahat*—a comprehensive and critical discussion of rabbinic Aggadah (Paris, 2007);⁷ *Mišpaṭim*

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- 2 This is not the place to detail the extensive research literature on the subject; relevant studies will be mentioned in context.
 - 3 For a brief overview, see Amos Frisch, “Berdugo, Raphael ben Mordecai,” in *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception, Volume 3: Athena–Birkat ha-Minim*, ed. Constance M. Furey et al. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011), 894–895.
 - 4 On the internal legislation of the Meknes Jewish community and Berdugo's part in it, see Moshe Amar, “On the ‘Meknes Regulations’ in the 18th–19th Centuries” [Hebrew], in *Society and Community*, ed. Avraham Haim (Jerusalem: Misgav Yerushalayim Institute for Research on the Sephardi and Oriental Jewish Heritage, 1991), 35–45; Amar, “The Meknes Regulations and Their Connection to the Fez Regulations” [Hebrew], *Miqqedem Umīyyam* 9 (2006): 109–185; Mori Amar, ed., *The Regulations of Meknes* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Hēvrat Ahavat Shalom, 1995), 27–72.
 - 5 Michael Avioz, “Rabbi Raphael Berdugo's Approach to Resolving Contradictions in the Bible in His Book *Mešammehei Lev*” [Hebrew], in *Fes and Other Moroccan Cities: A Thousand Years of Creativity*, ed. Moshe Bar-Asher, Moshe Amar, and Shimon Sharvit (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2013), 205–213; Avioz, “Biblical Text Criticism in Rabbi Raphael Berdugo's Commentaries” [Hebrew], in *Mehqerey Ma'arav Umizrah: Collected Papers*, ed. Moshe Bar-Asher, Elimelekh Westreich, and Shimon Sharvit (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2018), 41–54; Amos Frisch, “On the Interpretive Method of R. Raphael Berdugo (Based on His Exegesis of the Former Prophets),” *Revue des études juives* 163 (2004): 445–462; Frisch, “Rabbi Raphael Berdugo's Explanation of the First Two Verses of the Book of Ruth” [Hebrew], *Sinai* 150 (2018): 83–92.
 - 6 Haim Bentov, “Rabbi Raphael Berdugo: His Contribution and Approach to Talmudic and Halakhic Research” [Hebrew], in *North African Jewry in the 19th–20th Centuries: Studies in Its History, Culture and Society*, ed. Michael Avitbol (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 1980), 141–149.
 - 7 Michal Aziza Ohana, “*Roqeah Merqahat* by Rabbi Raphael Berdugo on Rabbinic Aggadat, Commentary and Authority” [Hebrew], *Tarbiš* 90, no. 2 (2024): 305–333.

Yešarim—responsa (Crakow, 1891);⁸ *Torat Emet*—novellae on the four parts of the *Šulḥan Arukh* (Meknes, 1939); and *Lešon Limmudim*—a short commentary in Mughrabi Jewish Arabic on twenty books of the Bible (Jerusalem, 2002). Based mostly on the study of the first five items in this list, scholars have concluded that he tended towards *pešaṭ* interpretation and rationalism.⁹

Berdugo's composition *Rav Peninim* is, as mentioned, a collection of sermons for special occasions such as a *Šabbat Kallah*,¹⁰ *Šabbat ha-Gadol*,¹¹ *Šabbat Zakhor*,¹² *Šabbat Tešuvah*,¹³ charity events, *Šabbat Eikhah*,¹⁴ eulogies, bar mitzvahs, and weddings.¹⁵ The final discourse in this book, which is dedicated to the thirteen principles of faith, will be the focus of the current study, thus expanding the current academic discourse on the acceptance of Maimonides's tenets of faith. Moreover, focusing on this text will also enrich our knowledge of North African scholars' affinity to the *Guide of the Perplexed* in the final stages of the early modern period and on the cusp of the late modern period.

Academic scholarship on the non-kabbalistic thought that developed in Morocco (and North Africa in general) from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries is only in its early stages. I propose that this aforementioned lengthy period be divided into three sub-periods. The first spans from the early sixteenth century, with the settlement of the Sephardic exiles in the Maghreb,

8 On his audacity in halakic rulings, see Moshe Bar-Asher, "Bold and Innovative Figures among the Sages of the West" [Hebrew], in *Progress and Tradition: Creativity, Leadership and Acculturation Processes among the Jews of North Africa*, ed. Moises Orfali and Ephraim Hazan (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 2005), 3–15, especially 5–7.

9 Eliša Naḥmani, "R. Raphael Berdugo and His Torah Commentaries" [Hebrew] (MA thesis, Bar-Ilan University, 1988); Dan Manor, "R. Raphael Berdugo: His Attitude towards the Philosophy and Rationalism of His Time" [Hebrew], *Miqqedem Umiyyam* 4 (1991): 127–143; Henry Toledano, "The Centrality of Reason and Common Sense in the Biblical and Talmudic Exegesis of Rabbi Raphael Berdugo (1747–1821)," in *Between History and Literature: Studies in Honor of Isaac Barzilay*, ed. Stanley Nash (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1997), 171–205; David Asulin, "Rabbi Raphael Berdugo: Philosophical Aspects" [Hebrew] (PhD diss., Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2017).

10 The Sabbath following a wedding, when the two families celebrate the bride and groom.

11 The Sabbath before Passover, when it is customary for the rabbi to sermonise about the upcoming festival.

12 The Sabbath before Purim, when it is customary to read the Torah passage about remembering 'Amaleq (Deut 25:17–19).

13 The Sabbath between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, when it is customary for the rabbi to sermonise about repentance.

14 The Sabbath before *Tish'ah be-Av*.

15 On the place of sermons in the North African space, see Michal Aziza Ohana, "To Preach on the Order of the Day': Oral and Written Sermons in the North African Diaspora in the Early Modern Period" [Hebrew], *Pe'amim* (forthcoming).

until the mid-seventeenth century with the arrival of Lurianic Kabbalah and the Sabbatean movement. The second spans from the mid-seventeenth to the mid-nineteenth century, coinciding with the onset of French colonialism, the penetration of the Haskalah movement, and the growing influence of Jewish Orientalism in the region.¹⁶ The third spans from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, at which point these communities ceased to exist. The little existing scholarship on non-kabbalistic Jewish thought in North Africa focuses on the first period. This scholarship emphasises that the descendants of the Spanish exiles who resettled in North Africa continued to reference and cite the *Guide* (along with other medieval thinkers) in their writings, which primarily took the form of biblical commentaries, commentaries on rabbinic Aggadah, and homiletic discourses on the weekly Torah portions and other significant events. Key themes addressed include, *inter alia*, creation, providence, prophecy, and human perfection.¹⁷ The scholarship devoted to the second period—in which Berdugo is situated—is even sparser, and the prevailing view is one in which only a handful of figures, Berdugo among them, sustained the affinity with the Sephardic philosophical tradition.¹⁸ Berdugo frequently invoked works such as Baḥya ibn Paquda's *Ḥovot ha-Levavot*, Judah Halevi's *Kuzari*, Maimonides's *Guide*, Joseph Albo's *Sefer ha-Iqqarim*, Gersonides's *Milḥamot Adonay*, Hasdai Crescas's *Or Adonay*, Isaac Arama's *Aqedat Yiṣḥaq*, and others. He also referenced Greek philosophers (whom he knew secondhand), primarily Aristotle, alternately endorsing and disagreeing with them. A close reading of the final discourse in his *Rav Peninim* reveals the manner of his interpretation of Maimonides's thought in general, and in particular illuminates his dialectical relationship with Maimonides's doctrine of the principles of faith.

16 The new periodisation in the historiography of Jewish communities in North Africa began at different points in time for each community throughout the nineteenth century.

17 Michal Aziza Ohana, "Jewish Thought in Fez in the Generations Following the Spanish Expulsion: Characteristics, Style, and Content," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 111 (2021): 605–621.

18 Alongside him, we can also mention Moses ben Isaac Edrehi (who at some point migrated to Amsterdam and later to the land of Israel) and Šmu'el ben Zaken, on whom see Dan Manor, "Humanity in Rabbi Shmuel ben Zaken's Thought" [Hebrew], in *Studies in the Culture of North African Jews*, ed. Issachar Ben-Ami (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1991), 133–144; Michal Aziza Ohana, "Let No One Suspect My Words of Contradicting the Ari': Traditional, Zoharic, and Lurianic Conceptions in Rabbi Samuel ben-Zaken of Fez's Thought," *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* (forthcoming).

2 Principles of Faith in Early Modern North Africa

According to Menachem Kellner, after the fifteenth century, “engagement with the principles of faith almost entirely disappeared from the agenda of Jewish intellectuals, only to resurface in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.”¹⁹ Eli Gurfinkel, however, has recently contended that there is an unbroken literary tradition concerning the principles of faith, though he acknowledges the fluctuations in the intensity of engagement with the subject over various periods. He asserts that the issue continued to be addressed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and into the first half of the eighteenth century.²⁰

An analysis of the writings of the descendants of the Sephardi exiles who resettled in Fez indicates that while they did not extensively discuss the principles of faith, they did engage with the topic intermittently. It appears that they adopted an approach in line with that of Joseph Albo, Yosef Ya’aveš, and others, distilling Maimonides’s thirteen principles to three core tenets. Moreover, they likely identified with the criticism directed against the Maimonidean formulation due to its omission of such key doctrines as creation and divine providence and re-emphasised these doctrines, positioning them among the three fundamental principles of faith.²¹ For example, Šmu’el Ḥagiz (d. 1633) in his collection of sermons on the weekly Torah portion, *Mevaqqeš ha-Šem*, and his commentary on *Deuteronomy Rabbah*, *Devar Šemuel*, mentioned the three principles of Judaism several times: “The greatest principles number three [in all]: His reality, His providence, and His omnipotence.”²² Similarly, Saul Serero (1566–1655) adopted Ya’aveš’s approach in one of his sermons for *Šabbat ha-Gadol*:²³

The pious scholar Rabbi Ya’aveš, in his book *Yesod ha-Emunah*, wrote that in order to inherit the world to come, the perfected individual must believe with complete faith in three fundamental principles, which en-

19 Menachem Kellner, *Dogma in Medieval Jewish Thought: From Maimonides to Abravanel* (Liverpool: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1986), 1.

20 Eli Gurfinkel, “The Engagement with the Principles after Maimonides: Between Continuity and Change” [Hebrew], *Aley Sefer* 22 (2012): 5–17.

21 Many fifteenth-century thinkers (such as Rashbaš [Simon ben Šemaḥ Duran], Abraham Shalom, Isaac Arama, Yosef Ya’aveš, Abraham Bibago, and Isaac Abravanel) emphasised the dogmatic centrality of the belief in creation; see Kellner, *Dogma*, 213–216.

22 Šmu’el Ḥagiz, *Mevaqqeš ha-Šem* [Seeker of God] (Venice, 1666), 211^{a–b}. See also *ibid.*, 141^b, 149^b; Ḥagiz, *Dvar Šmuel* [Samuel’s Statement] (Venice, 1666), 4^{a–b}, 41^a.

23 Yosef Ya’aveš, *Kol Sifrey R. Yosef Ya’aveš* [All the Books of Rabbi Yosef Ya’aveš] (Bnei Brak: Yitzḥak Fuchs, 1985), 3–6. On Ya’aveš’s doctrine of principles, see Kellner, *Dogma*, 161–164.

compass the thirteen principles laid down by Maimonides, of blessed memory. These are [firstly] the creation of the world. The second is His general and particular providence and His care for the human species, His interest in their deeds, and His recompense to each person according to his actions. The third is divine unity, that He, may he be blessed, was, is, and will be forever and ever.²⁴

In the generations after the Spanish expulsion, a limited discourse on the principles of faith also took place in other cities across North Africa. For example, in his *Sefer ha-Tappuah*, Josef al-Ashqar of Talmasan (b. end of the fifteenth century) explained a rabbinic statement as constituting an allusion to the principles of the faith:

Know that this article contains thirteen principles [...] one that God exists [...]. Furthermore, that of faith that God is not corporeal [...]. Furthermore, that God is one [...]. And furthermore the belief in prophecy.²⁵

Moreover, in his book *Šofnat Pa'neah*, al-Ashqar compared these principles with the thirteen attributes of divine mercy.²⁶ Šlomo Duran from Algiers (second half of the sixteenth century) determined that divine providence is among the principles of faith, but without specifying the other principles:

It is known that the foundation of the Torah commanded to us by Moses, peace be upon him, is to believe with complete faith that the people chosen by God, blessed be He, are governed by His providence, blessed be He.²⁷

If so, partial discussions of credal beliefs did occur in the North African Jewish diaspora in the generations following the Spanish expulsion (i.e., the first period mentioned above). However, in the subsequent (i.e., second) period, even these limited discussions dwindled to almost nothing. Kellner's sugges-

24 Saul Serero, *Derušey Maharšaš Širiro* [Sermons of Rabbi Saul Serero], vol. 1 (Jerusalem, 1989), 425. I should note that Serero later mentioned Ya'aves's assertion that "the first principle, namely the creation of the world, is the main principle and everything depends on it." Thus, the trend of the dogmatic centrality of the belief in creation highlighted by Kellner continued even in the generations following the expulsion.

25 Josef al-Ashqar, *Sefer ha-Tappuah* [The Book of the Apple] (Lod, 1997), 46–47.

26 Eli Gurfinkel, "The Thirteen Principles of Faith and the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy" [Hebrew], *Da'at* 84 (2018): 35–82, primarily 64–69.

27 Šlomo Duran, *Tiferet Yišra'el* [The Glory of Israel] (Jerusalem, 2005), 15.

tion that the post-expulsion neglect of philosophy led to a decline in engagement with credal matters may serve to elucidate the shift that transpired in the Maghreb.²⁸ In the initial post-expulsion generations, a moderated version of the philosophical tradition persisted in North Africa,²⁹ thereby sustaining engagement with the principles of faith, as briefly surveyed above. From the latter half of the seventeenth century onward, affinity to this Sephardic tradition weakened significantly in the Maghreb, with the rise in influence of kabbalistic, particularly Lurianic, perspectives. Likely as a result, this period also saw a decrease in engagement with creed. In this context, Berdugo's comprehensive discussion of the principles of faith in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries stands out as distinctly anomalous for his time and place, while perfectly reflecting his rationalist orientation and his affinity to the Sephardic philosophical tradition.

Before analysing Berdugo's work, it is worth taking into account the broader context. The discourse about principles of faith was very vibrant in North African Muslim thought in the early modern period, as Khaled El-Rouayheb has demonstrated.³⁰ The fifteenth-century North African theologian Muhammad b. Yusuf al-Sanusi argued that it is the individual duty of every Muslim to master the essentials of Ash'ari theology, and he accordingly wrote concise and accessible credal works for the general populace, alongside longer and more sophisticated works for scholarly circles. Sanusi emphasised that the believer should not rest content with firmness of conviction, for such firmness of conviction may be found in equal measure among non-Muslims. Rather, one should familiarise oneself with each tenet of the creed alongside at least one demonstration of it. A nominal Muslim entirely ignorant of Kalam, Sanusi declared, is at best a sinner who neglects a religious duty and at worst not strictly a believer at

28 Kellner, *Dogma*, 217. I should note that Kellner proposes another possibility, attributing the intensive fifteenth-century engagement with the issue of principles to the vigorous Jewish-Christian polemic of the time and the pressures exerted by the Church. He likewise attributes the minimal post-expulsion engagement with the issue to the absence of this context. For more on the connection between the Jewish-Christian polemic and the discussion of fundamental beliefs, see Daniel J. Lasker, "Fundamentals of Religion, Interfaith Polemic and Community Leadership in Fifteenth-Century Spain" [Hebrew], in *Studies of Leadership Phenomenon in Jewish Communities during the Middle Ages: A Jubilee Festschrift on the Occasion of the Seventieth Birthday of Prof. Menachem Ben-Sasson*, ed. Nahem Ilan, Hagai Ben-Shammai, and Miriam Frenkel (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2024), 329–342.

29 Ohana, "Jewish Thought in Fez."

30 Khaled El-Rouayheb, *Islamic Intellectual History in the Seventeenth Century: Scholarly Currents in the Ottoman Empire and the Maghreb* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 173–203; Caitlyn Olson, "Beyond the Avicennian Turn: The Creed of Muhammad b. Yusuf al-Sanusi (d. 895/1490)," *Studia Islamica* 115 (2020): 101–140.

all. Since theological reasoning is the individual duty of every legally competent Muslim, he concluded, theologians are consequently duty-bound to offer theological instruction to the community.

Sanusi's view inspired a distinctive North African genre of theological literature in subsequent periods. One of the more influential of these credal works was a didactic poem by the Moroccan scholar 'Abd al-Wāḥid ibn 'Ashir (d. 1631), which elicited a number of interpretations over the centuries. Sanusi's radical stance precipitated two theological disputes in southern Morocco in the latter half of the seventeenth century, as documented by Abū 'Alī al-Ḥasan al-Yūsī (1631–1691), the eminent Moroccan theologian and logician. The first dispute concerned the status of the "imitator," one who is unable to provide a theologically satisfying account of the creed and its rational grounding. The second concerned the proper understanding of the initial part of the Islamic profession of faith, "There is no God but Allah," requiring a grasp of both what is denied and what is affirmed by this statement.³¹

3 Berdugo's Purpose, Target Audience, and Literary Framework

An examination of Berdugo's opening remarks on the subject of the thirteen principles reveals his alignment with the medieval discourse on the limits of human inquiry and the minimal obligations imposed upon individuals within this framework. As is well known, this issue engendered extensive discussion and heated debates in the Middle Ages. This discourse continued in post-expulsion North Africa, throughout the sixteenth century and the first half of the seventeenth,³² but it significantly waned thereafter. Berdugo commenced his remarks with a particularly lengthy admonition that while the virtue of wisdom is indeed great, a person should not excessively indulge in intellectual inquiry:

Despite the great virtue and splendour of wisdom [...], one should be careful not to overly indulge in it. [...] And if one cleverly challenges and questions endlessly, then the answer will be hidden from his eyes [...]. Do not presume to investigate where investigation is forbidden, for it will avail you nothing, but will leave you confused and bewildered [...].

³¹ El-Rouayheb, *Islamic Intellectual History*, 204–231.

³² Michal Aziza Ohana, "The Polemic of External Wisdom and Intellectual Inquiry in the Sephardic Diaspora in North Africa in the Generations Following the Expulsion" [Hebrew], *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 26 (2021): 333–365.

And that is what King Solomon, peace be upon him, said, “Have you found honey? Eat only as much as you need, lest you be filled with it and vomit” (Prov 25:16) [...], as our Rabbi [Maimonides] elaborated on this in chapter 32 of the first part [of the *Guide*].³³

Notwithstanding this warning, he added that “everyone who possesses an intellect is obligated to know the fundamentals of his existence and the core of his [divine] service and religion.”³⁴ In Berdugo’s opinion, knowledge of the principles of faith lies outside the realm of forbidden inquiry; it is permissible, and even obligated. The delicate balance between forbidden inquiry and that which is allowed, and indeed desirable also emerges from his other writings.³⁵ In this context, it is noteworthy that Berdugo suggested that one should only engage in the study of external wisdom and philosophy after reaching the age of twenty-five—per the ban enacted by the Rashba (R. Solomon ibn Aderet [1235–1310])—at which point it is good and appropriate to do so:

For man was not forbidden the Tree of Knowledge except at the beginning of his days. The matter should be properly directed towards the advice of our teacher, the Rashba, of blessed memory, that a person should not study that wisdom until they reach the age of twenty-five. [...]. Then, of course, after his heart is filled and his kidneys are overflowing with the wisdom of the Torah, it is fine and fitting to study it, and it is an obligation to study it, as the eloquent Rabbi elaborated on its many benefits [...] in his apology to the Rashba.³⁶

He reinforced his argument by asserting that the path of human inquiry into the fundamental principles of faith had already been paved by his predecessors who established the thirteen principles. Therefore, he concluded, “to fulfil the will of my Creator and to instil in my heart His pure beliefs, my heart has told me to expound and clarify them.” In other words, Berdugo engaged in an interpretation and elucidation of the thirteen principles of faith, which he accepted as integral to the Jewish tradition. He deemed it essential to explain

33 Raphael Berdugo, *Rav Peninim* (Casablanca, 1970), 407–408.

34 Berdugo, 408.

35 Raphael Berdugo, *Mey Menuhot*, 2 vols. (Jerusalem, 1910; Djerba, 1942), 1:13^b.

36 Berdugo, 1:9^b. On the Rashba’s ban and his exchange with Yedayah ha-Penini, see Moshe Halbertal, *Between Torah and Wisdom: Rabbi Menahem ha-Meiri and the Maimonidean Halakhists in Provence* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2000), 152–180; Ram Ben-Shalom, *Jews of Provence and Languedoc: Renaissance in the Shadow of the Church* [Hebrew] (Ra’anana: Open University, 2017), 538–554.

these principles because of the duty incumbent upon every rational being to acquire knowledge of them. Berdugo justified his endeavour of explaining the principles anew, notwithstanding his predecessors' extensive treatment of the matter, by stating that "there is no interpretation without innovation." Within this pithy statement may lie a hint as to his intention to offer certain unconventional interpretations.

It is significant that when describing his purposes in the introduction, Berdugo employs the first person singular, "to instil in *my* heart," suggesting that his target audience was intellectuals like himself. Similarly, his demand that "every intelligent person" must grasp the principles of his religion is directed towards himself and his scholarly peers, rather than the general public. It is clear that Berdugo recognised varying levels of intellectual achievement among individuals. In his book *Mey Menuhot*, he proposed that "the great God, mighty and awesome" (Deut 10:17; the first blessing of the Amidah prayer) alludes to the three principles of faith—God's existence, omnipotence, and providence—which are concepts that are understood and internalised in different ways by different individuals, as he states:

Every one of Israel believes in them, but not all are equal in their faith, as the Rabbi, in the *Guide* of blessed memory [Maimonides], wrote. Some believe in them through tradition, and some believe in them through demonstration, which is greater than tradition, and greatest of all is he who sees with his own eyes, like our assembly, the assembly of Israel, whose eyes saw it all.³⁷

Berdugo based his discussion on the thirteen principles of faith on a short poem:

His existence and His unity, and [He has] no body, and He is eternal, He [alone] is to be worshipped, and He knew His prophets / He gave Moses [the Torah], and the Torah will not be altered; [He grants] recompense, and salvation, and will resurrect His hosts.³⁸

These brief lines serve as a summary of the Maimonidean thirteen principles of faith, as described in the introduction to his *Pereq Heleq*.³⁹ Over the centuries,

37 Berdugo, *Mey Menuhot*, 2:92^b. On the distinctions between the different types of proof, see below, note 54.

38 Berdugo, *Rav Peninim*, 408.

39 For a systematic examination of Maimonides's thirteen principles of faith, see Dror Ehr-

Maimonides's erudite discussion has been transformed into dogmatic creeds, folk songs, and liturgical poems that have been incorporated into daily prayers. A fierce debate was waged over the Maimonidean text, and these reworkings often censored, adjusted, or reinterpreted the original text with a more conservative slant.⁴⁰ The best known among the approximately two hundred hymns and liturgical poems inspired by Maimonides's thirteen principles of faith is *Yigdal Elohim Hay* by Daniel Ben Yehuda ha-Dayyan (thirteenth century).⁴¹ Liturgical poems on the principles of faith were also composed in Morocco; those from Berdugo's era included works such as *I Will Come into Your House to the Camp of the Shekhinah* by R. Saadia ibn Danān the Third (d. 1819) of Fez and *I Will Thank God with a Pleasant Voice, I Will Declare My Knowledge with You*, and *Songs and Thanksgivings, Come and Tell* by R. David Ḥassin (1722–1792) of Meknes, who was Berdugo's brother-in-law.⁴²

Berdugo's explanation of the principles of faith defied the prevailing trend of reducing Maimonides's discussion to a brief dogmatic text; instead, he re-expanded it into a detailed and comprehensive discourse. At the beginning of his treatment of each principle of faith, Berdugo cited the relevant word from the poem. He explained that he chose this particular poem as his basis

lich, *Maimonides on the Foundations of Jewish Faith* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2019). Maimonides's discussion of the principles of faith is mirrored in his list of heretics (heresiography), also consisting of thirteen items, which is presented in the Laws of Repentance (3.6–8). This list of thirteen types of heretics is a sub-category within a group of twenty-four types of people who do not have a portion in the world to come, despite being classified under the title of "Israel." See Hannah Kasher, *Heretics in Maimonides's Teachings* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2011), primarily 96–181.

40 Abraham Melamed, "Maimonides' Thirteen Principles: From Elite to Popular Culture," in *The Cultures of Maimonideanism*, ed. James T. Robinson (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 171–190.

41 Hannah Kasher and Uri Melamed, "The Origins of the Piyut 'Yigdal Elohim Hay'" [Hebrew], in *Prayer in Israel: New Aspects*, ed. Uri Ehrlich (Be'er-Sheva: Ben-Gurion University Press, 2016), 155–183. Kasher and Melamed are in the process of preparing a book that will include an annotated edition of the liturgical poems about the principles of faith. For now, see Israel Davidson, *Thesaurus of Medieval Hebrew Poetry*, vol. 4 (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1933), 493^a.

42 Regarding the poets mentioned who incorporate a connection to Aristotelian philosophy and the Maimonidean approach alongside kabbalistic motifs in their liturgical poems, see Hannah Kasher and Uri Melamed, "Maimonides's Thirteen Principles in Kabbalistic Garb" [Hebrew], in *Hallamish Lema'eyeno Mayim: Studies in Kabbalah, Halakha, Custom and Thought Presented to Prof. Moshe Hallamish*, ed. Avi Elqayam and Haviva Pedaya (Jerusalem: Carmel, 2016), 256–302, especially 263–264. According to Ephraim Hazan, Ḥassin was influenced by the poet R. Moše Adhan (d. 1736), who also wrote a poem on the principles of faith: see Hazan, *Hebrew Poetry in North Africa* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1995), 262. Samuel Elbaz (1790–1844) of Sefrou also wrote a *piyyut* on the thirteen principles of faith; see *ibid.*, 329.

because it was “the shortest of them all” (and therefore, presumably, the most convenient).⁴³ As will be clarified below, while Berdugo generally adopted Maimonides's thirteen principles of faith,⁴⁴ he did alter their order, supplementing them with content from Maimonides's other writings, primarily the *Guide*, and imbuing them with a different meaning from their original intent.⁴⁵

4 Reordering the Thirteen Principles of Faith

As noted previously, Berdugo's discussion is organised around the words of the short poem mentioned above, which determine the order of the discussion of the principles. His choice of this poem may, as mentioned, have been for reasons of convenience due to its brevity; however, it is also a significant and interesting choice in that it moves the position of Maimonides's tenth principle—that of divine knowledge—into sixth place. If we accept the tripartite structure of the thirteen principles suggested by Rashbaṣ (Simon ben Ṣemaḥ Duran) and others,⁴⁶ then this shift involves moving the principle of divine knowledge from the third and final grouping—relating to reward and punishment—to the first group of principles, which pertain to God. Berdugo was under no obligation to base his discussion on this particular poem; he could have directly engaged with the Maimonidean text and adhered to the original order. Thus, he almost certainly chose it with intention and careful consideration. As will become apparent later, Berdugo not only altered the order, but also deviated from Maimonides's original meaning in this context and in his discussion of other principles. For him, the principle of divine knowledge of human behaviour forms the basis of religion, and therefore all religions subscribe to it, though philosophers might not:

43 Berdugo, *Rav Peninim*, 408.

44 On the positive attitude of some of Moroccan rabbis, including Berdugo, towards Maimonides, see Dan Manor, “Maimonides in the Writings of Moroccan Scholars of the 16th–19th Centuries” [Hebrew], in *Fez and Other Cities in Morocco: A Thousand Years of Creativity*, ed. Moshe Bar-Asher, Moshe Amar, and Shimon Sharvit (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2013), 215–245.

45 Regarding the partial acceptance of Maimonides's thirteen principles of faith, see Marc B. Shapiro, *The Limits of Orthodox Theology: Maimonides' Thirteen Principles Reappraised* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2004); Joshua Berman, “Orthodox Rabbinic Exception to the Thirteen Principles of Faith: The Dynamics of Boundary Permeability,” *Modern Judaism* 39 (2019): 161–183, especially 162–164.

46 Kellner, *Dogma*, 24–25; Eli Gurfinkel, “Order and Structure in the Maimonidean List of Principles” [Hebrew], *Madd'ey ha-Yahadut* 55 (2021): 115–182, especially 118–138.

“*And He knew.*” This important principle is the foundation of all religions in general, at which all religions aim in their actions to fulfil the will of the Creator of this reality, for they believe that the Lord knows their actions and secrets [...], and indeed all religious people are equal in this except for the philosopher [= Aristotle] and his associates.⁴⁷

Berdugo held that God’s knowledge encompasses every detail, down to an individual’s thoughts, for there is no place devoid of God, as clarified in the third branch of the first principle (see below). Yet God’s comprehensive knowledge does not include foreknowledge of future events, as Berdugo explains elsewhere. Berdugo’s stance appears to stem from the need to refrain from presenting any contradiction to human free will, in an acceptance of Gersonides’s radical view on the matter.⁴⁸ He made it clear, however, that this denial of divine foreknowledge does not constitute the rejection of a principle of faith, since Maimonides himself did not include this type of knowledge in the principles—though we do find that he attributed foreknowledge to God in his other writings.⁴⁹

5 Insertion of New Content and Shifting Emphases in the Principles of Faith

Not only did Berdugo deviate from the order of Maimonides’s principles, but he also changed their content. The following section will be dedicated to elaborating how and why he did this. For ease of reading, I have indicated each principle under discussion with a Roman numeral.

I

Berdugo’s independence from the Maimonidean approach is already evident in his discussion of the first principle regarding the existence of God. He states that this is the “root of all beliefs [...] and the foundation of all religions.”

47 Berdugo, *Rav Peninim*, 414.

48 See Berdugo, *Mey Menuhot*, 1:30^{a-b}, and Israel Nathaniel Rubin, “What God Cannot Do: The Problem of God’s Subsistence to the Laws of Logic and Mathematics in Jewish Philosophy and Theology” [Hebrew] (PhD diss., Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2013), 147–148.

49 Berdugo, *Rav Peninim*, 414. On the absence of this concept from Maimonides’s thirteen principles of faith, see Kellner, *Dogma*, 48–55. In contrast, in his discussion in the Laws of Repentance, Maimonides established this belief as a “great principle” and a “pillar of the Torah”—see Kasher, *Heretics*, 186–190.

According to him, every rational person must accept this principle, as "its obligation is not only religious, but also intellectual."⁵⁰ However, rather than directing his readers, as one might expect, to Maimonides's proof of God's existence (*Guide* 2.1), he turns to that of Bahya ibn Paquda (*Duties of the Heart* 1:4–6), though without citing this work explicitly.

Berdugo proceeds to elaborate on the content of this principle, which he states includes three "branches." This claim echoes the dogmatic ranked and hierarchical approach of Crescas and Albo,⁵¹ though Berdugo did not offer a methodological explanation for his distinction between roots and branches, making it difficult to reconstruct his position on the matter. The three branches of the principle of the existence of God are:

1. *God is a necessary existence, in contrast to all other beings, which are possible existences:* as is well known, this distinction originates in Ibn Sina, and Maimonides mentions it in his third proof of God's existence (*Guide* 2.1).
2. *The existence of God is independent of the existence of other beings, but they are dependent on it:* Berdugo clarified that not only is the creation of all beings dependent on God, but also their ongoing existence. This follows Maimonides's dual characterisation of the principle of God's existence as not only a precondition for all other entities, but also an active cause of their being.
3. *God's existence differs from that of all other beings inasmuch as while they occupy a finite space, no place is devoid of God.*

II

In his understanding of the second principle of the unity of God, Berdugo followed Maimonides, writing: "He is one, it is impossible for there to be another, neither equivalent to Him nor second in rank or that you should say a second in degree." His meaning is that divine existence is one and no more. The second branch of this principle asserts that God is "utterly simple" by virtue of His eternal nature, in contrast to all other existences, which are contingent upon cause and effect. Divine existence lacks internal multiplicity. Berdugo goes on to add, however, in a manner significantly diverging from Maimonides's original discussion and intent, that "it is part of the belief in His unity to believe that He is One in His governance, One in His omnipotence, One in His greatness." Thus, the knowledge of uniqueness also implies a recognition that there

⁵⁰ Berdugo, *Rav Peninim*, 408.

⁵¹ Kellner, *Dogma*, 108–109, 120–125, 140–149.

is no ruler, governor, or leader in the world other than God. According to Berdugo, the emphasis thus extends beyond the static and non-personal aspects of divinity to encompass God's exclusive control over the world.

Berdugo argues that the vast chasm separating celestial and terrestrial entities may lead some to erroneously presume that each has its own ruler and that one is superior to the other. However, the miracles performed by God both in heaven and on earth prove that He rules over both. "In His performance, may He be blessed, of miracles in heaven and on earth [...] lies proof and demonstration that He is the ruler in heaven and on earth." Berdugo notes that, per Maimonides, it is not sufficient for a person to believe in the existence and unity of God solely on the basis of tradition; rather, this belief must be supported through rational demonstration. However, he posits that the Jewish people's knowledge of this truth surpasses the degree required by Maimonides, for they experienced the miracles of God directly, and he notes that according to Judah Halevi, knowledge of God based on historical experience is more reliable than that based on science (notably, Maimonides espoused precisely the opposite view, deeming knowledge of God based on science to be superior to that based on historical experience):⁵²

Our Rabbi wrote in the *Guide of the Perplexed* that it is not sufficient for a person to merely accept the existence and unity of God. Rather, the essence of knowledge is to know them through a proof that will instil their truth in one's heart. And Israel knew them better than [it could via] the knowledge by proof, for their eyes saw and not [those of] a stranger. And to this end, "and you shall know this day" (Deut 4:39) that through the miracles and wonders I have performed for you, you will easily know all that which all the philosophers have struggled with [...]. And as the *Kuzari* said, the accepted truths in Israel are far superior witnesses to knowledge by rational demonstration.⁵³

52 Warren Zev Harvey, "The First Commandment and the God of History: Halevi and Crescas vs. Ibn Ezra and Maimonides" [Hebrew], *Tarbiš* 97 (1988): 203–216. Berdugo was aware of the differences of opinion between Halevi and Maimonides on this matter, as can be inferred from his words elsewhere: "And since we have written that all the eagerness and astonishment to recount the exodus from Egypt is to believe in a tangible way what the philosophers believed and knew through proof, and behold, the sun has not yet set in its fullness, for even knowledge by a miracle would be very fine if we were to attain it. Although the Rabbi, great in his wisdom, told his friend the Khazar king that it is better not to seek a miracle, those who followed, like Rabbenu Moshe, did not say so." (Berdugo, *Rav Peninim*, 77).

53 Berdugo, *Rav Peninim*, 411.

In other words, while Maimonides sought to establish knowledge about the existence of God through metaphysical proofs, Berdugo gave precedence to proofs based on historical experience. Surprisingly, he primarily situated this discussion in his writing about the second principle, the unity of God, and not in the discussion of God's existence.⁵⁴

v

In his discussion of the fifth principle, which states that God is the sole being worthy of worship, Berdugo once again deviated from Maimonides's original intent. He questioned the rationale behind Maimonides's decision to categorise this as a principle, arguing that according to the latter's own interpretation, this principle is a commandment, not a belief. Consequently, Berdugo ascribes new meaning to his predecessor's original formulation:

"He [alone] is to be worshipped." This principle requires clarification, as it is not something that directly involves Him, may He be blessed. And Maimonides, of blessed memory, wrote [...] that He, may He be blessed, is the one who is worthy of our service and so on [...]. And I cannot understand the words of our teacher, of blessed memory, for if so, this should not be called a principle, but a commandment, as all principles are beliefs, not actions, and according to the words of our teacher, this is an action, not a belief. But let us expand on the words of our teacher.⁵⁵

According to Berdugo, Maimonides articulated this as a principle in order to refute the philosophers' erroneous view that God does not oversee the sublunar realm.⁵⁶ In contrast, according to traditional Jewish belief, God actively supervises human affairs (as Berdugo notes that he will later explain), and therefore also desires their service: "Moreover, we must believe in this principle that the Lord, may He be blessed, desires the service of this lowly human and cares about his deeds."⁵⁷ While acknowledging the struggle inherent in attributing

54 I will note that in his other writings, Berdugo expressed inconsistent appreciation for the two types of proof under discussion. For instance, in one case, he established the following hierarchy (from low to high): faith, intellectual proof, historical experience (see above, note 37) (Berdugo, *Mey Menuhot*, 2:92^b). Elsewhere, he claimed that philosophical proof and proof from historical experience regarding the existence of God are of identical weight; the hierarchy he established there (*Mey Menuhot*, 1:44^b) is (from low to high): faith, philosophical proof/proof from historical experience, and prophetic knowledge.

55 Berdugo, *Rav Peninim*, 412–413.

56 Berdugo, 413.

57 Berdugo, 413.

desire to God, Berdugo avers that since God created the world through His will, we are obliged to believe that He desires us to serve Him.

At this juncture, it is important to point out that Berdugo, like Maimonides in his commentary on *Pereq Heleq*,⁵⁸ omitted to dedicate a principle of faith to creation. In fact, from the first four principles—the existence of God, His unity, the denial of physicality, and His eternity—it does not necessarily follow that God created the world *ex nihilo* by His will, for these principles could plausibly be rooted in an Aristotelian interpretation of God as the Prime Mover, the Unmoved Mover. Thus, Berdugo's attitude to creation is only indirectly implied in the discussion above, while in his other writings, in contrast, he explicitly expressed the belief that God created the world through His will.⁵⁹ We might suggest two possible explanations for the omission of the belief in creation from Berdugo's list of principles: the first, that this is a deliberate choice because he did not perceive it as a fundamental religious principle, and the second, that it is due to this notion's absence from the short poem around which he structured his work. This latter explanation is flawed, however, for we can presume that had Berdugo strongly objected to the absence of this belief in the poem, he would have refrained from utilising it altogether.

To sum up, in his discussion of the fifth principle, Berdugo substituted the belief in divine desire for human service for Maimonides's principle that God is the sole being worthy of worship. In his words: "Ultimately, the content of this principle is to believe that the Lord desires our service of Him and our observance of His commandments."⁶⁰ While Maimonides sought to limit the attribution of will or desire to divinity, Berdugo actually expanded the scope of the divine will and applied it to the divine desire for human service.

VII

Berdugo's discussion of the seventh principle, prophecy, likewise reveals his complex relationship with Maimonides. At the beginning of his discussion, he writes, "It is incumbent upon us to believe that the Lord, may He be blessed, will speak with the worthy man who is perfect in his opinions and actions."⁶¹

58 Only in a later addition, unavailable to Jewish thinkers over the centuries, did Maimonides add in the fourth principle: "And know that the great foundation of the Torah of Moses our teacher is creation." See Yosef Qafil, *Mishnah with Maimonides's Commentary* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1968), vol. 3 142.

59 See Berdugo, *Mey Menuhot*, 1:93^a; 2:13^b–14^a.

60 Berdugo, *Rav Peninim*, 414.

61 Berdugo, 414.

From this statement, it is clear that Berdugo accepted Maimonides's critique (*Guide* 2.32) of the opinion that God grants prophecy to whomever He wills, even to a fool. He adopted the view (in line with the second and third opinions mentioned in the discussion in the *Guide*) that prophecy is only possible for those who have perfected themselves in both opinions and actions. However, immediately after this passage, he added: "However, the essence of prophecy and its nature are not known to us because it is not natural but miraculous, like all other miracles." These words imply that Berdugo did not fully embrace Maimonides's view that prophecy is an entirely natural phenomenon attained after self-perfection (unless God prevents this achievement).⁶² By leaving room for the perception of prophecy as a supernatural phenomenon, he allows for the idea that a natural preparation process entailing perfection of beliefs and actions does not suffice and that divine emanation upon the individual is additionally required. I should note that this dialectical conception of the phenomenon of prophecy—the obligation of human preparation alongside the active influence of God—was very prevalent among the scholars and rabbis of Fez in the sixteenth and the first half of the seventeenth century.⁶³

XI

In his discussion of the eleventh principle, Berdugo, like Maimonides before him, emphasised that the primary reward for the righteous and punishment for the wicked does not occur in this world:

"Recompense." [...] What we are obligated to believe beyond what is explicitly stated in the Torah [in the blessings and curses that appear in Lev 26 and Deut 28] is that God will punish the sinners in the next world and will also reward those who do His will. And that good and evil in this world are not the sole reward or punishment for a person's actions, but rather they are [only] part of the reward or punishment, and that the primary reward or punishment comes after death; and this is the "cutting off" mentioned in the Torah.⁶⁴

62 Many studies deal with Maimonides's conception of prophecy, and this is not the place to mention them all. See Howard Kreisel's comprehensive book *Prophecy: The History of an Idea in Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2001), 148–315.

63 Michal Aziza Ohana, "Between the Natural and the Supernatural: The Theory of Prophecy in Jewish Thought in Morocco in the Generations after the Expulsion from Spain" [Hebrew], *Da'at* 83 (2017): 175–198.

64 Berdugo, *Rav Peninim*, 422.

However, it is evident from the above quotation that Berdugo did not adopt Maimonides's view that the reward in the next world refers to the immortality of intellect; that is, the consequence of intellectual achievement. Rather, he adhered to the traditional notion that heavenly reward results from the performance of the commandments. It is worth noting that nowhere in his writings does Berdugo express identification with the Maimonidean ideal of intellectual perfection as conjunction with the Active Intellect; whenever he refers to human happiness, he ties it to the notion of submitting one's will to that of heaven.⁶⁵ Likewise, he parted company with Maimonides regarding the fate of the wicked in the world to come. For Maimonides, the intellect is the only part of the human soul that survives death, and hence there can be no otherworldly punishment for evildoers.⁶⁶ In contrast, Berdugo admitted that it is indeed difficult to understand how punishment after death or reward in the absence of the body can occur, and he directed his readers to his clarification of this topic at the close of his discussion of the thirteen principles. Nevertheless, he says, we must believe "that punishment will come to the wicked, more bitter than any bitterness we can comprehend in this world. And the righteous will receive goodness and pleasure, far greater than all the pleasures of this world." Thus, in contrast to Maimonides, who posited that the punishment of the wicked amounts to the destruction of the soul—this being his understanding of the punishment of *karet* [cutting off]—Berdugo emphasised that the wicked are destined for a punishment in which they will endure terrible suffering, without the soul's destruction—indeed, the very suffering is that of the soul itself.

Berdugo's explanation at the end of his discussion of the thirteen principles reinforces this impression, as he posits there that before the soul assumes a corporeal form, it has no interest in physical needs. However, upon entering the body, a "new nature is formed in it," and it becomes interested in bodily needs and pleasures, such that the soul bears responsibility for the body's sins. At death, with the separation of the soul from the body, the nature formed with the latter's entry into the body endures within it, and it receives punishment for

65 Michal Aziza Ohana, "To Do the Will of Their Creator [...] for in This Matter Happiness Will Be Achieved': Halakhic Religiosity of Obedience and Submission in Jewish Communities in North Africa in the Early Modern Period" [Hebrew], *Maḥshevet Yiśra'el* 5 (2014): 96–112.

66 Scholars have offered various explanations for Maimonides's decision to compose his thirteen principles of faith and to treat them as incumbent upon every Jew in order to earn a portion in the world to come (and to be considered part of the Jewish community). For a comprehensive overview of the various suggestions, see Howard Kreisel, "Back to Maimonides' Sources: The Thirteen Principles Revisited," *Jewish Thought* 1 (2019): 53–88.

its sins. Berdugo cautions against underestimating the pain of this punishment, even if it does not physically affect the body, just as a person may suffer from a nightmare even while sleeping between silk sheets.⁶⁷

After addressing reward and punishment in the next world, Berdugo devoted an even more extensive discussion to the question of divine providence and reward in this one, which once again illustrates his departure and independence from Maimonides's thought. He recognised that the goods and evils of this world provoke "a very great perplexity." While he believed that the issue of the sufferings of the righteous is beyond the scope of human inquiry, he argued that there is room to "somewhat alleviate the difficulty without hoping to settle it entirely," with the benefit of this investigation being vindication of the divine judgement (theodicy). He began his remarks on the subject with a description of Aristotle's view, a denial of divine providence over the particulars of the sub-lunar world. In contradiction to this, he cited Maimonides's claim in *Guide* 3.17 as follows:

Everything that happens to a person is under individual providence, and all the evils and goods that befall him are all just, fair, and upright, and there is no injustice in them, to the extent that even if a thorn enters a person's hand and he removes it immediately, it was only for the sake of punishment.⁶⁸

Maimonides's conception of providence has been the subject of considerable engagement among Jewish thinkers and interpreters down the centuries. Extreme rationalists—such as Samuel ibn Tibbon, Zerahiah b. Isaac b. Shealtiel Hen, and others—posited that he linked divine providence with intellectual attainment and even equated it to human intellect; in their view, individual divine providence has no external expression. However, moderate rationalists—such as Isaac ibn Latif, Shem Tov Falaquera, Abraham Shalom, and others—argued that for Maimonides, the basis of divine providence is not exclusively intellectual and includes the observance of the commandments. They also believed that individual providence has a clear practical dimension.⁶⁹ We see from Berdugo's quotation above that he aligns with the latter approach, ascribing to Maimonides a traditional conception of divine reward and punishment, according to which there is a clear pragmatic element to

67 Berdugo, *Rav Peninim*, 436–437.

68 Berdugo, 423.

69 Dov Schwartz, *Contradiction and Concealment in Jewish Medieval Thought* [Hebrew] (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2002), 126–143.

divine providence, and that he does not mention that in Maimonides's opinion, divine providence is contingent upon intellectual attainment.

Indeed, Berdugo explicitly stated that he was only partially in accordance with Maimonides's position: "In regard to what our Rabbi concluded, I partially endorse it and partially query it." He accepted the assertion that divine providence does not pertain to animals, yet expressed reservations about Maimonides's conception of divine providence in relation to humans. Berdugo observed that while Maimonides believed that several talmudic statements support the notion that humanity is subject to divine providence—for example, "A person does not move his finger below unless they proclaim it above" (*b. Hul.* 7^b)—other talmudic statements suggest the opposite, such as "Children, life, and sustenance depend not on merit but on fortune" (*b. Mo³ed Qat.* 28^a). Since the words of the Sages can be subject to varying interpretations, we are entitled to decide based on our own reasoning.⁷⁰ According to Berdugo, while nothing is impossible for God, His wisdom decreed that the world should operate according to the laws of nature, and this includes chance and luck. Hence, the majority of events in a person's life are determined by these factors and not by divine providence:

It is an article of complete faith that the Lord, may He be blessed, oversees details and minutiae; nothing can escape Him, and nothing can escape His notice to do as He wills in heaven and on earth. Yet He entrusted His world to humanity and His wisdom decreed that the world should operate according to nature and chance, and according to one's effort, one achieves what one can of good and evil. Most of the misfortunes that befall humans are purely coincidental, most depend on fate, and some details are random.⁷¹

In this passage, it is evident that Berdugo opposed the moderate position he attributed to Maimonides regarding divine providence and adopted a more radical view. However, he did not completely deny the possibility of divine providence over particulars, leaving room for its occasional exercise according to heavenly will and intervention, as miraculous acts that deviate from nature:

Yet despite all this [...] sometimes His simple will may be to harm or benefit a person according to His wisdom, like all the miracles He per-

⁷⁰ Berdugo, *Rav Peninim*, 423.

⁷¹ Berdugo, 424.

forms that defy nature. [...] In a way this suggests that divine providence regarding particulars is akin to miracles. That is to say, just as miracles are not common, so sometimes for the sake of a matter according to His supreme wisdom, He will benefit the righteous and save them from the evil destined for them according to nature, or harm the wicked for whom good was naturally prepared.⁷²

In other words, Berdugo believed that humans are generally subject to chance and that they are only governed by divine providence in exceptional cases. Having said this, there are two categories for which providence, rather than chance, is the default: the first is the case of a large collective, and the second is that of a wholly righteous individual.⁷³

Berdugo summarised his position by noting that according to this principle of faith, it is incumbent upon a person to believe in heavenly reward in the world to come, which serves as the primary locus of divine reward and punishment. Worldly good and evil represent only a portion of a person's desserts, as determined by the divine will.

XII

The subject of the twelfth principle in Maimonides's commentary on *Pereq Heleq* is the messiah.⁷⁴ In Berdugo's version, apparently under the influence of

72 Berdugo, *Rav Peninim*, 425; Berdugo, *Mey Menuhot*, 2:86^a. I should note that according to Berdugo, even in the act of performing miracles, God seeks to preserve the natural aspect as much as possible and to minimise the miraculous aspect. In the spirit of Gersonides's interpretation of the verse "And the Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind" (Exod 14:21), Berdugo too argued, "For He, blessed be He, prefers nature, and anything that He can do naturally, even a fraction of a thousandth, He will do through nature, and only then will He act through a miracle" (*Mey Menuhot*, 1:84^a; see also *Rav Peninim*, 242).

73 Berdugo reiterated his main views in his other writings: "Even though our teacher of blessed memory, in the *Guide of the Perplexed*, when he brought the opinion of Aristotle on providence and disagreed with him, he of blessed memory raised the idea that all matters of a speaking living creature are under providence [...]. However, as an addition to his words, may his memory be a blessing, I say that human affairs are sometimes entirely coincidental, and sometimes providential, depending upon human actions, and the more one's actions are rectified, the more providence will increase for him" (Berdugo, *Mey Menuhot*, 2:86^a).

74 On the face of it, there seems to be a gap between the title of this principle in *Pereq Heleq*, "The Days of the Messiah," and its content, focusing on the personal character of the messiah. Ehrlich suggests that while the overt message of this principle deals with the messianic figure, a close reading of its content reveals a message hidden between the lines that pertains specifically to the political changes that will characterise the messianic era. This principle serves as an example of esoteric writing: in the external layer of the

the literary framework, the focus is on the future redemption as a whole, with the coming of the messiah mentioned only once, in passing. Berdugo omits a detail greatly emphasised by Maimonides—that the messiah will descend from the royal lineage of the House of David. He writes:

“*Salvation.*” We must believe that the Lord will elevate the status of this nation, and even though it has fallen to the dust more than any other nation on the face of the earth [...] the day will come when it will rise above all the nations of the world.⁷⁵

A significant part of Berdugo’s discussion of this principle revolves around the idea that this belief in redemption has the power to reinforce a different belief, while undermining a contrary and erroneous idea, as follows. He starts by lamenting the lowly state of Israel’s exile as absurd. How is it possible that the chosen people of God, to whom He gave the Torah, should suffer under the harsh rule of nations who did not merit this distinction? In light of this existential absurdity, some might deny the unique status of Israel. But here, the belief in the future redemption comes into play, bolstering the belief in the greatness of Israel by offering an understanding of the terrible current reality as an affliction to atone for sins (and thus purifying them in preparation for their redeemed future).

As is well known, Maimonides did not incorporate a principle concerning the uniqueness of the Jewish people into his thirteen principles of faith, an omission that prompted inquiries within the general debate that ensued over them. Some have contended that the uniqueness of the Jewish people is implicitly foundational to Maimonides’s creed, while others have added it to the alternative lists of principles they proposed.⁷⁶ From Berdugo’s discussion, it emerges that he attributed a unique status to the people of Israel, founded in their being chosen by God and given the Torah. However, he did not confer upon this belief the status of a fundamental principle, possibly due to its absence from the short poem that served as the literary framework for his treatment. Yet it is likely that he attributed great significance to it, as is evident from his claim that future redemption is a principle of faith specifically because it reinforces the unique status of Israel.⁷⁷

text, Maimonides emphasised the concrete belief in the figure of the messiah, while the hidden layer deals with the messianic era itself. See Ehrlich, *Maimonides*, 182–183.

75 Berdugo, *Rav Peninim*, 430.

76 Eli Gurfinkel, “The Uniqueness of the Jewish People as a Principle of Faith” [Hebrew], *Da’at* 81 (2016): 207–235.

77 Berdugo, *Rav Peninim*, 430.

The challenge with which Berdugo primarily grappled was apparently not the theological matter of theodicy, but rather that of the doubt cast by the ongoing historical experience of exile on the belief in the chosenness and uniqueness of Israel. It is possible that the severe disturbances that affected the Jews of Morocco, including the Jews of Meknes, under the rule of Mawlay al-Yazid b. Mohammed (r. 1790–1792) lie in the background of these issues, since Berdugo referred to them on several occasions in his other writings.

A second reason Berdugo proposed to explain why the belief in future redemption is a principle of faith is that its realisation will enable renewed fulfilment of commandments that are currently inapplicable; thus, the eternity of the Torah is substantiated.⁷⁸

XIII

Finally, we have Maimonides's thirteenth and final principle: the belief in the resurrection of the dead. Berdugo, like Maimonides, did not necessarily link the resurrection of the dead with the messianic era:

“Will resurrect His hosts.” We must believe that the bodies that are of the children of Israel [...] even though they may be lost and buried in the dust [...] the Holy One, blessed be He, will by His supreme will [...] return the souls to those bodies.⁷⁹

It is well established that despite its inclusion in his list of principles, Maimonides came under suspicion of not believing in the resurrection of the dead in its literal and plain sense during his lifetime. Therefore, in his *Epistle on the Resurrection of the Dead*, he took pains to explicitly clarify that the possibility of the resurrection of the dead follows from the concepts of creation and the possibility of miracles—such that one who denies the former must also deny these latter notions and thus also the Torah's status as divine revelation.⁸⁰ Berdugo, however, did not regard the focus of this belief to be the possibility (or impossibility) of miraculous resurrection, but rather, at its core, the restoration of life in a corporeal form similar to the original and capable of remembering its previous life. In this context, he suggests that resurrection may not be the revival of a person's original body, but rather the creation of a new one:

78 Berdugo, 431.

79 Berdugo, 432.

80 Albert D. Friedberg, “Maimonides' Reinterpretation on the Thirteenth Article of Faith: Another Look at the Essay on Resurrection,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 10.3 (2003): 244–255.

Our belief is fundamentally established that God, may He be exalted, will return the soul to the body, similar to the [original] body in its stature and form, whether it be from the person's [original] body or another place [...]. Thus, when the dead rise, they will remember everything that happened to them in this world [...] and they will recognise each other and draw near to each other, the son to his father and the father to his sons, the man to his wife and the woman to her husband. And for this, there is no concern about whether the new body is built from the person's [original] body or other dust.⁸¹

Maimonides also posits that after a certain period, those righteous individuals who merited resurrection will die (again), but Berdugo's position on whether resurrection is of limited duration or whether it will last forever is unclear. Furthermore, while Maimonides claimed that the resurrection of the dead would be selectively applied only to the righteous, Berdugo brought up the possibility, based on rabbinic sources, "that even the babies of Israel will be resurrected." He concluded thus: "And in what is beyond us we will not inquire, and the God who kills and gives life knows who will live and who will not live."⁸²

I should note here that Maimonides's radical interpreters allege that he completely rejected the concept of the resurrection of the dead and only included it in his list of principles for social and political reasons. They point out that physical resurrection does not align in any way with Maimonides's naturalistic view, nor is it compatible with his understanding of the intellect's survival in the world to come.⁸³ While some identification with the former rationale can be attributed to Berdugo, given his approach that seeks to minimise the breach

81 Berdugo, *Rav Peninim*, 433. See also what he writes afterwards: "And however it may be, there is no concern about the body, whether it remains intact or not, for God will create a new body on earth similar to the original body, and it will remember all the events that happened to it, and it will be comforted over its death and rejoice in its resurrection" (ibid., 433). In contrast, in other writings, Berdugo links the belief in the resurrection of the dead to other beliefs, including creation: "And it seems that what the men of the Great Assembly ordained to remember the resurrection of the dead at the beginning of the prayer [the Amidah] is because it is a belief that strengthens all the beliefs that every son of Israel is obligated to believe in, the existence of God, His providence, and His omnipotence. Further derived from this is the belief in creation, as he who believes in the resurrection will believe in creation" (Berdugo, *Mey Menuhot*, 2:94^a).

82 Berdugo, *Rav Peninim*, 433.

83 For an overview of the radical interpretation of Maimonides, see Ehrlich, *Maimonides*, 195–199.

of natural laws,⁸⁴ he clearly did not identify with the latter rationale. As mentioned above, I have found no evidence in either the volume under discussion here or any of his other writings that he accepted the notion of intellectual survival that occupied such a central place in Maimonides's approach.

In his discussion of this principle, Berdugo also put forth the "advantages of resurrection." He first mentioned Isaac Abravanel's idea that this miraculous event would cause all nations of the world to recognise God and band together in His service.⁸⁵ Subsequently, he detailed the benefits that resurrection will offer to the field of halakah: it will enable the clarification of corrupted texts by both early and later halakic authorities and a renewed examination of rabbinic enactments that are no longer relevant due to the passage of time or human error.⁸⁶ The resurrection of the dead will also ultimately allow reconciliation between those who were offended and those who offended them.⁸⁷ Berdugo added that the resurrection of the dead is a fundamental principle of faith because, embodying as it does divine judgement of the human body, it will foster diligence in the service of God.⁸⁸

In conclusion, it emerges from the current discussion that while Berdugo demonstrated a strong affinity with Maimonides's works—both his thirteen principles of faith and his *Guide*—he did not hesitate to diverge from his view in some instances, to adopt a more radical view than the one he attributed to him, or to proffer his own original interpretation of the principles of faith in Jewish thought.

6 Questioning the Number of Principles

In the two previous sections, I presented selected discussions of Berdugo's reordering of Maimonides's thirteen principles of faith and the new content he infused into them. Now, I will address the possibility that he also questioned the fixed number of these principles.

Commentators and philosophers who have dealt with Maimonides's principles have wondered why he specifically enumerated thirteen principles, no less and no more. Was this number the result of his intellectual inquiry, or did

84 See above, note 72.

85 Berdugo, *Rav Peninim*, 433. Abravanel's idea appears in his introduction to his commentary on the book of Isaiah, twelfth purpose.

86 Berdugo, *Rav Peninim*, 433–435.

87 Berdugo, 435–436.

88 Berdugo, 436.

he aim to arrive at this specific figure for some reason? Advocates of the first view argue that it is inconceivable that Maimonides would establish principles of faith based on external considerations, thereby compromising the content of his list. Proponents of the second view, on the other hand, argue that he chose the number in question for its typological significance, as it frequently recurs in the Bible and rabbinic literature (thirteen tribes of Israel, the age of obligation for commandments, thirteen hermeneutical principles of Torah interpretation, and more).⁸⁹

From Berdugo's introduction to his discussion of the principles, it emerges that he aligned with the latter opinion. He noted that Maimonides's enumeration of the thirteen principles of faith was without precedent in rabbinic literature and that it must, *ipso facto*, be a product of his own reasoning, unconstrained by prior tradition. However, he (mistakenly) emphasized that it was "an accepted tradition" that the liturgical poem *Yigdal Elohim Hay* [Exalted Be the Living God], which also enumerates thirteen principles of faith, was written by Rashi, who preceded Maimonides, therefore concluding that "this number [thirteen] is ancient in our nation"⁹⁰ and that it was thus a typological number to which Maimonides was obligated in establishing the fundamental principles of the Jewish faith.

Berdugo explained the typological significance of the number thirteen in several ways. In the introduction to his discussion of principles of faith, he suggested that the high priest's breastplate and the twelve stones embedded in it taken together allude to the thirteen principles of faith,⁹¹ while in his conclusion, he noted that the thirteen principles equal the number of the tribes of Israel (including Manasseh and Ephraim).⁹² He further added that the arrangement of these principles in a numerical order signifies the vitality of each principle within the system of principles and that "their total number is *EH"D*" (meaning "one," where the numerological value of the three letters *E*, *H*, and *D* totals thirteen), intimating that even though they are thirteen in number, they are a unity, all one: "If one of them, God forbid, collapses, it is as if they all have collapsed."⁹³

However, in the body of the discussion, Berdugo raised the possibility that two of the beliefs are not fundamental principles of faith, but rather two branches of a particular principle. (This would imply that there are not thirteen

89 Gurfinkel, "The Thirteen Principles of Faith," 36–39.

90 Berdugo, *Rav Peninim*, 408.

91 Berdugo, 408.

92 Berdugo, 436.

93 Berdugo, 436.

principles, but eleven, though Berdugo did not explicitly state this conclusion, nor did he explore the implications of this possibility.) The two beliefs in question are in the uniqueness of Moses's prophecy and in the immutability of the Torah. While belief in Torah from Heaven is indeed a fundamental principle of faith, Berdugo does not consider these two aforementioned beliefs to be so; they are simply offshoots of the former.

At the outset of his discussion of the eighth principle of faith, the prophecy of Moses, Berdugo queried why this belief is considered a fundamental principle of faith. What great harm would ensue if we were to equate Moses's prophecy with that of other prophets, such that this would be considered apostasy? "In any case," Berdugo argues, "this should not be called a fundamental principle, as it is derived from the principle of Torah from Heaven."⁹⁴ Maimonides's particular emphasis on the superiority of Moses as a prophet is widely understood as stemming from his polemical stance against the Islamic conception of Muhammad as the final prophet and its claim that the Torah has been abrogated (*al-Nash*). Denying the uniqueness and supremacy of Moses's prophecy could open the door to the assertion that some other past or future prophet might amend the Torah of Israel, thus undermining its eternal validity, which is Maimonides's eighth principle.⁹⁵ Berdugo, however, apparently did not share the same sense of urgency that had compelled his predecessor to safeguard this theological point. His opening words in discussing Torah from Heaven, the ninth principle, illustrate this:

"And Torah." Following the fundamental belief in prophecy, we believe that this is the Torah that Moses placed before all of Israel, from the beginning of Genesis to "before the eyes of all Israel," all of it transcribed from the mouth of the Almighty.⁹⁶

It should be noted that Berdugo situates the principle of Torah from Heaven after the principle of belief in prophecy, and not after the principle of belief in Moses as one might expect. This presumably reflects his claim that belief in Moses's prophecy is a branch of the principle of Torah from Heaven. His stance is also evident in his use of the words "this too" at the beginning of his discussion of the next principle, the tenth, concerning the immutability of the Torah. He writes: "It will not change. This too is a branch of the other principle, and it is

94 Berdugo, 416.

95 See Kasher, *Heretics*, 138–145, 165–167; Ehrlich, *Maimonides*, 128.

96 Berdugo, *Rav Peninim*, 420.

called a principle in its own right.”⁹⁷ In short, according to Berdugo, after affirming the fundamental belief in the existence of prophecy, one must embrace the principle of Torah from Heaven, a principle with two branches: the uniqueness of Moses’s prophecy and the immutability of the Torah. And it is specifically here, in his discussion of the tenth principle, that Berdugo chooses to propose an answer to his previously posed question regarding the significance of the belief in the uniqueness of Moses’s prophetic stature—because for him, the two beliefs are mutually reinforcing. The belief in Moses’s unique prophetic role necessitates the belief that the Torah can never be altered, and, conversely, the immutability of the Torah affirms the unique value of its moral teachings:

For this reason, one must believe in the superiority of Moses our teacher over all other prophets. This belief prevents one from ever considering nullifying any commandment based on the words of any prophet: in considering Moses our master to be greater than all other prophets, one will not believe any prophet who contradicts the words of Moses our teacher. This is similar to not relying on a less experienced doctor over a highly skilled and renowned physician. Connected to what we have said is the magnification of the value of the Torah: since it is established for all generations, its transmission must be through one who is honoured and exalted above the entire world.⁹⁸

As mentioned, Maimonides had already established a correlation between the denial of the Torah’s eternity and the denial of the supremacy of Moses’s prophecy. Berdugo also recognised this connection; he argued, however, that these two beliefs are not fundamental tenets of faith, but rather branches of another principle. It is worth noting that he was not alone in opposing the Maimonidean viewpoint: many have proposed, *contra* Maimonides, that the commandments will be nullified in the future and/or that a prophet of Moses’s stature will emerge at the end of days.⁹⁹

Nevertheless, in his commentary on *Parashat Qorah*, Berdugo ascribed a much more severe consequence to the denial of Moses’s superiority:

97 Berdugo attributed great importance to this belief in the immutability of the Torah, for change only occurs in something deficient. Should change in the Torah be possible, it would imply a deficiency in God, as it would mean that He was unable to perfect the Torah. Therefore, Berdugo emphasised that “one for whom this principle is uncertain, it is as if he has denied fundamental belief, God forbid” (Berdugo, *Rav Peninim*, 421).

98 Berdugo, *Rav Peninim*, 421.

99 Shapiro, *Limits*, 122–131.

For contradicting the greatness of our teacher Moses is contradicting the entire Torah, and contradicting the Torah is contradicting all true beliefs, foremost among which is the belief in creation, from which it is known that the world has a Creator and that “the earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it.”¹⁰⁰

It is conceivable that the context contributed here; attributing such significance to the superiority of Moses’s prophecy serves to amplify the severity of *Qorah*’s transgression.

Berdugo does make a clear distinction between the prophecy of Moses and the prophecies of the other prophets. However, it is not a difference in the “essence of prophecy,” as Maimonides would have it;¹⁰¹ rather, Moses is the only one who introduced the “law and judgement” that endures for all time, while all other prophets could only rebuke the people regarding those laws, not proclaim new ones. Berdugo goes on to describe the four distinctions delineated by Maimonides between the prophecy of Moses and that of others, but argues that only the first distinction withstands scrutiny and the other three do not: “The four distinctions mentioned by our teacher are not necessary barring one, and that is the first.”¹⁰² Surprisingly, he then continues: “Indeed, we accept the other three from our Rabbi [Maimonides], and he is the strong pillar upon which we rely for them, and after his words, there is no response.” It is unclear whether this acceptance of Maimonides’s opinion—which certainly seems to contradict Berdugo’s earlier explicit refutation of it—is genuine, or merely lip service.

In addition to relegating two principles to the status of mere offshoots, as we have shown, thereby reducing the total to eleven, elsewhere Berdugo aligns himself with a trend initiated by Albo that is primarily characterised by boiling down the thirteen principles to only three. Berdugo asserts that “the principles of the principles” are the existence of God, His omnipotence, and His providence.¹⁰³ The special status of these three principles is evident in his repeated references to them in his other writings.¹⁰⁴ It is interesting to note that among these three principles, we find divine providence, for which, as discussed above, Berdugo proposed a minimalist interpretation.

100 Berdugo, *Mey Menuhot*, 2:61^a.

101 Maimonides clearly distinguished between the prophecy of Moses and that of other prophets, understanding their prophecy to be merely homonymous with that of Moses (*Guide* 2.35 and other places in his writings).

102 Berdugo, *Rav Peninim*, 420.

103 Berdugo, 66.

104 Berdugo, *Mey Menuhot*, 2:77^b; 2:146^a; 2:148^a.

In conclusion, this discussion has, in line with those above, served to highlight Berdugo's independent and original stance on the issue of the principles of faith in Jewish thought. While he attached great importance to Maimonides's thirteen principles, he maintained intellectual autonomy and did not view himself as inextricably bound to them.

7 Conclusions: The Late Eighteenth-Century European versus North African Study of the *Guide*

As demonstrated, Berdugo's discussion of the thirteen principles of faith reveals his strong affinity with Maimonides's *Guide*. In the opening sections of this study, I briefly mentioned the scholarly findings regarding the predilection of sixteenth-century through mid-nineteenth-century North African scholars for the medieval Sephardic philosophical tradition (covering the first and second periods of the three sub-periods I outlined). In the closing section of this study, I would like to offer some initial thoughts about Berdugo's affinity with the *Guide* compared with that of his European counterparts.

The Europe of this time was witnessing a reawakening of interest in Maimonides's *Guide*, which became the object of study and controversy to a far greater degree than at any time in the previous two centuries. It is well known that the *Guide* was rediscovered by German Jewry in the late eighteenth century, or more precisely, commencing in 1742 with the publication of a new edition, arranged by David Fraenkel, almost two hundred years after its previous printing. Moses Mendelssohn, who published a commentary on Maimonides's *Treatise on Logic* in 1763, is said to have claimed that his hunched back derived from hours bent over the *Guide* as an adolescent. Isaac Euchel produced a new edition of the *Guide* in 1791 and encouraged Solomon Maimon to compose a commentary on the work (*Giv'at ha-Moreh*), which was later completed by Isaac Satanov, while Mendel Lefin paraphrased the *Guide* into philosophically loose maskilic Hebrew, and so on.

These writers and other members of the Haskalah movement looked to Maimonides for justification for their novel social and educational agenda.¹⁰⁵ Wishing to cultivate a Jewish *Bildung* as a way of approaching greater participation in European cultural and social life, they turned to Maimonides's works with great enthusiasm. For them, he symbolised the possibility of accepting

105 Shmuel Feiner, *The Jewish Enlightenment*, trans. Chaya Naor (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 47–48, 249, 325, and more.

the authority of Reason and of affirming the compatibility of Reason and the Torah. In response, traditionalist opponents penned attacks on Maimonides, to the extent that possession of the *Guide* (and similar books) marked one as an intellectual or radical, whether one had read them or not. Solomon Maimon testified that one of the reasons he was refused entry to Berlin in the mid-1770s was his intention to publish a new edition of the *Guide* with a commentary. Thus, by the final decades of the eighteenth century, Maimonides and his writings had become integral parts of the culture war [Kulturkampf] between proponents of the Haskalah and their traditionalist opponents. (In the context of the present study, it is also worth noting that Mendelssohn argued that Judaism had no articles of faith [Glaubenslehren], but only legislation [geoffenbartes Gesetz].¹⁰⁶)

The current sparse scholarship on the intellectual history of the North African diaspora indicates that the situation there was different. As mentioned above, it has been pointed out that while the descendants of the Spanish exiles who resettled in the Maghreb (during the first sub-period) continued to refer to the *Guide*—alongside the works of other medieval thinkers—in their writings, only a few North African scholars from the mid-seventeenth century onwards (the second sub-period), Berdugo among them, maintained an affinity with the Sephardic philosophical tradition, including the *Guide*. In my opinion, the limited scope of the scholarship on this period precludes the drawing of definitive conclusions. It is highly probable that further research, especially on manuscripts, will reveal additional figures who maintained this affinity. However, if we restrict ourselves to current findings, it seems that Maghrebi engagement with the *Guide* significantly decreased after the mid-seventeenth century, though it did not completely disappear.

At any rate, the present study of Berdugo's principles of faith reveals that his reading of the *Guide* is a direct continuation of the medieval discourse and that of the post-expulsion generations. In contrast to his contemporaries from the European Haskalah, Berdugo did not interpret, confront, or challenge the Jewish tradition in light of Kantian philosophy or Newtonian physics. He formulated his positions on topics such as the existence of God or divine providence

106 Moses Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem, or On Religious Power and Judaism*, trans. Allan Arkush, introduction and commentary by Alexander Altmann (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 1983), 90. See Warren Zev Harvey, "Hasdai Crescas and Moses Mendelssohn on Beliefs and Commandments," in *Moses Mendelssohn: Enlightenment, Religion, Politics, Nationalism*, ed. Michah Gottlieb and Charles H. Manekin (Bethesda, MD: University Press of Maryland, 2015), 79–89. Later reformers reintroduced dogmas into Judaism: see George Y. Kohler, "Is There Room for Belief in Judaism? Two German Jewish Thinkers Debate Dogma in 1834," *Jewish Thought* 1 (2019): 89–114.

in the medieval style, in response to the Greek philosophers and their Muslim interpreters. Moreover, his reading of the text was not oriented to the promotion of modern values or agendas. For instance, while the maskilim invoked Maimonidean authority in their Enlightenment-based efforts to reform the traditional education system to include secular studies, Berdugo's opinion of the appropriate approach to secular studies—an issue absent from the agenda of North African Jewry during the period in question—was formulated within the framework of the compromise laid out in the Rashba's ban, as mentioned above. In other words, while the European maskilim found their primary inspiration in the Enlightenment and mobilised the medieval philosophical tradition as the authority in order to implement their programme, for Berdugo, the latter was the source of both inspiration and authority.

We know of no opposition to Berdugo's or others' study of the *Guide* or of any attempt on his part to justify it. Apparently, such engagement was not perceived as radical or in need of legitimisation, probably due to the continuous tradition of such engagement in North Africa, involving numerous scholars in the post-expulsion generations and subsequently a small number of individuals (at least as far as is currently known). For more comprehensive and grounded conclusions, further research is required in order to locate additional scholars in the Maghreb from the second sub-period who continued to peruse the *Guide* and other medieval philosophical works and to analyse how they interpreted these works. This research will also contribute to a deeper understanding of the North African scholars of the third sub-period (mid-nineteenth century onwards) who expressed a strong affinity to the philosophical tradition of the Middle Ages in their writings, such as Šmuel Ṭayeb, Maklouf Abitan, and Avraham Zarbiv, whose contributions are also gradually being brought to light.¹⁰⁷

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¹⁰⁷ Michal Aziza Ohana, "Between the Philosophers, Rashbaš and Copernicus, and between the Alliance Israélite Universelle and Rabba Bar Bar Ḥana: Studies in the Thought of Rabbi Šmuel Ṭayeb" [Hebrew], in *Rabbi Kalphon Moshe ha-Cohen and the Sages of Tunisia in the Modern Era*, ed. Zvi Zohar and Ronel Atiya (Tel Aviv: Idra, 2024), 15–39; Maklouf Avitan (Abitan), *Utopia from Casablanca* [Hebrew] (Be'er-Sheva: Ra'av Publishing House, 2016).

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Gaze Matters

Reflections on Pictorial Idolatry

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Abstract

It has long since been convincingly demonstrated that Judaism does not impose an all-out ban on pictures, as the biblical prohibition only applies to their idolatrous (mis)use. But how can a picture be used as an idol? In other words: How does pictorial idolatry arise? To answer this question, it is first necessary to investigate what a picture is, what functions it fulfils, and what visual attitudes (also called “gazes”) underlie them. Through an analysis developed on multiple levels—particularly the level of picture pragmatics—this essay will show how both pictorial idolatry and its overcoming depend on the different gazes that can be cast on pictures. A form of internalised criticism will ultimately emerge as an essential component of any gaze that manages to go beyond idolatry.

Keywords

Cassirer – gaze – idolatry – pictures – pragmatics – presentification – representation

1 Introduction¹

At first glance, the text of the Torah seems to leave no room for interpretation in resolutely forbidding all kinds of pictures:² the passage reads, “You shall

1 I would like to thank this journal’s anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments, from which I have greatly profited for improving the quality of this essay. All translations of non-English texts are by the author.

2 Throughout this essay, the term “picture” will be used instead of “image.” This terminological choice is consistent with Thomas W.J. Mitchell’s observations in his book *Iconology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 10, where he defines “image” as a kind of general concept that includes, among other things, linguistic metaphors, mental imagery, visual perceptions,

not make for yourself a sculptured picture or any likeness.”³ At the same time, however, this strictness seems to be contradicted by other verses in which the production of pictures is directly ordered by God. The two cherubim for the cover of the ark of the covenant⁴ or the copper serpent endowed with healing properties⁵—to name but two famous examples—make the idea that the Torah prescribes a radical form of aniconism untenable. This apparent contradiction can be resolved if one considers that the prohibition of pictures usually appears in the context of the condemnation of idolatry, so that the conclusion can be drawn that only idols, not pictures in general, are forbidden.⁶ At this juncture, however, more questions arise than are answered. In fact, this solution implies that pictures and idols are different, but their difference is left unclarified. Provided that not every picture is *eo ipso* an idol, one may now ask what it takes for a picture to become an idol.

From a theoretical point of view, the problem can be approached by dividing the two notions into two distinct categories. While pictures belong to the realm of *entities*—*sui generis* entities, of course, but entities nonetheless—idols have rather to do with the *ways* in which entities are considered. “A picture” is a possible answer to the question “What is this?”, whereas “as an idol” would only be an appropriate reply to questions such as “How is this regarded?” Although still implicit in the Torah, this distinction finds explicit support in rabbinic literature. For example, in the *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, Rabbi Hananiah ben Antigonus says that an idol is “anything at all that you declare to be ruling over you, even if it be a chip of wood or a piece of potsherd.”⁷ The last words of Rabban Gamliel’s reply to Proclus in a well-known passage from the Mishnah tractate *Avodah Zarah* offer an incisive summary of the same view, stating that “what is treated as a god is prohibited, what is not treated as a deity is permitted.”⁸

and also “pictures,” or the artefacts of painting and sculpture. According to this terminology, “picture” is more specific than “image” for rendering this essay’s object of study.

3 Exod 20:4.

4 Exod 25:18.

5 Num 21:8–9.

6 The still unsettled question of the relationship between idols and pictures has produced a vast literature over time. It is worth mentioning here at least the now classic works by Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, *Idolatry*, trans. Naomi Goldblum (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992); Kalman P. Bland, *The Artless Jew: Medieval and Modern Affirmations and Denials of the Visual* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); and Melissa Raphael, *Judaism and the Visual Image: A Jewish Theology of Art* (London: Continuum, 2009). Moreover, new insights on the topic of idolatry can be found in the recent collected volumes by Beniamino Fortis, ed., *Bild und Idol. Perspektiven aus Philosophie und jüdischem Denken* (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 2022) and Alon Goshen-Gottstein, ed., *Idolatry: A Contemporary Jewish Conversation* (Boston, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2023).

7 *Mek. R. Ish.*, *Bahodesh* 6:12.

8 *m. ‘Abod. Zar.* 3:4.

Based on these and other similar examples, it is safe to say that the decisive element for pictorial idolatry is not the picture *per se*, but rather the *way* in which it is viewed. This conception, moreover, constitutes a theoretical precedent for modern scholars to declare, for instance, that “the idol is not an object, but a function,”⁹ “to be an idolater is a state of mind,”¹⁰ or “idolatry is essentially a way of relating to otherness.”¹¹ This change in emphasis from the picture as the material target of worship to the way it is experienced—from the “what” to the “how,” so to speak—allows introducing two notions borrowed from the field of picture theory that can be fruitfully employed in the study of idolatry: the first is the notion of “pictorial function,” while the second is that of “visual attitude.” Both indicate modalities—that is, ways of being—but while a pictorial function is definable as “the way a picture is thought to relate to its object,” a visual attitude is “the way of looking at pictures that determines their functions.”

Pictorial functions concern the relation a picture is thought to establish with its non-pictorial object. Every picture, by definition, relates to something non-pictorial—namely, its object—but the nature of this relation can vary considerably. For example, a picture can be seen as *housing* its object and *merging with* it, but it is also possible that it is thought to *refer to* its object, to indicate and stand for it, while remaining distinct and separate from it. In these cases, it is legitimate to speak of different functions being ascribed to the picture. However, the question then arises as to who or what is in a position to ascribe functions to pictures. This leads to the second notion: visual attitude. This pertains to the relation between a picture and its beholder and affects pictorial functions by informing the manner in which the picture-object relationship is conceived. In short: the way the beholder relates to a picture (the visual attitude) determines how a picture is thought to relate to its object (the pictorial function).

Once outlined these two key notions, the idea lying at the roots of this essay can be clearly articulated: when considered in the context of the production and reception of pictures, idolatry is the result of a pictorial function, which, in turn, is derived from a visual attitude. The first part of this essay is dedicated to the two pictorial functions that are relevant to pictorial idolatry: presentification, in which a picture *embodies* its object, and representation, in which a

9 Stéphane Mosès, “Le point d’Énoch. L’art et l’idole selon les sources juives,” in *Idoles. Données et débats. Actes du xxive Colloque des intellectuels juifs de langue française*, ed. Jeanne Halpérin and Georges Lévitte (Paris: Denoël, 1985), 138.

10 Lionel Kochan, *Beyond the Graven Image: A Jewish View* (London: MacMillan, 1997), 14.

11 Raffaella Di Castro, *Il divieto di idolatria tra monoteismo e iconoclastia. Una lettura attraverso Emmanuel Levinas* (Milan: Guerini Studio, 2012), 37.

picture *refers to* its object. It will show how both can lead to idolatry, but each under different conditions. The transition from the first to the second part of this essay may suggest a sort of backward movement, from the pictorial functions to the visual attitudes that underpin them. Visual attitudes are also called “gazes” and indicate the dynamics through which the visible is organised for the formation of meaning. They can be considered *formae visionis*, which—as Ernst Cassirer’s studies reveal—are inextricably linked to corresponding *formae mentis*. More precisely, two visual attitudes are at issue here: one is conducive to idolatry, whereas the other prevents idolatry by undermining the conditions that make it possible. Finally, in the last part of this essay, conceptual tools from the pragmatics of pictures¹² will allow recognising a moment of critical distance as a crucial aspect of the visual attitude that manages to avoid pictorial idolatry.

2 Pictorial Functions

Different pictorial functions correspond to the different types of relationships a picture is thought to establish with its object. In this regard, scholars from disciplines as diverse as anthropology, theology, and visual studies agree on distinguishing between pictures that are thought to host their objects by way of embodiment and pictures that are conceived as indicating their objects through dynamics of reference.

The anthropologist Christoph Wulf, for example, talks about the picture as a magical presence, which “through its very existence ensures the divine presence in the world,”¹³ and as a mimetic representation that “displays, expresses, refers to something.”¹⁴ The same dichotomy is noticeable in Karl-Heinz Bernhardt’s theological reflections on the pictorial practices surrounding the Israelites in the Ancient Near East: “In the environment of the Old Testament—he says—, the picture of a god [Götterbild] is not a ‘representation’ [Abbildung] of the deity in the sense of a faithful replica of a heavenly archetype. It is rather a body animated by the divine spirit.”¹⁵ Summarising anthropological and theological views in the interdisciplinary perspective of visual studies, the

12 The study of how contextual factors contribute to the overall meaning of pictures.

13 Christoph Wulf, *Anthropologie. Geschichte—Kultur—Philosophie* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2004), 234.

14 Wulf, *Anthropologie*, 236.

15 Karl-Heinz Bernhardt, *Gott und Bild. Ein Beitrag zur Begründung und Deutung des Bilderverbotes im Alten Testament* (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1956), 67.

mediologist¹⁶ Régis Debray separates the two pictorial functions by arranging them into different structures that he calls “regimes”: the “regime of the idol” and the “regime of art,” the first being governed by the “principle of presence” and the second by that of “representation.”¹⁷

Apart from slight terminological discrepancies—which come with the territory when different scholars are involved—in this essay, the following terms will be used: the first function will be called “presentification” and the actual pictures fulfilling it “presentifications,” while the second function will be called “representation” and, by extension, its corresponding pictures will be called “representations.” In the first case, the conditions are provided for a deity to be present in the *hic et nunc*: through presentification, a deity “takes on residence in the picture” [nimmt Aufenthalt im Bilde],¹⁸ which thus becomes a *locus* for its object. In the second case, the picture makes reference to its object: it aims at it, but remains detached from it through an irreducible gap. It should also be pointed out that the main sources for outlining the difference between presentification and representation are literary works rather than archaeological relics, because the *way* a picture relates to its object—namely, its pictorial function—can be best inferred from textual descriptions of the situations in which the picture is involved.

2.1 *Presentification*

Examples of presentification can be found in numerous sources, from which it emerges that a deity and its statue tend to be conflated within a single dimension. In Mesopotamian texts, for example, it is not unusual that the mere presence of a statue of a god equates to that of the god themselves—with the underlying implication that deity and picture are considered equivalent to each other. A passage from the *Akītu Chronicles* is particularly illustrative of this point: “For eight years (during the reign of) Sennacherib, for twelve years (during the reign of) of Esarhaddon—twenty years (altogether)—Bel stayed in Baltil.”¹⁹ Although this passage states that Bel (an honorary title for the Babylonian god Marduk) himself stayed in the city of Baltil, in fact, the chronicles

16 As the founder of mediology, Régis Debray understands it as an interdisciplinary method for investigating the dynamics of cultural transmission. Particular attention is paid to the technological evolution of media and the role it plays in transferring culture. See Debray, *Transmettre* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 1997).

17 Debray schematically outlines his thinking in two overview tables: see Régis Debray, *Vie et mort de l'image. Une histoire du regard en Occident* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), 226–227.

18 See Bernhardt, *Gott und Bild*, 28.

19 Chr 14, 31–32, and Chr 16, 1–3, in Albert Kirk Grayson, ed., *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles* (Locust Valley, NY: J.J. Augustin, 1975), 127 and 131.

report his *statue* being physically transported to and left in Baltil. The wording of the text indicates that the deity and his statue are not conceived of as separate entities, but rather as a unity, so much so that abducting the statue of Marduk is tantamount to exiling Marduk himself.²⁰

In her study dedicated to pictorial practices in Assyria and Babylonia, Zainab Bahrani deals with the notion of *šalmu*,²¹ which is the Akkadian term for “image” in general and “statue” in particular. She maintains that the *šalmu* “was not considered to resemble an original reality that was present elsewhere but to contain that reality in itself. Therefore, instead of being a means of signifying an original real thing, it was seen as ontologically equivalent to it, existing in the same register of reality.”²² This description of how the Assyro-Babylonian *šalmu* relates to its object—with the use of the verb “to contain” and the emphasis on ontological equivalence—sheds light on the example above, clarifying the relationship between Marduk and his statue: in this view, the god *must* follow the statue’s peregrinations because he is contained in it and they are conjoined in the same level of reality. Ultimately, it is easy to see how Bahrani’s words, once adjusted to the terminology of this essay, allow the conclusion that a *šalmu* is essentially a presentification.

If the setting changes from the Ancient Near East to Ancient Greece, this conception remains valid, and a Greek counterpart of the Babylonian episode can be found, for example, in Homer’s *Iliad*. The scene is set in a temple, in front of a statue of the goddess Athena. The text reads: “With sacred cries they all lifted up their hands to Athena; and [...] took the robe and laid it upon the knees of fair-haired Athena, and with vows made prayer to the daughter of great Zeus.”²³ As in the *Akītu Chronicles*, in the *Iliad* too, the statue is the only thing that is materially present. Thus, the worshippers reach out their hands toward the *statue* of Athena. The knees of the fair-haired Athena are actually the *marble knees of the statue* of Athena. However, the statue is never referred to as an independent being, and it is completely equated with the goddess.

Following the French specialist in Ancient Greece Jean-Pierre Vernant, who identifies Plato’s philosophy as the watershed between the modes of presenti-

20 “The god moved with the image when the latter was carried off” (Leo A. Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia: Portrait of a Dead Civilization* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964], 184).

21 The etymological connection to the Hebrew שֵׁלֶם [*šélem*]²¹—one of the terms for “picture”—is evident.

22 Zainab Bahrani, *The Graven Image: Representation in Babylonia and Assyria* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 127.

23 Homer, *Il.* 6.301–304.

fiction and representation,²⁴ the Homeric conception of pictures falls entirely within the scope of presentification. In his investigations into the status of the picture *before representation*, Vernant summarises the function of presentification in the following words:

The problem is [...]: by means of localisation in an exact form and a well-determined place, how is it possible to give visual presence to those powers that come from the invisible and do not belong to the space here below on earth? The task is to make the invisible visible, to assign a place in our world to entities from the other world. [...] The ambition is to make this power present *hic et nunc*, to make it available to human beings [...]: the idea is to establish real contact with the world beyond, to actualise it, to make it present.²⁵

2.2 *Representation*

While the pictorial function of presentification aims at the closest possible connection between picture and object in order to make the latter available in the former, representation is instead structured around an irreducible gap between them: the picture is no longer a *container* for its object, but rather a *sign* for it. This change in perspective, with the opening of a gap between picture and object, is attested in several textual sources from both Jewish thought and Greek philosophy. In the book of Isaiah, for example, the prophet's irony against the idolaters only makes sense in a context in which that gap is presupposed, and the author arguably already conceives of pictures in terms of representation. The same gap is then explicitly thematised through ontological categories in Plato's philosophy, in some passages from the *Cratylus*, and, more extensively, in the *Sophist*.

In the book of Isaiah, the practices of idol-making and worshipping are ridiculed by emphasising the idol's materiality:

The carpenter [lit. חָרֵשׁ עֵצִים (*haraš 'ešym*), "craftsman in wood"] [...] takes some [wood] to warm himself, // And he builds a fire and bakes bread. // He also makes a god of it and worships it, // Fashions an idol and bows down to it! // Part of it he burns in a fire: // On that part he roasts meat, // He eats the roast and is sated; // He also warms himself and cries, "Ah,

24 See Jean-Pierre Vernant, "De la présentification de l'invisible à l'imitation de l'apparence" (1983), in Vernant, *Œuvres. Religions, rationalités, politique* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2007), 1:546–558.

25 Vernant, "De la présentification de l'invisible à l'imitation de l'apparence," 548–549.

// I am warm! I can feel the heat!" // Of the rest he makes a god—his own carving! // He bows down to it, worships it; // He prays to it and cries, // "Save me, for you are my god!"²⁶

In the view expressed in this passage, the fundamental foolishness of idolatry consists in failing to realise that it is always *the same* piece of wood that is partly used for domestic purposes and partly worshipped as a deity. The absurdity of the same matter being simultaneously profane and sacred denounces idolatry's essential inconsistency. To be fair, various aspects of Isaiah's position lend themselves to criticism because of what can be read as a tendency to present a strawman caricature of its polemical target.²⁷ But beyond this, the prophetic book is still a valuable testimony to a new separation that is now perceived in the idols' internal structure: they can be mocked as lifeless matter, because the deities they were supposed to house are now considered to be separate from their material support. From the point of view of picture theory, this implies a radical change in pictorial function, as the gap between matter and deity corresponds to that between picture and object that characterises representations as opposed to presentifications.

The pictorial function of representation, which can be read between the lines as a necessary, but implicit presupposition in Isaiah's anti-idol polemics, becomes an object of ontological investigation in Plato's *Cratylus* and *Sophist*. In the first of these two dialogues, names [ὄνοματα, *onómata*] and pictures

26 Isa 44:13–17.

27 "Strawman fallacy" refers to a form of incorrect reasoning through which criticism is levelled against a distorted, trivialised version of the real argument under discussion, as committing this fallacy is like fighting a strawman. In Isaiah's case, the prophet is criticising an idea of idolatry that probably never existed. It is highly unlikely that a piece of wood was believed to have divine essence in itself, as the link between the deity and its picture had to be forged through extremely elaborate rituals. The so-called *mis pí* [washing of the mouth], for example, is a multiple-stage ceremony whose purpose is to turn a newly manufactured statue into a vessel for the divine essence. See, on this topic, the classic study by David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), especially chapter 5, 82–98. It is safe to say that the idolaters Isaiah mocked were probably less naive than he thought. However, for the sake of intellectual honesty, it is worth reporting Joachim Schaper's words in favour of Isaiah's view: "Of course [Isaiah's] intention was a polemical one [...]. However, he must have had considerable knowledge of those cult practices and of the assumptions that informed them [...] i.e., the belief that the images were alive with the powers of the deity. By polemicising against that belief, he posited that human beings, however much they try, are unable to induce life into the 'idols' they produce" (Schaper, *Media and Monotheism: Presence, Representation, and Abstraction in Ancient Judah* [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019], 89).

[ζωγραφήματα, *zôgraphêmata*] are explicitly thematised as imitations [μιμήματα, *mimêmata*] of reality:

- SOCRATES Let's see, Cratylus, if we can somehow come to terms with one another. You agree, don't you, that it's one thing to be a name and another to be the thing it names?
- CRATYLUS Yes, I do.
- SOCRATES And you also agree that a name is an imitation of a thing?
- CRATYLUS Absolutely.
- SOCRATES And that a painting is a different sort of imitation of a thing?
- CRATYLUS Yes.
- SOCRATES Well, perhaps what you're saying is correct and I'm misunderstanding you, but can both of these imitations—both paintings and names—be assigned and applied to the things of which they are imitations, or not?
- CRATYLUS They can.²⁸

In this exchange, a conception of appearance as a different dimension from reality comes to the fore. Names and pictures, as verbal and visual imitations respectively, are the two main modes of appearance. They enjoy a peculiar intermediate position that enables them to resemble reality—that is, establish a mimetic reference to it—without, however, being it. This divide between being and imitating, reality and appearance, is further developed in genuinely ontological terms in the dialogue *Sophist*, in which, as Gernot Böhme once said, “something quite astonishing can be found, something that, as far as I know, has never been attempted again in history; namely, a definition of ‘picture’”.²⁹

- STRANGER That which is like [read: picture], then, you say does not really exist, as you say it is not true.
- THEAETETUS But it does exist, in a way.
- STRANGER But not truly, you mean.
- THEAETETUS No, except that it is really a picture.
- STRANGER Then what we call a picture, though not really existing, really does exist?
- THEAETETUS Not-being does seem to have got into some such entanglement [συμπλοκή, *symploke*] with being.³⁰

28 Plato, *Crat.* 430^{a-b}.

29 Gernot Böhme, *Theorie des Bildes* (Munich: Fink, 2004), 18.

30 Plato, *Soph.* 240^{b-c}.

What Böhme calls a definition of “picture” is, more precisely, a definition of “representation.” In fact, the picture Plato describes, with its complex relations to reality, is certainly not a presentification aimed at embodying its objects. Rather, the pictorial function emerging from the passage from the *Sophist* is that of representation: the picture is definitely something other than the reality it imitates, but at the same time, it is still connected to that reality by way of mimetic reference. In ontological terms, the Platonic picture can be considered a form of *not-being*, because it *is not* its object. But on the other hand, as a picture, it *is* still something: to wit, the *appearance* of its object. It is not pure nothingness, and therefore it falls within the purview of being. Elaborating on Plato’s conception, Böhme suggests the chiasmic formulation “is what it is not and is not what it is,”³¹ which brilliantly captures the nature of representation by conjuring up the idea of an oscillation between being and not-being.

This exact ontological oscillation lies at the core of another study on representation. In his essay “Rappresentazione. La parola, l’idea, la cosa,” the Italian historian Carlo Ginzburg provides an alternative definition, which is based on the notions of absence and presence rather than on being and not-being:

On one hand a “representation” stands in for the reality that is represented, and so evokes absence; on the other, it makes that reality visible, and thus suggests presence. Moreover, this opposition can easily be reversed: the representation is present in the former case, even if only as a surrogate; in the latter case it ends up recalling, in contrast to itself, the absent reality that it is intended to represent.³²

While presentifications tend to identify with their objects, providing them with full presence, representations are instead characterised by a constant swinging between presence and absence, for Ginzburg, or an entanglement of being and not-being, for Plato. Presence is the very essence of presentifications, exhausting them completely, but it is only one component of representations, whose internal structure also includes a dimension of absence. Every representation is constitutively based on a fundamental gap between the representation itself, which is present, and the referred-to object, which is absent. A moment of pres-

31 The expression is Sartre’s definition of the human being (see Jean-Paul Sartre, *L’être et le néant. Essai d’ontologie phénoménologique* [Paris: Gallimard, 1943]), which Böhme considers applicable to pictures: “*The human being is what it is not and is not what it is. The same goes for the picture*” (Böhme, *Theorie des Bildes*, 7–8).

32 Carlo Ginzburg, “Rappresentazione. La parola, l’idea, la cosa,” in Ginzburg, *Occhiacci di legno. Dieci riflessioni sulla distanza* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2019), 89.

ence is thus always involved, but in addition, it is also in relation to a moment of absence. As Ginzburg vividly expresses, moreover, the interplay between them evokes a movement of oscillation that can be considered the distinguishing trait of representation.

To sum up, the structural features of the pictorial functions considered thus far lend themselves to being schematised as follows: presentification emerges as a static one-pole structure consisting of a moment of presence only, whereas representation relies on a dynamic two-pole structure that exists by means of an interplay between its two poles of presence and absence. Finally, it is worth recalling that presentifications and representations do not indicate *different types* of pictures; rather, they indicate *different pictorial functions*, which, in principle, can be even fulfilled by the same picture. Understandably enough, this latter remark prompts the question: What determines whether a picture functions as a presentification of its object or rather as a representation of it? The following section, which is dedicated to the study of different visual attitudes, aims to find an answer to this question.

3 Visual Attitudes

The modes of presentification or representation are not inherent features of a picture, as they are ascribed to it based on the various approaches that can be adopted towards it. The notion of “visual attitude” precisely accounts for the particular way in which a picture can be considered, indicating a conventionally coded, culturally mediated, and historically characterised approach. To be more precise, the conceptual relationship between pictorial functions and visual attitudes can be described as “a way of relating to a way of relating.” As convoluted as it may seem at first glance, this formula can be easily explained in two steps: 1) a pictorial function indicates the variable relation between a picture and its object, and 2) a visual attitude indicates the variable relation between the beholder and the “picture-object” pair. In other words, a visual attitude is a way of relating to a pictorial function, which, in turn, is also a way of relating; to wit, the way a picture relates to its object. Thus, in order to go deeper into the matter, the study of different pictorial functions needs to turn into the study of the different visual attitudes in which they are rooted and from which they are derived.

The notion of visual attitude rests on the shared assumption that vision cannot be reduced to a merely passive recording of visual data. Rather, it is a far more complex operation that presupposes a set of conventions for actively organising the visible and whose validity is not established once and for

all, but changes in accordance with temporal transformations. Visual attitudes are historical in nature, and the course of their evolution can accordingly be divided into different historical epochs. In this regard, scholars from various orientations may have divergent positions on several aspects, but agree on visual attitudes having a historical character that allows each attitude to be conventionally paired with a phase of human history. Beyond Ernst Cassirer, Jean-Pierre Vernant, Jan Assman, and Régis Debray, who are expressly dealt with in this essay, several thinkers as diverse as Walter Benjamin, Odo Marquard, Hans Belting, Jacques Rancière, and many others elaborate their own interpretations regarding the historical sequence of visual attitudes—often intertwining their discourses on pictures with their reflections on art.³³

While all of the aforementioned authors converge on the idea of visual attitudes being subject to historical development, chronological discrepancies emerge when it comes to marking the exact boundaries and turning points between different epochs. In particular, two moments in history are usually pinpointed as crucial for the epochal change leading from the visual attitude that determines the pictorial function of presentification to the visual attitude that determines the pictorial function of representation. The biblical ban on idolatrous pictures is the first of the abovementioned moments; Platonic philosophy, with its condemnation of mimetic pictures, is the second. Sound arguments can be adduced in support of both, but beyond the tedious task of establishing primacy, the point should be made that the same conceptual dynamics are at work in both the scriptural passages and Plato's dialogues. More precisely, a shift from "immanence" to "transcendence" can be recognised in both contexts, giving rise to monotheism on the one hand and metaphysics on the other.

33 Benjamin, for example, distinguishes pictures (and artworks in general) that are "in the service of rituals—first magical, then religious" from those related to "the most profane forms of the cult of beauty" (Walter Benjamin, "Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit" [1936], in Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften, Band 1,2: Abhandlungen*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhauser [Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991], 480). Odo Marquard also speaks of "artistic religion or religious art" [*Kunstreligion oder Religionskunst*] as opposed to aestheticised art (see Marquard, *Aesthetica und Anaesthetica. Philosophische Überlegungen* [Paderborn: Schöningh, 1989], 12). Moreover, his view shows striking analogies with Hans Belting's separation between an "era of pictures" and an "era of art" (see Belting, *Bild und Kult. Eine Geschichte des Bildes vor dem Zeitalter der Kunst* [Munich: Beck, 1990]). For a comparison between Marquard's and Belting's perspectives, see Luca Vargiu, "Hans Belting, l'estetica della compensazione e la Riforma," *Aisthema* 5 (2018): 19–35. Finally, Jacques Rancière, to name just one last example, divides the evolution of the concepts of picture and art into different regimes (see Rancière, *Le partage du sensible. Esthétique et politique* [Paris: La Fabrique, 2000], 27).

The perplexity that this comparison inevitably arouses can perhaps be mitigated through some clarifications. In dealing with this problem, Cassirer, for example, states that “the religious consciousness achieves its intrinsic and peculiar ideality, and at the same time it approaches a fundamental idea which philosophical thinking progressively works out via entirely different methods and on the basis of other presuppositions.”³⁴ Based on this and other similar passages, it is arguable that he understands religious consciousness and philosophical thinking as different ways of overcoming mythical thinking. In his view, religion and philosophy are both bearers of a form of transcendence, but each “by its own methods and on its own presuppositions.” They can be seen as two different ways of opposing immanence and thus as two different developments beyond mythical thinking. In other words, Cassirer focuses on a transition, or an evolution, from immanence to transcendence, which leads to the affirmation of monotheism when inflected by Jewish accents, but gives rise to metaphysics when inflected by aspects of Greek philosophy.³⁵

3.1 *Cassirer’s View*

The passage quoted above is only a brief excerpt from Cassirer’s thorough study dedicated to the various aspects of the transition at issue here. In the second volume of his *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*, he not only reads the shift from presentification to representation through the categories of immanence and transcendence, but also acknowledges the inextricable link between visual attitudes and ways of thinking—that is, the implication between what, to use Latin phrases, could be referred to as *formae visionis* and *formae mentis*.

In the part dedicated to myth as a form of thought,³⁶ Cassirer develops his own position in the wake of Kant’s critical philosophy, extending its purview from the “theoretical, intellectual sphere” to every sphere in which some sort of order is imposed over chaos: “wherever a cosmos, a characteristic and typical world view, takes form out of the chaos of impressions.”³⁷ In a Kantian

34 Ernst Cassirer, *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen. Zweiter Teil. Das mythische Denken* (1925), ed. Claus Rosenkranz (Hamburg: Meiner, 2010), 295.

35 About this parallel between monotheism and Greek philosophy, Schaper writes: “[It] does not imply any assumption of any form of dependence. Rather, our comparison illustrates that the problem of the conceptualisation of the deity and its representation occurred in very different ancient cultures; it was not tied to any one tradition in particular. [It is about] a shift from immanence to transcendence, from presence to representation, in short, a shift which, in Israel, took the shape of monotheism [...] while elsewhere it did, in principle, have the same result (as in Greece)” (Schaper, *Media and Monotheism*, 160–161).

36 See Cassirer, *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*, 35–86.

37 Cassirer, 35.

manner, Cassirer conceives of the notion of “world view” as a combination of what can be called material and formal principles. Unorganised impressions (the material principle) are given an order (the formal principle) by the categories through which they are filtered, so that Kant’s famous sentence from the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* can be adapted and repeated here: “Categories without impressions are empty; impressions without categories are blind.”³⁸ Unlike Kant, however, who sees the *a priori* apparatus as the ahistorical structure of transcendental subjectivity, Cassirer historicises it, acknowledging that “all such world views are made possible only by specific acts of objectivization, [and that] the direction and means of this process of objectivization change.”³⁹

“Objectivization” is Cassirer’s term for the process through which the categories give shape to the “raw material” of impressions, and several acts of objectivization together constitute a “world view.” However, the categories, and more precisely, their ways of relating to the impressions—namely, the “direction and means” of objectivization—are not permanent and vary over time. This means that several world views have succeeded each other in the course of human history, and mythical thinking, with its specific categories and its specific way of applying them to the chaos of impressions, is one world view among others. As an overall approach to reality, the mythical world view covers various domains, which particularly affect the spheres of thought and vision—that is, the way of thinking and the way of seeing, the *forma mentis* and the *forma visionis*. From Cassirer’s study, these emerge as two different inflections of the same fundamental mode, which is characterised by such distinctive traits as a primacy given to presence, a lack of differentiation between layers of reality, a lack of depth, and a general one-dimensionality.

Dealing with the sphere of *thought* in the context of myth, Cassirer writes:

The nuances of significance and value [...] which enable it to distinguish different spheres of objects and to draw a line between the world of truth and the world of appearance are utterly lacking. Myth lives entirely by the presence of its object. [...] All “truth” and reality dissolve into the mere presence of the content, all phenomena are situated on a single plane. Here there are no different *degrees* of reality.⁴⁰

38 The original sentence from the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* reads: “Gedanken ohne Inhalt sind leer, Anschauungen ohne Begriffe sind blind” (Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* [1781–1787], vols. 3 and 4 of Kant, *Werkausgabe*, ed. Wilhelm Weischedel [Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974], 3:98). The English translation is “Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind.”

39 Cassirer, *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*, 35.

40 Cassirer, 43–44.

However, these features of the mythical way of *thinking* are also mirrored in a corresponding way of *seeing*:

If we examine myth itself, what it is and what it knows itself to be, we see that this separation of the ideal from the real, this distinction between a world of immediate reality and a world of mediate signification, this opposition of “image” and “object,” is alien to it. [...] The “image” does not represent the “thing”; it *is* the thing; it does not merely stand for the object, but has the same actuality, so that it replaces the thing’s immediate presence.⁴¹

It is clear that in both thought and vision, the mythical world view is based on a fundamental one-dimensionality, which, however, starts to waver when a new world view takes root; that is, when the mythical consciousness develops into religious consciousness. This transition is crucial for Cassirer, who reads it, among other things, as an evolution from an immanence-based conception to a transcendence-based conception. Even when myth and religion share the same content, their ways of approaching it are completely different, as religious consciousness sees reality through the lens of a new dichotomy that is ignored by mythical consciousness. Meaning and existence, thing and image, signified and signifier, and being and appearance are all pairs of notions that express relations of *transcendence* and can thus render various aspects of the new view introduced by religion. When considered in the context of vision, moreover, this dichotomous conception reveals pictures, and signs in general, as merely forms of reference, which as such are irremediably detached from and essentially inadequate to express the reality they mean to address.

This momentous turning point from myth to religion is explicitly described as an evolution from immanence to transcendence—as can be gathered, for example, from this passage:

The naive indifference of image and thing, the immanence of both as we find it in mythical thinking, begins to give way: in its place there develops more and more clearly that form of transcendence—to speak in ontological terms—in which is expressed the new division which the religious consciousness has now experienced in itself. Things and events do not now simply signify themselves but have become an indication of something “other,” something “transcendent.”⁴²

41 Cassirer, 47.

42 Cassirer, 295. The transition from myth to religion is one of the major conceptual junc-

In conclusion, while Cassirer's inquiry can certainly be praised for the thoroughness of its approach, which has the merit of tackling the topic from multiple perspectives, at the same time, the overlapping of various levels of analysis is precisely what makes the discourse particularly intricate. However, a thread to be followed through the intricacies of Cassirer's thought can be found in the dichotomous structure that can be recognised at every level as a sort of common denominator, despite taking on different forms. A series of correspondences can thus be obtained: on the one hand, the immanence that is typical of mythical consciousness manifests itself in a fundamental incapability to distinguish appearance from reality and truth at the level of thought, or to separate a picture from its object at the level of vision. On the other, the transcendence associated with religious consciousness allows the recognition of an ontological gap, because of which reality transcends an appearance that can never exhaust it, in the same way that a picture (in this case, a representation) always falls short of thoroughly accounting for its object.

3.2 *Idolatrous Ways*

Beyond terminological and chronological differences, all the authors considered thus far refer to an epochal transition involving world views, ways of thinking, visual attitudes, and pictorial functions. Focusing on these latter alone, two functions stand out as the most significant for the problem of idolatry: presentification and representation. It has been shown that the pictures that are explicitly prohibited in the Decalogue are presentifications,⁴³ but the texts

tures in Cassirer's thought and has been extensively dealt with in the secondary literature. In-depth treatments of this issue can be found in Oswald Schwemmer, "Die symbolische Existenz des Göttlichen. Mythos und Religion bei Ernst Cassirer," in *Religion-Metaphysik(kritik)-Theologie im Kontext der Moderne/Postmoderne*, ed. Markus Knapp and Theo Kobusch (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2001), 56–84; Michael Bongardt, "Must Religion Be Overthrown? Myth, Religion and Liberation in the Thought of Ernst Cassirer," *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift* 82 (2006): 5–15; Bongardt, "Wider die Sprachlosigkeit. Zur Bedeutung der Religion in Ernst Cassirers Kulturphilosophie," in *Philosophie der Kultur—Kultur des Philosophierens. Ernst Cassirer im 20. und 21. Jahrhundert*, ed. Birgit Recki (Hamburg: Meiner 2012), 457–481; Ursula Renz, "From Philosophy to Criticism of Myth: Cassirer's Concept of Myth," *Synthese* 179 (2011): 135–152.

43 See Beniamino Fortis, "From Representation to Power: The *Bilderverbot* Reconsidered," *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 84 (2023): 275–293. Arguments supporting a connection between the notions of presentification and idolatry have also been made in various areas of the secondary literature on this topic. In addition to the aforementioned texts by Bernhardt (*Gott und Bild*), Debray (*Vie et mort de l'image*), and Schaper (*Media and Monotheism*), consider also Moshe Barasch, *Icon: Studies in the History of an Idea* (New York: New York University Press, 1992); Alain Besançon, *L'image interdite. Une histoire intellectuelle de l'iconoclasme* (Paris: Fayard, 1994); Gottfried Boehm, "Die Bilder-

in which the new function of representation can be recognised *in nuce* are also parts of the Torah⁴⁴ and enforce the same strict counter-idolatrous prohibition. It is thus necessary to clarify how the two pictorial functions establish different relationships with idolatry, because given their differences, it is conceivable that each has its own way of being idolatrous. Simply put, the following two questions can be raised: What does it mean to be idolatrous for presentifications? And what for representations?

In regard to the first question, it can be observed that the relation between presentification and idolatry is one of *identity*: presentifications *are* idols. With reference to the first two commandments, the Egyptologist Jan Assmann confirms this equivalence by stating that “having ‘other gods’ means making pictures, and vice versa.”⁴⁵ The phrase “other gods” is a clear reference to the אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים [*elohim aḥerym*] in Exod 20:3, which in Assmann’s view can only exist by way of embodiment in a presentification: they require a material vessel to occupy, for example, a פֶּסֶל [*pesel*, graven picture] or a מַסֵּכָה [*massekha*, molten picture]. In this view, pictures are the specific mode of existence of other gods. Or, reformulating the same sentence using the terminology of the Torah: *psalim* and/or *massekhot* are the specific mode of existence of *elohim aḥerym*. But the reverse is also true: “And vice versa,” says Assmann, who, in another text, writes: “Worship is the only *raison d’être* for the production of pictures.”⁴⁶ The sole purpose of pictures in the Ancient Near East is to provide deities with a place in the world so that they can be properly worshipped. Given the double implication between the employment of *psalim* or *massekhot* [presentifications] and the worship of *elohim aḥerym* [idolatry], the conclusion can be drawn that presentifications are *per se* idolatrous.

When the mode of presentification yields to that of representation, the relationship between pictures and idolatry changes accordingly. Unlike presentifications, representations are not inherently idolatrous, but this does not mean that they are completely immune to idolatry. For them, idolatry undergoes a

frage,” in *Was ist ein Bild?*, ed. Gottfried Boehm (Munich: Fink 1994), 325–343; Jean-Jacques Wunenburger, “L’idole au regard de la philosophie des images,” *Protée* 29, no. 3 (2001): 7–16; Jean-Luc Nancy, “La représentation interdite” (2001), in Nancy, *Au fond des images* (Paris: Galilée, 2003), 57–99; Silvano Petrosino, *L’idolo. Teoria di una tentazione dalla Bibbia a Lacan* (Milan: Mimesis, 2015).

44 For example: Deut 4, Isa 44, Ps. 115, and others.

45 Jan Assmann, “Du sollst dir keine Bilder machen. Bedeutung und Kontext des Zweiten Gebots,” in *Bilder-Verbot und Verlangen in Kunst und Musik*, ed. Christian Scheib and Sabine Sanio (Saarbrücken: PFAU, 2000), 16.

46 Jan Assmann, “What’s Wrong with Images?,” in *Idol Anxiety*, ed. Josh Ellenbogen and Aaron Tugendhaft (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 20.

sort of change in status and transforms from a necessity into a possibility, a risk—more precisely, the risk of a relapse into the old mode of presentification. To put it another way, idolatrous outcomes are still possible, even with representations, if they are mistakenly taken for presentifications; if their essential swinging between presence and absence (see the quotation from Carlo Ginzburg above) is erroneously reduced to the fixity of pure presence. Idolatry, for representations, consists in disregarding their internal, essential gap. As Emil Fackenheim once noted in an essay dedicated to this topic: “There is [...] no idolatry where this gap both exists and is known to exist.”⁴⁷ More precisely, “when the gap exists” refers to situations where representations are at issue; “when the gap is known to exist” indicates the acknowledgement of a relation of reference between picture and object, which always implies a separation between them.

As a final remark, it is worth recalling that the difference between presentification and representation is but a particular aspect of a radical break that goes far beyond the two pictorial functions, also involving visual attitudes and ways of thinking. But however radical this break may be, as Debray points out in his study of the evolutions of visual culture, “there is nothing after a cesura that could not already be found before it.”⁴⁸ This quotation provides a basis for interpreting representation as a broader dimension that includes presentification as one of its fundamental elements, rather than excluding it as its antithesis. More precisely, presentification lives on in representation as its pole of presence, which enters into relation with the opposite pole of absence and generates the movement of constant oscillation mentioned above. In this regard, Debray even evokes the Hegelian process of *Aufhebung* for the relationship between presentification and representation—the former being overcome by, but also conserved in, the latter. “We can only half-jokingly make ‘moments’ of them in the Hegelian sense,”⁴⁹ he says, meaning that the “moment” of presentification is comprised within, but also surpassed by, representation.

4 Gaze

In the field of visual studies, there is a technical term that is often employed for what has thus far been called “visual attitude”: “gaze.” David Morgan, though

47 Emil L. Fackenheim, “Idolatry as a Modern Possibility,” in Fackenheim, *Encounters between Judaism and Modern Philosophy: A Preface to Future Jewish Thought* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1973), 188.

48 Debray, *Vie et mort de l'image*, 222.

49 Debray, 231.

focusing on a particular type of gaze (namely, the religious one), seeks first to provide a general definition, which serves as an introduction for his subsequent reflections. He says, for example, that a gaze “is the manner in which a way of seeing invests an image, a viewer, or an act of viewing with [...] significance.”⁵⁰ And, with a more extensive description:

A gaze is a projection of conventions that enables certain possibilities of meaning, certain forms of experience, and certain relations among participants. Although in standard English the word gaze means a particular kind of looking—a steady, intense or absorbed form of vision—the term is used here in a technical sense. Gaze designates the visual field that relates seer, seen, the conventions of seeing, and the physical, ritual, and historical contexts of seeing.⁵¹

Beyond Morgan, whose definition touches on every key feature of the notion of the gaze, other scholars have addressed it from different perspectives, depending on their (inter)disciplinary interests. Thus, for example, Régis Debray writes a theoretically informed “history of the gaze in the West”;⁵² Hans Belting stresses the inseparability of picture and gaze in his iconological view;⁵³ Thomas Mitchell acknowledges the fundamental role of the gaze in the formation of vision as a social construct;⁵⁴ and the political implications of the gaze as a means of control have been thoroughly investigated in works by Jonathan Crary⁵⁵ and Martin Jay.⁵⁶ In this variety of viewpoints and methods, however, all authors converge on outlining the notion of “gaze” in terms of a “field” or “context,” in which the practice of shaping the visible takes place. This entails a shift in focus that is simultaneously also a broadening of perspective: the picture is

50 David Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 3.

51 Morgan, *Sacred Gaze*, 4.

52 “Une histoire du regard en Occident” [A History of the Gaze in the West] is the subtitle of Debray’s book, *Vie et mort de l’image*.

53 Hans Belting, “The Gaze in the Image: A Contribution to an Iconology of the Gaze,” in *Dynamics and Performativity of Imagination: The Image between the Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Bernd Huppau and Christoph Wulf (New York: Routledge, 2009), 93–115.

54 Thomas J.T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

55 Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990).

56 Martin Jay, “Scopic Regimes of Modernity,” in *Vision and Visuality*, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1988), 3–23.

now regarded as merely the final product of complex dynamics and operations that precede it and determine its meaning.⁵⁷

The introduction of the notion of the gaze prompts a more comprehensive approach to visual culture and visual phenomena. The relationship between a picture and its object—be it understood as a presentification or a representation—is now considered within a broader context in which it is only one of the elements involved, along with many others. The overall meaning of a picture is not exhausted in the relation it establishes with its object (i.e., the pictorial function), but is also informed through the contextual dynamics in which it is involved (i.e., the visual attitude or gaze). In the terminology of modern semiotics, this new attention to context can be interpreted as an acknowledgement that the *semantic* dimension is always embedded in the *pragmatic* one, as semantics is concerned with the relation between picture and object, but pragmatics also considers the context of cultural practices on which that relation depends and from which it draws its meaning.

This point is plainly expressed, for example, by Klaus Sachs-Hombach, who in his comprehensive inquiry into the communicative value of pictures writes that “picture semantics [Bildsemantik] can only partially account for meaning and comprehension of pictures and needs to be supplemented with picture pragmatics [Bildpragmatik].”⁵⁸ In general, the line that, for the sake of thorough comprehension, leads from semantics to pragmatics runs parallel to that leading from the picture-object relationship to the gaze that is cast on it—or, in the terms used in this essay, from the pictorial functions of presentification and representation to the visual attitudes on which these latter depend. This means, finally, that the various meanings of pictures, their being seen as embodiments or references, and therefore their idolatrous or non-idolatrous significance, must be investigated on the level of picture pragmatics.

4.1 *Picture Pragmatics*

The first attempts to delineate a theory of picture pragmatics take cues from the fields of linguistics and the philosophy of language, in which the pragmatic value of so-called speech acts was first conceptualised—starting from

57 “The study of images should take a broader look at how images are actually part of ways of seeing. [...] Seeing is about more than its product. [...] Seeing is an operation that relies on an apparatus of assumptions and inclinations, habits and routines, historical associations and cultural practices” (Morgan, *Sacred Gaze*, 3).

58 Klaus Sachs-Hombach, *Das Bild als kommunikatives Medium. Elemente einer allgemeinen Bildwissenschaft* (Cologne: Herbert von Halem, 2013), 152.

the Wittgenstein of the *Philosophische Untersuchungen*⁵⁹—by John L. Austin⁶⁰ and John R. Searle.⁶¹ The idea is to introduce the new notion of the “pictorial act” into the field of visual studies and to think of it in analogy with that of the “speech act.” In this regard, two groundbreaking articles by the Danish scholar Søren Kjørup bear titles that themselves speak volumes: the first essay, “Doing Things with Pictures,”⁶² explicitly recalls Austin’s book *How to Do Things with Words*, conveying Kjørup’s intention to substitute words with pictures and investigate their pragmatic significance. The second essay’s title is “Pictorial Speech Acts,”⁶³ and it places even more emphasis on the analogy between pictorial and linguistic pragmatics. This quote clarifies Kjørup’s point:

J.L. Austin has coined a term for the act of making a statement with a string of words as vehicle; he calls it performing an *illocutionary act*, doing something with words. And since the parallel between making a statement with a sentence and making a statement with a picture is so striking, we may say that also with the picture do we “do a thing,” we perform an illocutionary act, although a pictorial and not a verbal one.⁶⁴

As Kjørup says, Austin coined the phrase “illocutionary act,” but the concept was further developed by Searle, who distinguished two components of a speech act: the propositional element and the illocutionary element. Searle writes:

The expression of a proposition is a propositional act, not an illocutionary act. And as we saw, propositional acts cannot occur alone. One cannot just express a proposition while doing nothing else and have thereby per-

59 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953).

60 John L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962).

61 John R. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969).

62 Søren Kjørup, “George Inness and the Battle of Hastings, or Doing Things with Pictures,” *The Monist* 58 (1974): 216–233.

63 Søren Kjørup, “Pictorial Speech Acts,” *Erkenntnis* 12 (1978): 55–71. Studies of picture pragmatics have flourished over the years. Some of the most significant are Horst Bredekamp, *Theorie des Bildakts* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2010); Klaus Sachs-Hombach, “Bildakttheorie. Antworten auf die Differenz von Präsenz und Entzug,” in *Präsenz im Entzug*, ed. Philipp Stoellger and Thomas Klie (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 57–82; and Dirk Westerkamp, *Schrift, Bild, Handlung* (Hamburg: Meiner, 2022).

64 Kjørup, “Doing Things with Pictures,” 219.

formed a complete speech act. [...] When a proposition is expressed it is always expressed in the performance of an illocutionary act.⁶⁵

The propositional element corresponds to the semantic content—that is, *what* is said—while the illocutionary element is the act that *always* accompanies that content. A corollary to this twofold structure is the recognition of the limitations of semantics, which is necessary but not sufficient for a speech act. It is obviously necessary to know to what this latter refers—namely, its semantic content—but this is not enough to properly understand the speech act, as its overall meaning depends also, and mainly, on the pragmatic context in which the semantic element is embedded. This leads to the conclusion that the basic unit of linguistic communication is not the sentence, let alone the word, but rather the speech act, with both its semantic and pragmatic dimensions. Likewise, following Kjörup's parallel, the same conclusion can also be drawn about visual communication, whose basic unit, then, is not the picture, but rather the pictorial act.

As they have the same twofold structure, both types of act need to be simultaneously considered from a semantic and a pragmatic point of view. Focusing on the pictorial act, semantic considerations reveal which object a picture relates to, but pragmatic conventions are responsible for defining the nature of that relation by including it within a given context of visual meaning—or, in short, a gaze. By applying these general observations to the particular problem of pictorial idolatry, it follows that semantics has the task of identifying the particular deity intended by a picture—that is, its object—but only pragmatics can tell if that deity is to be understood as being *embodied in* the picture or rather as being *referred to by* the picture. More precisely: the deciphering process through which a picture is regarded as a presentification, with all of its idolatrous consequences, or as a representation, which is capable of going beyond idolatry, only takes place on the level of pragmatics. It has been already shown that the two pictorial functions are crucial for establishing whether a picture is to be viewed as idolatrous or non-idolatrous, but now their difference turns out to be derived from pragmatic dynamics: pictorial idolatry, in other words, is a matter of pragmatics.

Given the affinity between speech and pictorial acts, the pragmatic meanings of presentifications and representations can be expressed in words. In both cases, the semantic element establishes a connection with the picture's object, which here can be conventionally denoted by the letter "x." However,

65 Searle, *Speech Acts*, 29.

presentifications and representations are differentiated by their illocutionary element, which provides the contextual—that is, pragmatic—meaning of “x,” based on the gaze that is cast on it. Thus, when articulated in words, the illocutionary element of a presentification can be rendered as “x is here and now.” The propositional-semantic element indicates which “x,” among all possible “x”s, is meant, while the illocutionary-pragmatic element is responsible for the context in which “x” is embedded and the overall meaning projected onto it—which, in this case, is an affirmation of presence.

If the same operation is repeated with representations, their structural difference from presentifications clearly emerges. As shown above, presentifications have a one-pole structure, while representations consist of two poles. Accordingly, the pragmatics of presentifications can be expressed through a single sentence, while representations require two sentences to be thoroughly accounted for on a pragmatic level. As previously pointed out, representations presuppose the reality-appearance divide, but they are also characterised by an internal swinging between presence and absence. By combining the two dichotomies of “presence-absence” and “reality-appearance,” the pragmatic meaning of representations now takes shape as an *absence of reality* paired with a *presence of appearance*. If “x” is the object of representation, then it is understood that “x” is not really present in the picture, while only the appearance of “x” is visually reproduced. In other words: the reality of “x” is absent, but its appearance is present. When translated into words, this twofoldness, which constitutes the illocutionary element of representations, results in two sentences to be taken together, to wit: “x is not here and now” (*absence of reality*) and “x looks like this” (*presence of appearance*).

To summarise this complex section, it can be said that depending on the gaze—that is, a visual pragmatic field—a picture of “x” can be ascribed different communicative meanings, leading to opposite—that is, idolatrous and non-idolatrous—consequences. A *first* gaze comprises rules and conventions through which a picture of “x” is immediately seen as a presentification of “x” and is thus associated with an affirmation of its presence—in words, “x is here and now.” In contrast, a *second* gaze enforces a different set of visual regulations and codes, which make the beholder recognise a representation in the same picture of “x.”⁶⁶ The pragmatic meaning, in this case, is twofold: a negation of reality in conjunction with an affirmation of appearance, which articulated in words reads “x is not here and now” and “x looks like this.” In conclusion, it must

66 “The same picture can therefore have or receive a different communicative meaning depending on the context in which it is used” (Sachs-Hombach, *Das Bild als kommunikatives Medium*, 155).

be remarked that pictorial idolatry occurs only in the first case, when the first gaze is in force. In contrast, the second gaze is able to leave idolatry behind and is only still exposed to the risk of idolatrous relapses in the form of a regression to the first gaze—that is, when representations are incorrectly interpreted as presentifications.

At this juncture, after outlining the pragmatic differences between the two gazes, it seems that only one final question remains unanswered: *What makes the second gaze able to overcome pictorial idolatry?*

4.2 *Idolatrous vs. Critical Gaze*

Pictorial idolatry depends on the different gazes that can be cast on pictures. A picture receives an idolatrous meaning as a result of a gaze that makes it appear as a *presentification embodying* its object, whereas idolatry is overcome by a gaze through which pictures are regarded as *representations referring to* their objects without merging with them. But what kind of gaze is required in this latter case? What exactly is it about this gaze that allows pictures to be seen as representations instead of presentifications?

The transition from the first to the second gaze can be conceived as an evolutionary step in human thought. In this view, the ability to look at pictures and see them as representations rather than presentifications is not inborn, but has to be construed and achieved through cultural development. Analysing this transition, Vernant states: “The notion of figurative representation is not self-evident; neither univocal nor permanent, it constitutes what might be called a historical category. It is a construction that is elaborated, and elaborated with difficulty, through very different voices, in different civilisations.”⁶⁷ Unlike presentification, then, representation requires the notion of appearance to have become detached and autonomous from that of reality. It is, in other words, necessary for such concepts as “imitation,” “likeness,” “simulation,” and so forth to have been enucleated and clearly delineated, in their mutual relationships and, above all, in their common opposition to reality.⁶⁸

A significant precedent for Vernant’s conception can be found—once again—in Cassirer’s *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*, precisely in the chapter called “Der Grundgegensatz,” where the underlying *formae mentis* of the two gazes are presented side by side to be compared:

67 Vernant, “De la présentification de l’invisible à l’imitation de l’apparence,” 547.

68 See Jean-Pierre Vernant, “Figuration et image” (1990), in Vernant, *Œuvres*, 2:2019–2031.

The theoretical structure of the world view begins at the point where consciousness first makes a clear distinction between appearance and truth, between what is merely perceived or represented and what truly “is” [...]. Such differentiation and stratification are totally alien to the mythical consciousness. This consciousness lives in the immediate impression, which it accepts without measuring it by something else. [The impression] manifests and confirms itself by the simple intensity of its presence, by the irresistible force with which it imposes itself upon consciousness. Whereas thought takes an enquiring and questioning, doubting and scrutinising attitude toward its “object” [...], myth knows no such opposition.⁶⁹

The basic opposition that gives Cassirer’s chapter its title is the divide between reality and appearance, which also manifests itself between the thing and a picture now conceived of as a representation. In this new conception, the picture is obviously not the thing, but access to the thing can be gained *through* the picture, is *mediated* by the picture. However, the very nature of mediation always involves the possibility of deception. The gap between thing and picture—that is, between represented and representation—is a space of potential deception, discrepancy, distortion, or deviation. The difference between thing and picture, the missing coincidence between them, goes along with a critical attitude as an essential feature of the gaze that is able to grasp it. According to the visual conventions that comprise the new gaze, picture and thing can no longer be uncritically equated to each other, as they used to be with presentification. But this rejection of an equivalence hitherto taken for granted results precisely from that critical attitude that is now an integrated part of the new gaze.

The two opposite attitudes—one still ignoring the basic opposition and one recognising it—emerge clearly from the quotation from Cassirer. The *uncritical acceptance* of appearance is presented as the main feature of the mythical consciousness. To prove his point, Cassirer mentions the fact that impressions (i.e., the basic units of appearance) are simply assumed, without relating and comparing them to anything else. But this lack of a real criterion for judging impressions is the direct consequence of reality and appearance being seen as fused together. It is impossible to measure appearance to something else—in Cassirer’s own words—for the simple reason that in this view, “something else” is not even conceivable: reality and appearance are not yet *other to each other*,

69 Cassirer, *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*, 87–88.

but are still conflated in one indistinct dimension. Moreover, the naivety⁷⁰ of this way of thinking also affects its corresponding way of seeing, which leads to the pictorial function of presentification, and with it, to pictorial idolatry.

The phrase “enquiring and questioning, doubting and scrutinising attitude,” through which Cassirer indicates the opposite of mythical consciousness, could just as well be used to define *critical thought*—which, when visually inflected, takes shape as an attitude of *critical distrust* towards pictures, in the awareness of their constitutive difference from their objects. Precisely this awareness lies at the roots of a new, more advanced gaze, which provides the conditions for seeing pictures as representations and thus prevents the idolatrous relapse into the mode of presentification. If, as Fackenheim says,⁷¹ preventing idolatry requires an awareness of the gap between reality and appearance, it is safe to say that an *underlying critical attitude* plays a crucial role in keeping that awareness alive within the gaze. In other words, avoiding idolatry, in the context of pictures, means being able to see representations instead of presentifications. However, this capability requires the gaze through which pictures are approached to have assimilated and internalised an “enquiring, questioning, doubting, scrutinising”; in a word, a *critical attitude* towards the picture-object relationship.⁷²

In the last analysis, the dichotomy in the title of this section—*idolatrous* versus *critical*—becomes clear if one considers the features of the gazes at issue here. The first gaze is blind to the gap between picture and thing, and, more generally, between appearance and reality. The inability to appreciate the “basic opposition”—as Cassirer calls it—makes this gaze the visual attitude that fosters the pictorial function of presentification. However, given the close connection between this latter and idolatry, it is probably not inappropriate to talk about an “idolatrous gaze” in this case. In contrast, the second gaze is based on a clear distinction between the dimensions of reality and appearance. The awareness of this gap, once assimilated in a *forma visionis*, translates into a *critical approach* to the presumed identity of picture and thing and leads one to see representations where previously only presentifications were recognised. The

70 In other passages, Cassirer qualifies the inability to see the basic opposition as “naïve.” See § 3.1, footnote 42.

71 See § 3.2, footnote 47.

72 It is possible to perceive a certain affinity between the critical attitude mentioned here and the notion of “iconic literacy” that Assmann mentions in one of his essays and which consists in the human capacity to escape the charm of pictures; i.e., what he calls their “magic claim” (see Assmann, “What’s Wrong with Images?”, 31). However, while Assmann’s conception remains in the form of an undeveloped intuition, that proposed here rests on the theoretical basis provided by pictorial pragmatics (see § 4.1).

anti-idolatrous meaning of this shift makes the term “anti-idolatrous gaze” a fitting choice, but the central role that the *critical attitude* plays in it makes it equally legitimate to qualify this second gaze with the adjective “critical.”⁷³

5 Conclusion

When considered in the context of pictorial production and reception, idolatry is not an intrinsic feature of pictures, but just one of the possible ways in which they are regarded and treated. No picture is inherently idolatrous, while any picture is exposed to the risk of idolatry, depending on the specific function it fulfils. But again, pictorial functions are not linked to pictures by an essential bond. Rather, they are projected onto pictures as a result of the contextual rules and conventions which, in different ages, determine the different ways in which pictures are considered in relation to their objects.

More precisely, “presentification” stands for a relationship in which pictures are thought to *contain* their objects, whereas “representation” implies that pictures *refer to* their objects. Presentification is the pictorial function of idols, whereas representation is connected to the overcoming of idolatry. Their difference, however, depends on the different contexts from which pictures can be approached. The phrase “visual attitude”—or, synonymously, the term “gaze”—has been used precisely to indicate the context of meaning that determines which functions are ascribed to pictures.

The path followed in investigating pictorial idolatry can thus be seen as a backward movement and a progressive widening of perspective: from pictures to pictorial functions to visual attitudes, an ever-larger framework is considered. The meaning of pictures—that is, whether they are or are not idolatrous—requires looking at their pictorial functions, but these, in turn, are derived from the visual attitudes adopted in each historical context. The idolatrous or non-idolatrous value of a picture is the outcome of complex dynamics that do not depend on the picture itself, nor on its pictorial functions, but rather originate deeper at the level of visual attitudes.

A visual attitude (or gaze) can be interpreted as a network of assumptions, habits, inclinations, and tacit rules that together constitute and govern the act of seeing as a cultural practice. Such a network is always embedded in a his-

73 The adjective “critical” is derived from the Greek verb κρίνω [*krínō*], which means “to separate,” “to distinguish.” Considering that the anti-idolatrous gaze is such precisely because of its ability to distinguish between reality and appearance, this word choice appears particularly appropriate in this context.

torical context, and from within that context, it allows for a certain range of meanings. In other words, a visual attitude (or gaze) provides the conditions from which the pictorial functions derive their sense. Broadening the scope of analysis from the picture-object relationship (pictorial function) to the context that includes it (visual attitude or gaze) corresponds, from the point of view of semiotics, to a shift from the field of semantics to that of pragmatics.

In a semiotic perspective, visual attitudes (or gazes) are the pragmatic backgrounds that enable various meanings to be attributed to pictures—including idolatrous meaning. Thus, saying that pictorial idolatry has its roots in visual attitudes (or gazes)—as previously stated—turns out to be tantamount to saying that pictorial idolatry is a matter of pragmatics. And it is precisely in this direction that potential for genuine scholarly progress in the study of idolatry can be recognised: the already established interdisciplinary alliance between Jewish thought and anthropological studies is extended to also include pictorial pragmatics.

Jewish and anthropological studies—especially Cassirer’s philosophical anthropology—show that the *formae mentis* and implicit conventions defining the practices of seeing in a given epoch can be conducive to pictorial idolatry, while different codes and mentalities, in other epochs, can have the opposite effect and, through an underlying distrust of appearance and internalised criticism,⁷⁴ come to prevent idolatrous outcomes. The phrase “idolatrous gaze” can thus be used in the first case, while it is possible to talk about an “anti-idolatrous” or “critical gaze” in the second.

Beyond Jewish and anthropological studies, however, reflections from the point of view of pictorial pragmatics seem to be able to take the discussion a step further, for in addition to noting an opposition between idolatrous and anti-idolatrous gazes, they also manage to specify the nature of that opposition in terms of different performative meanings. The introduction of a pragmatic perspective in the study of pictorial idolatry can thus orient research towards a deeper understanding of the dynamics underlying idolatrous processes. This finally opens up a research path that is still little trodden and probably deserves to be pursued even beyond the scope of this essay.

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74 See § 4.2.

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Voltaire, a Metaphysician!

Mendelssohn's Critique of Candide in the 1771 Edition of Philosophische Gespräche

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Abstract

In the 1771 edition of Moses Mendelssohn's *Philosophische Gespräche*, the third dialogue from the 1755 edition was almost completely rewritten: instead of featuring Pierre Bayle as a leading character and praising his critical approach to (Leibnizian) metaphysics, Mendelssohn instead decided to mount a defence of Leibnizian metaphysics against Voltaire's *Candide* (1759). The goal of this paper is to explain Mendelssohn's move by arguing (I) that his rewriting of the third dialogue was specifically intended to strengthen his defence of Leibnizian metaphysics against the criticism of it in Voltaire's *Candide* and (II) that this move must not be understood as a dismissal of sceptical approaches to philosophy, but rather as an attempt to give a better account of Leibnizian metaphysics and its importance for morals without incidentally denying its theoretical problems. The paper will therefore consist of the following four parts: an introduction to the subject matter; a section on Mendelssohn's intellectual development and the sense in which Voltaire's *Candide* challenged his views; an account of Mendelssohn's 1771 refutation of Voltaire; and a final overview.¹

Keywords

Leibnizian-Wolffian philosophy – optimism – Moses Mendelssohn – Pierre Bayle – Voltaire

1 All references to the critical edition of Mendelssohn's works will take the form "JubA xy," where "x" refers to the volume of the *Jubiläumausgabe* and "y" to the page(s) from which the quotation is extracted. All volumes cited are included in the bibliography.

1 Introduction: Did Mendelssohn's Views on Leibniz Change from the 1755 Edition to the 1771 Edition of *Philosophische Gespräche*?²

As has been argued in a recent article on the philosophical relationship between Moses Mendelssohn and Pierre Bayle,³ the first version of Mendelssohn's *Philosophische Gespräche* (1755) features a peculiar dialogue with Bayle's *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (1697). The *Gespräche* consist of four dialogues that can be divided into two parts: the first and second dialogues are centred on the philosophical relationship between Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz and Benedictus de Spinoza, while the third and fourth dialogues are devoted to discussing some fundamental principles of Leibnizian metaphysics. Bayle turns out to be relevant for Mendelssohn both in his addressing of the links between Spinoza and Leibniz and in his consideration of the ontological grounds of Leibniz's philosophy. Mendelssohn had decided to deal with Spinoza and Leibniz in a delicate context in which Spinoza's philosophy had become an object of scorn due to the religiously biased belief that his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (1670) undermines the sacredness of Scripture and leads to atheism.⁴ In explicit opposition to this stigmatizing approach to Spinoza, Mendelssohn makes a rather singular defence of his philosophy in the first dialogue of the *Gespräche*: he grants him the unexpected merit of being Leibniz's forerunner, based on the consideration that his *Ethics* contains an almost complete prefiguration of Leibniz's pre-established harmony.⁵ Neophil and Philopon, the fictional characters whom Mendelssohn brings into conversation, come to this conclusion by the end of the first dialogue:

2 I would like to express my sincere thanks to the following people: to Martí Bridgewater for his incredibly careful reading of the text and his great number of illuminating comments and amendments; to Caterina Marinelli and Caterina Diotto for their precise suggestions regarding the introduction to the article; and to Chiara Rover for her (always very useful) insights in interpreting some Greek fragments appearing in Mendelssohn's work.

3 Guillem Sales Vilalta, "Scepticism against Intolerance? Moses Mendelssohn and Pierre Bayle's 'Dialogue' on Spinoza in Mendelssohn's *Philosophische Gespräche* (1755)," *Religions* 15 (2024): 49, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15010049>.

4 For an exhaustive survey of the reception of the *Tractatus* and how Spinoza was subsequently stigmatised, see Rüdiger Otto, *Studien zur Spinozarezeption in Deutschland im 18. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 1994). For a more general view of the complex reception of Spinoza throughout the German Enlightenment, see Maria Jimena Solé, *Spinoza en Alemania (1670–1789), historia de la santificación de un filósofo maldito* (Córdoba: Brujas, 2011).

5 Regarding Mendelssohn's peculiar position with respect to the earlier, stigmatised reception of Spinoza's philosophy in Germany, see Corey W. Dyck, "The Spinozian-Wolffian Philosophy? Mendelssohn's Philosophical Dialogues of 1755," *Kant-Studien* 109 (2018): 251–269.

NEOPHIL In the seventh proposition of the second part of his *Ethics*, Spinoza says: “The order and connection of concepts is one and the same with the order and connection of things.” *Remember now what Leibniz brings to his defense against Bayle when the latter objects that, without the effect of another substance upon the soul, it would be inconceivable how the soul is frequently able to pass over immediately from pleasure to displeasure and from sadness to joy.* Did he not also assert that changes in the soul can be explained by the same reason or ground through which changes in the visible world can be understood? Did he not assert that everything in the soul succeeds something else just as it does in the context of things? What else does this mean but what Spinoza says in the words cited: “The order and connection of concepts is one and the same with the order and connection of things”?⁶

As the quotation suggests, Bayle plays a subtle, yet crucial role in rehabilitating Spinoza. Neophil eventually succeeds in persuading his friend that Spinoza devised the harmony specifically by bringing Bayle’s criticism of it to the stage. By doing so, he can show that Leibniz and Spinoza overcame Bayle’s criticism by resorting to the same thesis; that is, the parallelism between the realm of physical phenomena and the realm of thoughts, which is precisely considered the ontological core of pre-established harmony.⁷ However, as I have said, Bayle’s importance for the *Philosophische Gespräche* is not restricted to the comparison of Spinoza and Leibniz. The third dialogue in the 1755 *Gespräche* argues in favour of adopting Bayle’s critical ethos when approaching the sort of complex metaphysical questions that were tackled by Leibniz. Very early

6 Moses Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, trans. Daniel O. Dahlstrom (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 103 (*JubA* 1:9–10); my emphasis.

7 At the beginning of the first dialogue, Philocon defines Leibnizian harmony as being constituted by the following three interconnected claims: (I) the changes occurring to a soul (thoughts) must be caused by the soul itself, through the representative force that is essential to it; (II) the changes that bodies undergo (movements) must be caused by bodies (whether the bodies themselves or others), through their constitutive motive force; and (III) God has set an absolute harmony between souls and bodies, so that each thought has a specific, correlative body movement and vice versa (cf. *JubA* 1:4). Mendelssohn’s surprising point in the first dialogue is, then, that Spinoza’s claim that “the order and connection of concepts is one and the same with the order and connection of things” prefigures both Leibniz’s differentiation between the realm of physical movements and the realm of thoughts and his further assumption of a perfect parallelism between them.

on in the dialogue, Neophil and Philopon conclude that even Leibniz, who is said to be the greatest German philosopher, committed mistakes that must be addressed in the manner of Bayle. Neophil praises Bayle's sceptical attitude as something that allows us to grasp both the strengths and the deficiencies of a philosophical doctrine like that of the best of all possible worlds, so as to subsequently subscribe to it in a more proper and just way:

- PHILOPON You leave me in doubt: Will you ultimately destroy the doctrine to which I thought I had adhered with good reasons?
- NEOPHIL I have already told you: the doctrine of the best of the worlds is directly implied by God's properties, and *even Bayle, when considering the issue from this viewpoint, had to admit it* [the doctrine]. Moreover, it is the only one that can provide us with happiness, so it is necessary for us to cherish it if we wish to gain peace of mind. The remarks against it that I have just disclosed to you are only useful because they help us to realise that as far as this doctrine is concerned, we are far from a perfect certainty, and that much prudence is required to arrive at reliable conclusions in our philosophical speculations about the world.⁸

Although it has not gone entirely unnoticed, a remarkable detail has largely escaped deeper inquiry up until now. In the 1771 edition of the *Gespräche*, the third dialogue from the 1755 edition was almost completely rewritten: instead of featuring Bayle as a leading character and praising his sceptical approach to metaphysics (both Leibniz's and in general), Mendelssohn instead decided to mount a defence of Leibnizian harmony against Voltaire's *Candide* (1759).⁹ Compared to the sceptical tones of the 1755 dialogue, Mendelssohn's new version conveys much more resolve and less doubt:

Civil wars, the bloody wedding, persecution by dragoons, Law's system, Ravailac, Clement and so forth. What does this matter to our system? [...] It [Leibniz's harmony] follows so naturally and so unforced from the

⁸ *JubA* 1:26–27; my translation and emphasis.

⁹ Very interestingly, Mendelssohn had already introduced some changes in the 1761 edition of the *Gespräche* (that is, the one published as a part of the anthology of texts entitled *Philosophische Schriften*, whose second edition, published in 1771, contains the new *Gespräch* on Voltaire's *Candide*). Nevertheless, we cannot say that Mendelssohn rewrote the dialogue in 1761; rather, he enlarged it with some curious and interesting reflections on Leibniz and Newton, which are also included (in an abridged formulation) at the end of the 1771 version. Cf. *JubA* 1:565–569.

concept of an infinite wisdom that I do not comprehend at all how the proposition can be doubted: *Supreme wisdom will prefer what is best to what is less good.*¹⁰

This move raises many questions. Why did Mendelssohn feel that it was important to temper the sceptical tones of the *editio princeps* and to now make a stronger defence of Leibniz against *Candide*? And, more relevantly: Should this gesture be construed as a shift from the sceptical affinities of 1755 to a more dogmatic attitude? The goal of this article is to provide answers to such questions by arguing for the following theses, namely: (I) that Mendelssohn's rewriting of the third dialogue is specifically intended to strengthen his defence of Leibnizian metaphysics against its discrediting by Voltaire's *Candide* and (II) that this move must not be understood as a dismissal of sceptical approaches to philosophy, but rather as an attempt to give a better account of Leibniz's metaphysics and its importance for morals without incidentally denying its theoretical problems. To do so, let us begin by focusing on Mendelssohn's trajectory until 1759, in order to understand in what sense Voltaire's *Candide* challenged his philosophical views.

2 Rival Enlightenments: Mendelssohn's Vindication of German Metaphysics against French Thought

By the time that the *Gespräche* was published, Mendelssohn had been living in Berlin for about a dozen years, where he had complemented the Torahic and Talmudic knowledge he had acquired at the *Bet ha-Midrash* in his native Dessau with a progressive immersion in modern Christian philosophy.¹¹ The

10 Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 110–111 (*JubA* 1:361); Mendelssohn's emphasis.

11 Those many years of progressive learning were of crucial importance in the shaping of Mendelssohn's philosophical personality. Guided by enlightened friends such as Solomon Gumpertz, Friedrich Nicolai, and Lessing, he soon became one of the main representatives of the so-called Leibnizian-Wolffian philosophy. From the publication of his very first works in 1755 onwards, Mendelssohn can be seen as simultaneously displaying two great facets that were to make him a totemic figure of the German Enlightenment: that of a learned scholar within the Jewish tradition on the one hand, and that of a skilful Leibnizian-Wolffian philosopher on the other. For the details and importance of this formative period in Berlin, see Alexander Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1973), 15–49, and Shmuel Feiner, *Moses Mendelssohn: Sage of Modernity*, trans. Anthony Berris (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 17–34 and 35–55. For the twofold dimension of Mendelssohn's intellectual personality, see especially Michah Gottlieb's considerations of his theological-political thought: Gottlieb, *Faith and Freedom: Moses Mendelssohn's Theological-Political Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 13–30.

first tangible results of this twelve-year process came in 1755, not only with the *Gespräche*, but also with the appearance of his *Briefe über die Empfindungen* and *Pope ein Metaphysiker!*, which was co-authored with Gotthold Ephraim Lessing and published anonymously. In fact, Lessing's collaboration with Mendelssohn was also crucial for the *Gespräche*, since he was responsible for reviewing the text and finally delivering it to the editor in February 1755.¹² His careful intervention is no coincidence. Mendelssohn met Lessing for the first time in early 1754, when Solomon Gumpertz invited him to a chess game in which Lessing was also taking part. From then on, their friendship seems to have solidified very quickly due to an element that is clearly connected with the *Gespräche*; namely, their shared interest in Spinoza's *Ethics*. As Alexander Altmann has argued, the fact that Mendelssohn and Lessing spent a large part of 1754 reading and discussing Spinoza makes it possible to regard the dialogues between Neophil and Philopon as reproducing Lessing and Mendelssohn's real conversations, to some extent.¹³ In this respect, Lessing's decision to revise the text and deliver it to the editor himself can be seen as a sign of personal interest in the content of the work, which supports Altmann's point.

Pope ein Metaphysiker!, which, alongside the *Gespräche*, is the other great result of the initial collaboration between the two friends, is particularly useful to understanding the development of Mendelssohn's philosophical profile. This essay resulted from the annual philosophical contests organised by the Prussian Academy of Sciences of Berlin. In 1754, the Academy issued a call for papers to uncover the philosophical system contained in the proposition "whatever is, is right" from Alexander Pope's 1733 *Essay on Man* and to discuss its relationship to the (so-called) metaphysical doctrine of optimism.¹⁴ As Mendelssohn and Lessing highlight in their initial reference to the call for papers, "system of optimism" [System des Optimismus] is taken to be synonymous with "system of the choice of the best" [System der Wahl des Besten]. Historically speaking, this technical, metaphysical sense of the word "optimism" can be traced to a 1737 review of Leibniz's *Theodicée* in the *Journal de Trévoux*, in which the term was used rather critically to underscore Leibniz's geometrical (i.e., rational) approach to theological issues. From then on, it began to be frequently deployed not only to describe Leibniz's metaphysics, but also to refer to other philosophers, such as Nicolas Malebranche.¹⁵ The term "optimism" came to be applied to those metaphysical systems asserting that since the

12 See Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 37.

13 See Altmann, 37–38.

14 Cf. *JubA* 2:46.

15 Cf. Yvon Belaval and Horst Günther, "Optimismus," in *Historisches Wörterbuch der*

world created by God is the best of all possible worlds, it is essentially good. What this statement fundamentally implies is that in ontological terms, evil is not really *something* (a thing created by God), but only an absence of good. In Mendelssohn and Lessing's time, the notion of optimism must be thus understood as specifically describing the world's *optimal* ontological status, a status granted by God's absolute benevolence and in virtue of which evil does not really exist.¹⁶

Lessing and Mendelssohn, who inherited this technical sense of the word, decided to firmly side with Leibniz's optimism, and in a rather peculiar way. In their view, poetry may be beautiful and pleasant, but it lacks the precision and systematicity inherent in proper, rationally argued metaphysics. The vague and lyrical language of the *Essay on Man* contains only scattered instances of some of the philosophical claims constituting metaphysical optimism, and thus it falls very short (philosophically speaking) of Leibniz's articulation of this view.¹⁷ *Stricto sensu*, the comparison between Pope and Leibniz can be traced to the first and second sections of the work, while the third and last part is specifically aimed at offering refined rational proofs for some of Pope's core statements. In the first section, Mendelssohn and Lessing strive to reconstruct the system of optimism that could be said to underlie Pope's *Essay*. Based on this reconstruction, the second part of *Pope ein Metaphysiker!* details how the propositions attributed to Pope tend to be unsatisfactory and states that Leibniz's formulations are much more precise. To give just one example:

In the best system, everything must be interconnected. We have already seen what it is that Pope understands by this interconnection [Zusammenhang]: namely, the constitution of the world being such that all degrees of perfection, from the lowest to God, are filled with beings.

Leibniz, on the other hand, turns this interconnection into the claim that all things in the world can be intelligibly explained one from the

Philosophie, Bd. 6: Mo–O, ed. Joachim Ritter, Karlfried Gründer, and Gabriel Gottfried (Basel: Schwabe, 1984), 1240.

16 With regard to the question of metaphysical optimism that motivated the Prussian Academy's 1754 competition and its philosophical relevance at the time, it is worth noting that Kant had also planned to write something for the contest, but his notes remained incomplete and he did not manage to take part. Regarding Kant's initial reflections on optimism and its connection to his posterior (critical) approach to theodicy, see Pablo Genazzano, "Teodicea y destinación humana en el joven Kant," *Con-Textos Kantianos* 10 (2019): 102–120 and Salvi Turró, "Kant y el orden del mundo," *Cuadernos salmantinos de filosofía* 51 (2024): 169–196.

17 Cf. *JubA* 2:61–67.

other [...]. These different things together could not make up a [interconnected] whole if they were not all, like the wheels of a machine, united with each other.¹⁸

This flattering comparison between Leibniz and Pope is by no means coincidental. The Prussian Academy of Sciences, which organised the competition, had contained a remarkably pro-French and anti-Leibnizian faction since its refoundation in 1746, and it was led by none other than its director, Pierre Louis Maupertius, who had been appointed by King Frederick II himself.¹⁹ Thus, the act of siding with Leibniz in *Pope ein Metaphysiker!* can arguably be seen as a response to the Academy's anti-Leibnizian drift and its rather anti-metaphysical agenda. Incidentally, Mendelssohn and Lessing likely saw their adversaries as all too powerful: seemingly aware of the adverse reception that a praise of Leibniz's metaphysics might have provoked in the Academy under Maupertius, they ultimately chose not to enter the competition, instead publishing the text anonymously the following year.²⁰

Be that as it may, Lessing and Mendelssohn's early work outlines an enlightened project in explicit opposition to the anti-metaphysical faction in the Academy. First and foremost, they vindicate the great achievements of Leibniz and Christian Wolff, who is unanimously taken to be Leibniz's most important disciple (whether by supporters or detractors) and also the person responsible for definitively articulating the so-called Leibnizian-Wolffian system.²¹

18 *JubA* 2:62; my translation.

19 Regarding Maupertius's faction in the Academy and its relation to both contemporary Leibnizianism and its further reception, see Catherine Wilson, "The Reception of Leibniz in the Eighteenth Century," in *The Cambridge Companion to Leibniz*, ed. Nicholas Jolley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 442–476. For a more general overview of the scientific culture prevailing in the Berlin Academy after Frederick's refoundation of it, see Mary Terrall, "The Culture of Science in Frederick the Great's Berlin," *History of Science* 28 (1990): 333–364.

20 Mendelssohn and Lessing's criticism of the Academy even led them to question the very formulation of the advertisement for the contest. In the preliminary remarks to their work, they point out that the core question is not accurate enough. As they saw it, the Academy should not have posed a vague question about unveiling the system "contained in" [enthaltend] the sentence "everything is right": instead, the question should have been phrased more precisely in order to ask the participants to reconstruct the system by means of which one could eventually conclude the proposition "everything is right" (Cf. *JubA* 2:47–49). Thus, their defence of Leibniz even prompted them to question the anti-Leibnizian Academy's capacity for philosophical precision.

21 By Mendelssohn's time, the idea that Wolff had systematised Leibniz had clearly become commonplace. In his *Dilucidationes philosophicae de Deo, anima humana et mundo* (1725), Georg B. Bilfinger is said to have coined the expression "Leibnizian-Wolffian philosophy"

However, this does not prevent them from dialoguing with other figures outside German metaphysics, such as Pierre Bayle in the *Gespräche*. In this respect, the introduction to the second dialogue of the *Gespräche* sketches an interesting duality between an allegedly superficial, Francophile thinking (which was becoming increasingly fashionable in Germany) and the profound metaphysical doctrines of Leibniz and his followers:

PHILOPON People at the present time must have completely forgotten to consider metaphysics [...]. God, in what disdain it languishes, this former queen of the sciences! Because it was so much loved, so much exalted by the Germans in the past, I am flabbergasted and cannot find the reasons why it has sunk so low in the present day.

NEOPHIL [...] You have undoubtedly overlooked a source from which we, unfortunately, must derive several evils. I have in mind our slavish imitation of a people that appears, as it were, made to seduce us. This people, which does not have a single metaphysical mind to show for it since P. Malebranche, saw that rigorous and fundamental matters are not its expertise. Hence, it made the stylishness of manners its sole concern and made a practice of heaping the most biting sarcasm on those who indulged in profound meditations and did not know how to live in the society according to a certain exaggerated tenderness of taste. [...] Germans derided right along with them. And how could they do otherwise? [...].

PHILOPON Will the Germans, then, never recognize their own worth? Will they forever prefer to exchange their gold for the fool's gold of their neighbors? [...].

for the first time. The works written by Wolffians such as Georg V. Hartmann (*Anleitung zur Historie der Leibnitzisch-Wolffischen Philosophie*, 1737) and Carl G. Ludovici (*Neueste Merckwürdigkeiten der Leibnitzisch-Wolffischen Weltweisheit*, 1738) further reinforced the category, to the extent that Wolff's philosophy came to be regarded as a systematisation of Leibniz's brilliant (though scattered) ideas. Cf. Sonia Carboncini, "Christian August Crusius und die Leibniz-Wolffische Philosophie," in *Beiträge zur Wirkungs- und Rezeptionsgeschichte von Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz*, ed. Albert Heinekamp (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1986), 110–125. For our present purposes, I will refer to Leibnizian-Wolffian philosophy in this sense (as it was a popular understanding of the term at that time), without further inquiring into the philosophical problems of considering Wolff a mere systematiser of Leibniz. Regarding the historiographical inaccuracies of the concept of Leibnizian-Wolffian philosophy, see especially Charles A. Corr, "Christian Wolff and Leibniz," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 36 (1975): 241–262.

NEOPHIL Certainly! Leibniz, Wolff, and their various successors, to what a level of perfection and completeness they have brought philosophy!²²

In light of this, it is clear that both the first version of the *Gespräche* and *Pope ein Metaphysiker!* were predominantly aimed at vindicating Leibniz and Wolff in order to counter Francophile trends like that of the Academy.²³ Though not as explicitly as these two works, some of Mendelssohn's most important writings before the publication of *Candide* continued to promote and defend the so-called Leibnizian-Wolffian philosophy and its metaphysical optimism. The singular extent of this defence is worthy of attention. Mendelssohn can arguably be seen as broadening the scope of this philosophy by merging it with other sources (such as Shaftesbury in his *Briefe über die Empfindungen*) and by using it when approaching themes that had not truly been directly addressed by either Leibniz or Wolff (such as the experience of beautiful objects in the 1757 *Betrachtungen über die Quellen und die Verbindungen der schönen Künste und Wissenschaften*). Very interestingly, then, Mendelssohn can be regarded as responding to the cultural richness of Berlin by adopting its philosophical diversity and articulating it from a Leibnizian point of view.²⁴

22 Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 106–107 (*JubA* 1:13–14). For a historical overview of this sort of philosophical and cultural rivalry between national Enlightenments, see Giorgio Tonelli, “The ‘Weakness’ of Reason in the Age of Enlightenment,” *Diderot Studies* 14 (1971): 217–244 (especially 217–228).

23 Within the Academy, the Mendelssohnian dualism between “German metaphysics” on the one hand and “French stylistic thought” on the other was more diffuse and complex than suggested here. Nevertheless, it must be conceded to Mendelssohn that Voltaire's criticism of German (i.e., Leibnizian-Wolffian) metaphysical thinking (which we will discuss at the end of this section) had a considerable influence on the Academy's more anti-speculative and pro-Newtonian faction. Thus, Mendelssohn's factions could be said to exist in the following, specified sense: within the Academy, some thinkers had a more metaphysically oriented agenda (such as the Wolffian Samuel Formey, who incidentally was secretary of the Academy), while some others tended to be suspicious of (German) metaphysics and were much more likely to develop a Newtonian-inspired scientific programme (like the director, Maupertius, or the well-known mathematician Leonard Euler). Regarding the interplay of these currents, see Ronald S. Calinger, “The Newtonian-Wolffian Controversy: 1740–1759,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 30 (1969): 319–330.

24 His emphatic remarks on his formative years in the *Briefe über die Empfindungen* clearly attest to this. The English empiricist John Locke and the German metaphysician Christian Wolff are jointly praised and are portrayed as being almost as genial as Leibniz: “Thanks be to those true guides who have guided me back to true knowledge and to virtue. Thanks to you, Locke and Wolff! To you, immortal Leibniz! [...] Without your help I would have

A quick glance at the 1755 *Briefe* will help us to better understand Mendelssohn's peculiar modulation of the Leibniz-Wolff philosophical tandem. As their title suggests, the *Briefe* take the form of epistolary literature, consisting of a total of fifteen letters exchanged between the fictional characters Palemon and Euphranor.²⁵ Through them, Mendelssohn offers an autonomous treatment of a highly restricted area within Wolffian psychology; namely, that of the sentiments of pleasure, which Wolff had simply included as the initial part of his treatment of volition.²⁶ Mendelssohn enlarges Wolff's account by distinguishing three kinds of pleasure: (I) those resulting from strictly physiological processes; (II) those produced by the contemplation of beautiful objects; and (III) the pleasant sentiments inherent to knowledge. Based on Wolff's modulation of Leibnizian epistemological concepts,²⁷ each kind of pleasure is distinguished by its mental representation [Vorstellung] and by the object for which the representation stands. Sensory pleasure is produced by an indistinct yet vivid representation [undeutliche aber lebhaftere Vorstellung] of a perfection occurring in our own body; namely, a state of gratification that emerges in a limb and is further transmitted to the whole body. Pleasure caused by beauty relies on an extensively clear representation [ausgebreitet klare Vorstellung] of a perfection relative to the aspect of physical bodies, which occurs when we succeed in visualising an external object as a neat, harmonic unit. Pleasure caused by knowing needs a clear representation of the "highest perfection"; that is, the harmony relative both to each created being and to the universe that they collectively compose. Though also influenced by Shaftesbury (particularly from a

been lost forever [...]. Your immortal writings [...] steered me on the sure path to genuine philosophy, to knowledge of my very self and my origin": Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 106–107 (*JubA* 1:64).

- 25 In the first 1755 edition of the *Briefe*, Euphranor's friend is called Palemon. However, he is given the name Theocles from the 1761 edition onwards.
- 26 Cf. Christian Wolff, *Gesammelte Werke. II Abteilung, Band 5. Psychologia empirica*, ed. Jean École (Hildesheim: Olms, 1968), 387–440 (§§ 509–578).
- 27 The criteria used to formally characterise thoughts, which Wolff introduces for the first time in his 1713 *German Logic*, are unquestionably taken from Leibniz's 1684 *Meditationes de cognitione, veritate et ideis*; see Hans Werner Arndt, "Einführung," in Wolff, *Gesammelte Werke. I. Abteilung, Band 1. Vernünfftige Gedanken von den Kräfte[n] des menschlichen Verstandes und ihrem richtigen Gebrauche in Erkänntnis der Wahrheit*, ed. Hans Werner Arndt (Hildesheim: Olms, 1965), 55–74, and Charles Leduc, "Les *Meditationes* de Leibniz dans la tradition wolffienne," *Archives de Philosophie* 76 (2013): 295–317. For Wolff, representations (still called "concepts" [Begriffe] in *German Logic*) can be: (I) clear/dark [klar/dunkel]; (II) distinct/indistinct [deutlich/undeutlich]; (III) complete/incomplete [vollständige/unvollständige]; and (IV) adequate/inadequate [ausführlichen/unausführlichen]: see Wolff, *Vernünfftige Gedanken*, 132–138 (c. 1, §§ 19–28).

formal point of view²⁸), Mendelssohn's vindication of the harmony presiding over creation by his resort to the principle of sufficient reason is unquestionably linked to Leibniz:

Since, now, it is certain that God can permit nothing without sufficient reason, God, too, enjoys representations grounded in one another, that is to say, God, too, enjoys perfection. Nature continues to be my witness. The ugliest shapes cloaked by human skin, the innermost, tiniest parts of creation, where no eye penetrates, do not cease to be perfect in the sense of being complete; in their reciprocal harmony with one another, they do not cease to contribute as much to the general final purpose as they can, they endure without fail neither excess nor deficiency. Everything in nature aims at one purpose, everything is grounded in it, everything is complete.²⁹

The *Briefe*, which were apparently devoted to explaining the nature of pleasant sentiments, became concerned with great metaphysical themes like that of universal harmony. In this regard, it is noteworthy that letters 7 and 8 are focused on considering relevant objections to the notion of providence, which are largely addressed throughout the last three letters of the fifteen that constitute the *Briefe*. Thus, even before Voltaire's *Candide* appeared, the grounds of Leibniz's optimism (i.e., pre-established harmony and providence) had already been challenged by some critics and had received substantial treatment from Mendelssohn.

After the *Briefe* and in the late 1750s, Mendelssohn's interest in metaphysics became slightly toned down. During this time, he seemed more centred on aesthetic issues, due to the influence of his friends Lessing and Friedrich Nicolai. Their aesthetic concerns were initially articulated through the *Bibliothek der schönen Wissenschaften und der freyen Künste*, a review that had been edited by Nicolai since 1757, through which many works by foreign authors came to be known in Berlin and for which Mendelssohn wrote a great number of articles and reviews.³⁰ Nonetheless, this did not preclude metaphysical principles from featuring relevantly in Mendelssohn's aesthetical works. The opening words of the 1757 *Betrachtungen*, his first and most programmatic work on beauty, show how he approached aesthetic issues by taking some (Wolffian) metaphysical principles as indispensable:

28 Cf. Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 44–45.

29 Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 24 (*JubA* 1:61).

30 Cf. Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 65–74.

The profoundest secrets of our soul lie hidden in the rules of beauty. [...] Each rule of beauty is at the same time a psychological discovery. For, since it contains a prescription of the conditions under which a beautiful object can have the best effect on our mind, it must be possible for the rule to be derived from the nature of the human spirit.³¹

By the end of that decade, however, things had become unexpectedly bad for Leibniz's optimistic metaphysics. In 1759, Voltaire published *Candide, ou l'optimisme*. Far from being a mere *divertissement*, *Candide* and Pangloss's comical adventures concealed a harsh critique of Leibniz and Wolff.³² In other words: Voltaire's main goal in the work was to counter optimism in its aforementioned technical sense (that is, as the metaphysical belief that the actual world is the best of all possible worlds and contains no real evil at all) by showing that the world is actually full of evil and misfortune. The extent of Voltaire's "refutation" of optimism deserves attention. First and foremost, *Candide* must be regarded as a piece of satirical literature. Of course, this does not prevent it from containing many relevant philosophical insights. However, the ethos underlying this approach to optimism places Voltaire in a very different sphere to that of (rationally argued) metaphysics. In this respect, he should be seen as countering the optimists' metaphysical perspective by vindicating a mode of thinking that is much more reliant on everyday experience. As William Barber puts it:

In *Candide*, [...] Voltaire shows little disposition to argue. In the face of human suffering, the niceties of philosophical discussion now merely arouse his indignation. [...] His weapon is not argument, but irony: it is enough to confront the optimist with the brute facts of human misery, to dwell upon some of the less agreeable aspects of life in the best of all possible worlds, in order to demonstrate his folly.³³

31 Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 169 (*JubA* 1:167).

32 The evolution of Voltaire's acquaintance with Leibnizian-Wolffian metaphysics is very interesting. Voltaire had some preliminary contact with Leibnizian philosophy during his time in England in the 1720s. Nevertheless, it was Frederick the Great (who at that time was still a prince) who properly introduced him to Leibnizian-Wolffian philosophy in 1736. At first, Voltaire showed himself to be moderately critical of Leibniz and Wolff, but his antipathy towards them increased during the following few years and resulted in *La Métaphysique de Newton* (1741), his most systematic and complete criticism of Leibnizian philosophy. See William H. Barber, *Leibniz in France, from Arnauld to Voltaire: A Study in French Reactions to Leibnizianism, 1670–1760* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), 176–196. From then on, Voltaire would remain severely critical of Leibniz's and Wolff's metaphysics.

33 Barber, *Leibniz in France*, 231.

Voltaire's irony and wit were undeniably a crucial factor in *Candide's* widespread circulation across Europe from very early on: by the end of 1759, for instance, it had been the object of no less than twelve pirate editions.³⁴ The sudden appearance of a popular, fiercely anti-Leibnizian piece of literature was *per se* a valid cause for concern among Leibnizian-Wolffian philosophers. Yet the reason for *Candide's* appearance made the matter even worse. As is well known, Voltaire's motivation for writing *Candide* was the tragic earthquake that struck Lisbon in 1755.³⁵ In other words: Nature had raised serious questions about Leibniz's optimism, both by causing a monstrous earthquake and by consequently launching Voltaire as its most fervent propagandist. In light of all this, it is clear that by the end of the 1750s and the beginning of the 1760s, Leibniz's metaphysics was far from being at its best. The discredit brought about by both the earthquake and *Candide* called for a renewed and firm defence of it. In this regard, the fact that Mendelssohn waited for a decade before taking up the challenge might seem a little surprising. However, as we shall now see, it was precisely in 1771 that he made a fundamental philosophical discovery that would greatly reinforce his defence of optimism.

3 Criticising the Critic: Mendelssohn's Refutation of Voltaire's "Refutation" of Optimism

Mendelssohn's rewriting of the third *Gespräche* in order to counter Voltaire's anti-optimistic *Candide* is curious. I say "curious" because, though they are formally very different, both versions of the dialogue deal with the same main topics; namely, the claim that God created the world at the best possible moment in time and the claim that the actual world is the best of all possible worlds. However, this relevant connection did not prevent the dialogue from undergoing an almost total transformation: in the 1771 edition, Mendelssohn completely rewrote the introduction, discussed the topics in a different order, substantially expanded and amended the part on the best of all possible worlds, and, in addition, renamed the characters, so that Neophil became Kallisten and Philopon became Numesian. Let us begin with an overview of the 1755 version in order to properly understand Mendelssohn's further changes in 1771.

34 See Philip Stewart, "Candide," in *The Cambridge Companion to Voltaire*, ed. Nicholas Cronk (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 125–138.

35 Regarding Voltaire's critical approach to metaphysical optimism in *Candide* and the reasons behind it, see Haydn Mason, *Candide: Optimism Demolished* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992).

As indicated earlier, the introduction to the 1755 version is completely different from that of the 1771 version. Before addressing God's act of creation, Neophil and Philopon make some preliminary remarks on the importance of having a critical attitude when doing philosophy. This is indispensable because, as Neophil puts it, every philosopher has been mistaken at some point, and Leibniz is no exception, despite his being considered the greatest among philosophers. Neophil's intervention in this respect is worth noticing:

To understand Leibniz successfully, it is necessary to become a good Leibnizian first. One must be familiar with his fundamental theses and definitions, just like a diligent student who only aims to focus strictly on his words. At this point, the difficulties will not have to be sought, but will eventually emerge on their own. [...] Anyone who reaches the end of the road will eventually encounter them. It will only be necessary not to close one's eyes to what appears there at sight.³⁶

The difficulties and equivocations entailed by Leibniz's philosophy are unveiled immediately afterwards. The discussion of the claim that divine creation occurred in time begins with a basic, yet challenging question: Why did God not create the world just a little before the precise moment in time at which his creation occurred? To further inquire into this, Neophil takes the series *b-c-d-e* as representing the set of elements that make up the world (so that *b* causes and explains the existence of *c*; *c* causes and explains the existence of *d*, and so forth³⁷). Given this series, it is possible to imagine a new element (*a*) that could be added at the beginning of the chain, so that *b* would become an effect caused by *a*. And here is precisely the troubling point. To hold that the world was created in time involves assuming that it is constituted by a finite series of

36 *JubA* 1:21; my translation.

37 This conception of the world as essentially consisting of a series of connected elements comes from Wolff's cosmology, which is first discussed in his *German Metaphysics* (1720). In the chapter of the work devoted to cosmology, Wolff defines the world as a series [Reihe] of coexisting and successive things that are completely interconnected [verknüpft]. This multiplicity of interconnected things is a whole or unity [Eines], an entity constituted by other entities (its parts), and is thus a composite thing. As Wolff had pointed out in the ontological chapter of *German Metaphysics*, the essence of something composite is its structure (the specific way in which its parts are arranged). Therefore, the essence of a world corresponds to the specific arrangement of the many elements that constitute it. See Wolff, *Gesammelte Werke. I. Abteilung, Band 2. Vernünftige Gedanken von Gott, der Welt und der Seele des Menschen*, ed. Charles A. Corr (Hildesheim: Olms, 1983), 329–338 (§ 540–560).

elements. The first element of this series is only first *de facto*, but nothing prevents us from thinking *de iure* of another, prior element that could be explained in turn by reference to another, even more prior element, and so on indefinitely. Therefore, the possibility that God may have created the world a little earlier in time has not yet been refuted, since Leibnizian philosophers have not really found a sufficient reason to exclude this possibility *de iure*.³⁸

The problems attributed to the doctrine of the best of all possible worlds are not minor either. Some critics of Leibniz's *Theodicee* claim that it is impossible to classify a world as the best, based on the consideration that there is no perfect creature *stricto sensu*. These critics seem to suggest that to be categorised as perfect, a creature must not be improvable by any other creature, which is never the case because, assuming that all creatures are finite (i.e., endowed with a limited number of properties and perfections), a better one can always be conceived by simply adding one more perfection to it. Leibniz responded to these critics by asserting that predicates applied to particular substances cannot be applied to the world. In other words: a world is something infinite [etwas undendliches], so it is impossible to compare two worlds in the same way that two finite things are compared. This answer is unconvincing, as it relies on our cognitive incapacity to compare different worlds, and Wolff is credited with having amended it in his 1737 refutation of Spinoza.³⁹ In Wolff's view, two infinite series of perfections, A and B, are perfectly comparable: in particular, if B results precisely from adding a new perfection to a prior series A, then B can be clearly considered to be better than A. From the Wolffian perspective, then, it should be possible for God to grasp the infinite series of perfections that constitute every possible world and to create the world containing the most perfect one. However, Leibniz's words as adduced by Neophil do not seem to agree with Wolff. In his view, the series of perfections that make up a possible world cannot be regarded all together because their display is eternal: the series cannot be grasped as a whole because it is (let us say) a never-ending process and will be never completed. It is at this final stage that Neophil's doubts receive Philopon's final and Baylean-inspired consolation quoted in our introduction.⁴⁰

38 Cf. *JubA* 1:20–24. From a Leibnizian-Wolffian point of view, our comprehension of God's creation is incomplete, in that the series of reasons that explain it remains open (other reason[s] could still be added). In Leibnizian-Wolffian terms, this makes our reason for God's creation "insufficient" (i.e., not conclusive and still open to completion).

39 For Wolff's "refutation" of Spinoza within the 1737 *Theologia rationalis*, see Solé, *Spinoza en Alemania*, 132–151.

40 Cf. *JubA* 1:28.

Neophil's sceptically toned remarks at the end of the 1755 edition had been seemingly reinforced by Voltaire's satire of Leibniz's optimism. It is no coincidence, then, that the now-renamed Numesian and Kallisten begin the 1771 dialogue precisely by reflecting on the extent to which true ideas can be the subject of satire. In their view, *Candide* deserves to be regarded as "the most biting satire on our German doctrine of the best of the worlds."⁴¹ In this respect, Kallisthen, who is described as being German and metaphysically minded,⁴² confesses to his colleague that he enjoyed reading *Candide*. This leads Numesian to ask him whether he has come to adopt Voltaire's views, which Kallisthen immediately denies. To justify his position on Leibniz's side, he suggests that laughing at something (in this case, the doctrine of the best of all possible worlds) does not preclude it from being true. These remarks bring Shaftesbury into the scene, as Numesian thinks that his reflections on risible things are opposed to the ones held by Kallisten.⁴³

The subsequent discussion of Shaftesbury's views is a little prolix, but it contains an important clarification that helps us to further understand the first step of Mendelssohn's criticism of Voltaire. Kallisten immediately refutes the way in which the Numesian interprets Shaftesbury's use of a fragment attributed to Gorgias. According to this fragment, Gorgias advises that we should "tackle another's jesting by earnestness and earnestness by jesting."⁴⁴ As Kallisten notes, it is reasonable to think that Gorgias's point was essentially rhetorical: his aim was seemingly to teach how to articulate proper discourses by the alternation of serious and comical statements. Based on this remark, Kallisten takes Shaftesbury to give a more restrictedly epistemological sense to Gorgias's words: in particular, he is taken to be saying that every truth must be transformable into something risible and, vice versa, that every joke must be transformable into a serious, truthful proposition. Numesian expresses some concerns about (what he sees as) this paradoxical interconnection between joking and truth-telling. To temper his doubts, Kallisten observes that it is important to distinguish between (I) being *really* risible (i.e., absurd and nonsensical) and (II) *appearing* to be risible. In the light of this distinction, Shaftesbury has to be understood as specifically defending the claim that truths can (and even should) be made to appear risible and comical without truly being so.⁴⁵

41 *JubA* 1:356.

42 It is interesting to see that in this new version of the dialogue, Mendelssohn is more emphatic regarding the duality between the Germans and the French presented at the beginning of the second *Gespräch*. Cf. *JubA* 1, 13–14.

43 Cf. *JubA* 1:357–358.

44 "ἔφη Γοργίας τὴν μὲν σπουδὴν διαφθεῖρειν τῶν ἐναντίων γέλωτι τὸν δὲ γέλωτα σπουδῆν." This fragment is extracted from Aristotle's *Rhetoric* 3.18 (1419^b 4–5).

45 Cf. *JubA* 1:358–359.

This somewhat abstruse reflection leads the dialogue to a fundamental point. Following Shaftesbury, Voltaire's presentation of Leibniz's optimism as something *apparently* risible is absolutely compatible with Leibniz's view actually being true. In fact, Kallisten's subsequent goal is to show that Voltaire entirely failed to describe the world as it *really* is (and, *eo ipso*, to properly assess its ontological status). He is accused of lacking objectiveness for one main reason: he describes a situation in which an exaggerated series of tragedies occurs in a very small amount of time, without anything really good (not even the slightest) happening in parallel. What is Voltaire trying to achieve by depicting such a hyperbolic number of tragedies? For Kallisten, if Voltaire is seeking to claim that the actual world is not the best of all possible worlds, then his reasoning is entirely misleading, as he is attempting to refute a general metaphysical doctrine by making recourse to particular human experiences. Very interestingly, Kallisten refers once again to the cultural rivalry between the Germans and the French in order to reveal Voltaire's great confusion:

One must simply not know what is at issue if, as another French writer has done to repudiate the German system, one drafts a portrait of the history of France and analyzes the chain of evils out of which this country's affairs of state are composed. Civil wars, the bloody wedding, persecution by dragoons, Law's system, Ravailiac, Clement, and so forth. What does this matter to our system, what do even a thousand other ridiculous or lamentable things which have so often turned the political world of France on its head matter? With utter composure Pangloss can wrap himself in his mantle and say: *The world is still the best!*⁴⁶

With this, the attack on Voltaire's anti-optimistic stance reaches a first, relevant milestone. By means of his new introduction to the dialogue, Mendelssohn argues that Voltaire's fundamental problem is one of perspective. Based on our everyday experience of evil and suffering, Voltaire adduces counterexamples that do not really apply to the metaphysical thesis of the best of all possible worlds. The fact that humans have experiences of something that is catalogued as evil does not entail that evil actually exists in the world, as something created by God. These experiences are specifically restricted to humans and their finite mode of existing. Mendelssohn's underlying point is that the act of judging the ontological status of the world requires us to place ourselves above the finite perspective that is proper to humans. In other words, the nature of creation depends on the nature of its creator, God, who is an infinite being with infinite

46 Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 115 (*JubA* 1:360); Mendelssohn's emphasis.

perfections. Accordingly, it is absolutely inappropriate to question God's creation based on our imperfect access to the world: it relies on the mistaken assumption that the conditions proper to our finite existence also apply to God's infinite nature.

The discrediting of Voltaire's general approach to optimism alone could be regarded *per se* as a sufficient refutation of *Candide*. However, Mendelssohn's 1771 defence of Leibniz's optimism goes a little further. After dismissing Voltaire's general approach to the matter, he proceeds in the remainder of the dialogue to readdress his 1755 doubts on the doctrine of the best of all possible worlds. And he has good reason to do so. By 1771, Mendelssohn was ready to face these doubts by using a new conceptual tool; namely, the notion of strength [Stärke], which, incidentally, would also play a crucial role in the 1771 rewriting of his *Betrachtungen* on the sublime. The problem attributed to Leibniz in the 1755 edition was not minor at all. As seen at the beginning of this section, Leibniz's own words led to the troubling conclusion that an infinite multiplicity of perfections cannot be collectively regarded as a whole [Ganzes], which dangerously implies the impossibility of understanding how God could have compared possible worlds (each constituted by a specific series of perfections) and subsequently create the best of them. In short: the 1755 version of the third dialogue left us with no sufficient reason to account for God's creation of the actual world as the best of all possible worlds.

Kallisten then manages to find a sufficient reason by specifying that the world's eternal and everlasting nature does not prevent God from grasping it as a peculiar kind of whole. *Prima facie*, there is good reason to think that the world cannot be defined as a whole (i.e., a delimited, closed totality). After all, creation is eternal, so the world should be conceived as an infinite, dynamic display of creatures and perfections rather than as a static and delimited totality. However, if we cannot say that this dynamic series of creatures and perfections constitutes a whole, then the problem in the 1755 dialogue emerges once again: How could God completely grasp and compare different possible worlds in order to opt for the best one? Kallisten's new response involves a very subtle clarification. As he puts it, the infinite number of perfections that constitute a world are *extensively infinite*, but *intensively determined*:

If, however, this universe, in spite of its infinity and eternal duration, must present itself as a whole to the divine intellect, then a definite degree of perfection will also have to be ascribed to it, regarded as a whole. Of course, it will be a limited, not an infinite degree. Contrary to Spinoza, it has been proven very successfully that an infinite number of finite perfections, taken together, constitutes a merely finite perfection of

the whole. By heaping up many parts or taking them together, one sustains an extended magnitude [ausgedehnte Größe], but no unextended magnitude [unausgedehnte Größe], no strength [Stärke]. *Thus, too, when infinitely many limited perfections are taken together, they constitute an infinite perfection in terms of extension, but not of strength.*⁴⁷

The notion of strength allows Mendelssohn to finally account for God's creation of the best of all possible worlds. An infinite series of perfections can appear to God as an *unextended* whole; that is, as a determined strength. This allows him to grasp each world as being endowed with a specific degree of strength, so that the magnitude of this strength becomes a measure of perfection. In other words: each world has a degree of perfection corresponding to its degree of strength. It is in the light of this crucial interconnection that God's reason for creating the best of all possible worlds comes to be comprehensible. In the instant prior to creation, God grasps a multiplicity of possible worlds: since each of them is endowed with a specific degree of strength and perfection, he can rationally take the one containing the greatest perfection and make it real. At this point, the reader might expect this discovery to cause great joy among the Leibnizian characters. However, instead of this, Kallisten immediately observes that this new solution to the 1755 version's doubts in turn requires further inquiry. Very interestingly, his rather critical intervention recalls that version's sceptical invitation to never stop looking for possible objections to great metaphysical theories:

If, however, the perfection of every universe, however infinite in number and duration it may be, is still limited, then it is difficult to understand why another universe is not possible which, considered as a whole, possesses a higher degree of perfection. [...] To be sure, the Leibnizian always wins when he infers from the result. This universe has been produced by God, hence there must be no more perfect system of the world. [...] These reasons are patent. If something better were possible, then the supreme goodness could only choose what is better. But we would still like to see more distinctly how the perfection of the whole, without being infinite, can nevertheless not be greater than it actually is.⁴⁸

In fact, this sort of critical mood persists until the end of the dialogue. Numesian and Kallisten conclude their discussion by briefly approaching a second

47 Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 118 (*JubA* 1:363); my emphasis.

48 Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 118–119 (*JubA* 1:364).

major theme (namely, the thesis that the best of all possible worlds was created in time). As for the first great topic of the dialogue, both friends now manage to find that sufficient reason that could not be grasped in 1755. As in the 1755 edition, holding that our world was created in time is taken to entail that this world is constituted by a finite series of elements. According to Kallisten, this series is not arbitrary at all: following Leibniz, God must have conformed the world to the specific series of elements leading to the greatest possible perfection via the shortest path. Thus, a sufficient reason has apparently been found to explain the actual series of created elements. However, once again, Kallisten observes that this does not really explain why the actual chain of elements could not be endowed with further exogenous elements: "This answer is not completely satisfying, and I wish to see clarified more distinctly how the first condition, which actually came to be, could involve an earlier condition without this earlier condition having belonged to the choice of the best."⁴⁹

This kind of bittersweet taste at the end suggests that although he has made some relevant changes to his account of Leibniz's optimism, Mendelssohn has by no means become a dogmatic defender of it. Voltaire's inaccurate critique of Leibniz's optimism called for a proper refutation. And the one Mendelssohn offers is by no means vain. As well as entirely dismantling Voltaire's dialectical strategy, he has reinforced some relevant aspects of his first, much weaker account of Leibnizian optimism. However, metaphysics is not especially straightforward. As Mendelssohn's attitude suggests, this is an area in which it is very difficult (if not impossible) to reach. However, some doctrines are truly worthy of further inquiry, on the one hand, because of their global strength, even in spite of having some particular problems, and on the other, because of their great benefit for our moral life:

I have already said to you that the doctrine of the best world flows immediately from the properties of God, and Bayle himself had to acknowledge as much, considered from this point of view. Since, therefore, it has its proven certainty, objections and difficulties cannot keep us from agreeing with it. They can capture our attention and provide us with an occasion for reflection. However, *the once proven truth stands fast as long as the foundations on which it rests are not shaken. For my own peace of mind, I would not like to do without this doctrine since it is the only one that is able to satisfy me. Through the consideration that the slightest objects around me are parts of the most perfect world, they acquire a sublimity that makes them worth revering.*⁵⁰

49 Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 119 (*JubA* 1:365).

50 Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 120 (*JubA* 1:366); my emphasis.

4 Conclusion: The Importance of Being Earnest (and Optimistic)

Let us end our inquiry by considering the extent to which the two main theses of this article have been argued. As pointed out at the beginning, the theses that I aimed to defend were (I) that Mendelssohn's rewriting of the third dialogue is specifically intended to strengthen his defence of Leibniz's metaphysics against the criticism of it in Voltaire's *Candide* and (II) that Mendelssohn is not dismissing sceptical approaches to philosophy, but rather attempting to give a better account of Leibniz's metaphysics and its moral importance, without denying its theoretical problems.

In a fundamental (and even trivial) sense, it is quite beyond doubt that the 1771 version of the third *Gespräch* is directly addressed to Voltaire's *Candide*: the first half of the dialogue is nothing less than an explicit commentary on (and refutation of) Voltaire's work. However, besides this basic detail, the second section of this article aimed to illuminate in what sense that refutation was philosophically significant for Mendelssohn. From the beginning of his trajectory, Mendelssohn showed a great affinity with Leibnizian metaphysics. As has been argued, this affinity must be construed in a context that was marked by a clash between opposing intellectual factions. In this regard, Mendelssohn's siding with Leibnizian metaphysics is not trivial: the pro-French and anti-Leibnizian (or, even more precisely, "anti-Leibnizian-Wolffian") current prevailing at the time had gone far enough to dominate the Prussian Academy of Sciences in Berlin and thus occupied a privileged space in the German cultural sphere. Mendelssohn and Lessing's *Pope ein Metaphysiker!* emerged as an ironic and provocative defence of Leibniz's optimism against the Academy, the source of the very contest that had motivated its composition. Afterwards, Mendelssohn conceived some metaphysical works, like the *Gespräche* or the *Briefe*, in order to further argue for Leibnizian-Wolffian views, which he continued to do even in the aesthetical works of the late 1750s. The radically anti-Leibnizian *Candide* was intended to destroy Mendelssohn's metaphysical worldview. Mendelssohn, who quite unsurprisingly could not permit this by any means, decided in turn to destroy Voltaire's view, to the point of showing both (I) that Voltaire's approach was fundamentally mistaken and (II) that Leibnizian optimism was now even stronger than it was in Mendelssohn's first account of it.

Yet, in connection to my second thesis for the present article, Mendelssohn's renewed defence of Leibniz's optimism was far from dogmatic. The rewriting of the third *Gespräche* against *Candide* gave Mendelssohn the opportunity to reconsider some complex issues of the doctrine of the best of all possible worlds that constitutes Leibnizian optimism. This reconsideration was partially successful, in that it allowed Mendelssohn to finally find an explanation

for that which he had not managed to explain in 1755. Nevertheless, and in connection to the Baylean spirit of the 1755 *Gespräche*, Mendelssohn conceded that his answers to those doubts were not conclusive, thus suggesting once again that reliable metaphysical conclusions are not that easy to attain. Metaphysical issues like the ones featured in the *Gespräche* require a critical spirit: dogmatic assent is therefore out of their reach. However, this does not mean that one should not subscribe to the doctrine of the best of all possible worlds. Even though some of its aspects remain unclear, it is worth cherishing such a well-proven doctrine, especially, as Mendelssohn concludes, if we also consider its great benefit for our moral praxis. In short: for Mendelssohn, subscribing to such a well-grounded metaphysical doctrine seems a good decision to make our moral life happier.

I think that Mendelssohn's final emphasis on the moral benefits inherent in metaphysical optimism might become especially comprehensible if we link it to his *opus magnum*, *Phaedon*. This 1767 work argues in a literary manner for the intimate interaction between metaphysics and morals. In this regard, it might be seen to be making a crucial modulation of Wolffian metaphysics (or, more precisely still, what Mendelssohn took to be Leibnizian-Wolffian metaphysics). In Wolff, psychology, which is the third branch of his metaphysics, is conceived as being literally fundamental for moral philosophy: moral philosophy relies on psychological contents like the descriptions of the functioning of volition and action, or, even more basically for Wolff, the demonstration that the soul is free. Very interestingly, Mendelssohn's *Phaedon* offers an inversion of the Wolffian structure and turns morality into the horizon of psychology. In short: knowledge of the nature of the human soul is granted a moral significance that constitutes its main and primary motivation. What this fundamentally implies is as remarkable as it is fascinating: the horizon of metaphysical doctrines like that of immortality becomes, after all, a moral one. Thus, metaphysical optimism should also reasonably be seen as having this crucial moral orientation. For Mendelssohn, the belief that the world is essentially good leaves us with a charm and a hope that, it seems to me, is not that distinct from the one expressed rather lyrically at the very end of *Phaedon*:

From all these proofs, [...] the most reliable assurance of a future life awakens, which can completely satisfy our mind. The ability to feel is not an attribute of the body and its fine structure, but has its existence in itself. The essence of this existence is simple and consequently imperishable. Also, the perfection which these simple substances acquired, must be of unceasing consequences in regard to themselves, and makes them [...] efficient to fulfil the purposes of God in nature. [...] Further, the spirits

have, as moral beings, a system of duties and rights, which would be full of absurdities and contradictions, if they were inhibited on the path to perfection and turned back.⁵¹

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51 Moses Mendelssohn, *Phaedon, or on the Immortality of the Soul*, trans. Patricia Noble (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 2007), 142 (*JubA* 3.1:122–123).

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Philosophy as Rigorous Science

Scepticism and Anti-scepticism in Leo Strauss's Writings

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Abstract

As Carlo Rovelli observed, physicists and philosophers cannot stop looking for the truth even if they know that this is an asymptotic activity; that although the ultimate truth may not be found, philosophy and science will continue to look for it. This article, inspired by Rovelli's reflections on the meaning of science and philosophy and the relationship between them, contributes to the understanding of one of the most controversial philosophers of the twentieth century: Leo Strauss. It aims to show how Strauss conceives of philosophy as a rigorous science, much like Edmund Husserl did in his manifesto of phenomenology, and attempts to demonstrate, through a brief analysis of his key contemporary and modern sources—Husserl, Hermann Cohen, and Gotthold Ephraim Lessing—that Strauss's stance is anti-sceptical in the sense of opposing philosophical scepticism, which questions the very possibility of discovering the truth. However, it is sceptical in the sense that it views philosophy as an ongoing inquiry and a questioning of everything in reality—an inquiry that can potentially be infinite. Strauss was influenced by Husserl's conception of philosophy as a rigorous science, Cohen's critical idealism, and Lessing's notion of truth when he was developing his own understanding of the philosophical enterprise. This, in turn, led him to the view that it is possible to learn from ancient philosophers, such as Socrates, how to navigate the challenges inherent in this difficult endeavour.

Keywords

Leo Strauss – scepticism – anti-scepticism – philosophy as rigorous science – Socrates

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In the thirteenth century, the great philosopher Maimonides writes: “Time is composed of atoms, that is to say of many parts that cannot be further subdivided, on account of their short duration.” The idea probably dates back even further: the loss of the original texts of Democritus prevents us from knowing whether it was already present in classical Greek atomism. Abstract thought can anticipate by centuries hypotheses that find a use—or confirmation—in scientific inquiry.

CARLO ROVELLI, *The Order of Time*.¹

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1 Introduction

For several decades, Leo Strauss was exclusively considered in scholarship as the political philosopher who claimed that political philosophy in modern times was undergoing a fatal crisis, which he attributed to radical historicism in contemporary philosophy or to Weber’s idea of science as “value-free.”² This was thanks to his contemporaries’ initial and very partial study of the influence of his philosophical sources on his work as a whole. More recently, scholars have also considered him as the pessimistic alter-ego of Hannah Arendt, who, though disillusioned with the modern Western philosophical tradition, was still convinced that philosophy and politics are irreconcilable, unless the latter is seen as a necessary framework for the former (since the philosopher cannot be completely free within the *polis*).

Furthermore, Strauss has also been seen as an elitist and exoteric philosopher who paralysed both Jewish and non-Jewish interpreters of Maimonides,

1 Carlo Rovelli, *The Order of Time*, trans. Erica Segre and Simon Carnell (New York: Riverhead Books, 2018), 55.

2 According to Strauss, classical political philosophy had not survived the rise of political science and of Max Weber’s ideal of the ethical neutrality of social sciences and had thus become incapable of dealing with ethical values, of discerning the bad from the good, for example. See Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1950), published in a new German translation in Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften, Band 4: Naturrecht und Geschichte*, ed. Heinrich Meier (Hamburg: Meiner, 2022), 332.

convincing them to read him only in terms of the dichotomy between Jerusalem and Athens, revelation and reason, a dichotomy that is impossible to overcome if not by means of a complex interpretation of the so-called secrets of the Bible.³ Interpreters of his work have resisted defining his philosophy, as it is frequently expressed in ambiguous propositions. Many of them have stated that his most famous writings—such as *Die Religionskritik Spinozas* (1930), *Philosophie und Gesetz* (1935),⁴ *Hobbes' politische Wissenschaft* (1936), and *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (1952)—contain no original thoughts, but are merely more or less philologically accurate studies in the history of philosophy that at best can guide us to a careful reading of the philosophers of the past.

Finally, many of Strauss's contemporary interpreters today understand that none of these positions describes the core of his thought and therefore define his philosophical method as a zetetic scepticism.⁵ What this means is still unclear, and a more profound analysis of his philosophical or sceptical sources is required. Looking for an authentic rationalism—a rationalism capable of including irrational aspects without fearing or refusing them—Strauss attempted, with the help of Maimonides and his Islamic sources as well as that of other philosophers from the past, to understand it and its Greek origins. A central topic during Strauss's epoch (similar to Eric Dodd's 1951 thesis about the crisis of rationalism during the Hellenic period),⁶ his thesis of the crisis of rationalism during the modern period focuses on the tendency among modern thinkers to expel irrational elements without considering that, once expelled, these elements could become stronger and more dangerous to reason itself. In the earliest period of his university education, Strauss read philosophers such as Hermann Cohen and Edmund Husserl, the founders of the neo-Kantian school of Marburg and the phenomenological school, who were seminal to his subsequent work. Always critical of the philosophical attitude of the neo-Kantian philosophers—who, according to him, began their reflections “from the roof” (that is, from the scientific view of the world and reality), while phenomenology begins “from the foundation” (that is, “from our common understanding

3 Warren Zev Harvey, “How to Begin to Study Strauss's ‘How to Begin to Study the *Guide of the Perplexed*,’” in *Interpreting Maimonides: Critical Essays*, ed. Charles H. Manekin and Daniel Davies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 228–246.

4 Leo Strauss, “Philosophie und Gesetz” (1935), in Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften, Band 2: Philosophie und Gesetz—Frühe Schriften*, ed. Heinrich Meier (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1997), 9–27.

5 Carlo Altini, *Una filosofia in esilio. Vita e pensiero di Leo Strauss* (Rome: Carocci, 2021), 366; Mauro Bonazzi, “Sul platonismo di Leo Strauss. A proposito di uno studio recente,” *Rivista di storia della filosofia* 4 (2015): 817–827; Alessandra Fussi, *La città nell'anima. Leo Strauss lettore di Platone e Senofonte* (Pisa: ETS, 2012).

6 See Eric Dodds, *The Greek and the Irrational* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951).

of the world, from our understanding of the world as sensibly perceived prior to all theorising”)—Husserl in particular influenced Strauss’s concept of philosophy more than is usually believed by Strauss scholars.⁷

2 Is Philosophy a Rigorous Science? Leo Strauss, Hermann Cohen, and Edmund Husserl

For the physicist Carlo Rovelli, scepticism seems to be the method that enables us to rethink reality again and again and induces us to continuously renew the language in which we speak of it (even if the abstract thinking of ancient philosophers like Maimonides was able to anticipate the results of future scientific discoveries).⁸ More than a century before Rovelli, Leo Strauss—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 “classic” figure of Jewish medieval rationalism during the twelfth century: Maimonides.⁹ Strauss first published “Philosophy as Rigorous Science and Political Philosophy” around 1961, in a festschrift for his friend Shlomo Pines in Jerusalem, but he had attended Husserl’s courses as a student in Freiburg as early as 1922. Husserl’s phenomenology is Strauss’s contemporary philosophical horizon, and he writes: “Phenomenology is essentially the study of essences and in no way of existence. In accordance with this the study of the life of the mind as practiced by the thoughtful historians offers to the philosophers a more original and therefore more fundamental material of enquiry than the study of nature.”¹⁰

For Strauss, what Cohen and Husserl have in common is that they are both interested in the study of the mind or consciousness, and they are both philo-

7 Leo Strauss, “Philosophy as Rigorous Science and Political Philosophy,” *Interpretation* 2 (1971): 1–9.

8 See Carlo Rovelli, *Buchi bianchi* (Milan: Adelphi 2023).

9 There is a consensus that Hermann Cohen (the founder of the Marburg school of Neo-Kantianism and a predecessor of Strauss in studying Spinoza and Maimonides) and Strauss’s *Doktorvater* Ernst Cassirer (the author of a long history of knowledge and an essay on Einstein’s theory of relativity) did not have much of an influence on their younger reader and student Leo Strauss. For a different interpretation, see Chiara Adorisio, *Leo Strauss lettore di Hermann Cohen. Dalla filosofia moderna al ritorno agli antichi* (Florence: Giuntina, 2007), 260.

10 Leo Strauss, “Philosophy as Rigorous Science,” 7.

sophers in the Kantian horizon, even if they diverge in their interpretations of his philosophy. In his essay, he states that Husserl's most important contribution to philosophy is that he conceives of it as a rigorous science, as opposed to a *Weltanschauung*. According to Strauss, Husserl almost reaches the point of understanding that the philosopher, while conceiving of a rigorous scientific philosophy (which is a potentially infinite task), must assure peace in society, carefully and consciously dealing with the conflict between philosophy and *Weltanschauung*:

No one in our century has raised the call for philosophy as a rigorous science with such clarity, purity, vigor, and breadth as Husserl. "From its first beginnings philosophy has raised the claim to be a rigorous science; more precisely, it has raised the claim to be the science that would satisfy the highest theoretical needs and, in regard to ethics and religion render possible a life regulated by pure rational norms. This claim ... has never been completely abandoned. [Yet] in no epoch of its development has philosophy been capable of satisfying the claim to be a rigorous science ... Philosophy as science has not yet begun ... In philosophy [in contradistinction to the sciences] everything is controversial."¹¹

Strauss seems to take Husserl's idea so seriously that he seeks to develop it in a more consequent way. In his interpretation, this means underscoring the underestimated problem of the conflict between philosophy and *Weltanschauung*. Had Husserl done this, he would have regarded *Weltanschauung* as necessary for society, but at the same time as something from which philosophy, as a rigorous science, should remain separated. The conflict between *Weltanschauung* and philosophy is unavoidable, but if the philosopher is aware of this unavoidable conflict, he can still practice philosophy as a rigorous science:

"Already in the beginnings of philosophy persecution sets in. The men who live toward those ideas [of philosophy] are outlawed. And yet: ideas are stronger than all empirical powers." In order to see the relation between philosophy as rigorous science and the alternative to it clearly, one must look at the political conflict between the two antagonists, i.e. at the essential character of that conflict. If one fails to do so, one cannot reach

¹¹ Strauss, 6.

clarity on the essential character of what Husserl calls “philosophy as rigorous science.”¹²

As Rovelli observed, physicists and philosophers cannot stop looking for the truth even if they know that this is an asymptotic activity; that although the ultimate truth may not be found, philosophy and science will continue to look for it and to transform the language that should help this enquiry. There is something anti-sceptical in Strauss’s thought, in the sense of a polemic against the philosophical scepticism that questions the very possibility of finding the truth.

3 Zetetic Scepticism or Exotericism? Leo Strauss’s Response to the Crisis of Rationalism

As Jeffrey Bernstein has stated regarding Strauss’s philosophy:

As a zetetic activity (i.e., one that proceeds by means of inquiry), Strauss holds that philosophy is concerned with articulating the fundamental questions, problems, and responses to such problems (which responses exceed the purview of ultimate practical resolutions). [...] The philosopher cannot, in principle, take those provisional responses to be destinations without transforming his way of life into a sect.¹³

While some of these interpreters, who are themselves scholars of ancient philosophy, have studied the influence of ancient *zētēsis* in Strauss’s writings—especially on his reinterpretation of Plato’s philosophy, his lessons on Socratic sources, or his writings on Greek literature and history—these same interpreters have not devoted the same attention to the Jewish sources of his scepticism. It is in his reading of some of the most important Jewish philosophical sources that Strauss becomes aware of the crisis of modern rationalism and of some alternatives to it. He begins to read Spinoza, who in both his *Short Treatise on God, Man, and His Well-Being* and the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* criticises the sceptics among the philosophers (that is, those philosophers who deny that human beings can find any truth at all and whose position ends in a

¹² Strauss, 9.

¹³ Jeffrey Bernstein, *Leo Strauss on the Borders of Judaism, Philosophy, and History* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2015), 228.

sort of aphasia).¹⁴ It was on Spinoza's critique of religion and on Cohen's essays on Spinoza's biblical exegesis that Strauss wrote his first works, particularly his 1930 book *Die Religionskritik Spinozas als Grundlage seiner Bibelwissenschaft. Untersuchungen zu Spinozas Theologisch-politischem Traktat*,¹⁵ in which he examined the confutation of orthodoxy contained in the *Theological-Political Treatise*. According to Strauss himself, his realisation that the philosophers of the past used techniques for concealing truths, or a kind of writing strategy, in order to face the above-mentioned conflict between philosophy as a rigorous science and a *Weltanschauung* began from his examination of Spinoza's rationalism (which was at the same time modern and medieval, as Henry Austryn Wolfson had noted).¹⁶ After a careful analysis of the relationships between the doctrine contained in the *Ethics, Demonstrated in Geometrical Order* and the *Theological-Political Treatise*, Strauss began to see Spinoza as a philosopher concerned not only with the theoretical issues of philosophy, but also with the practical issues. Far from being detached from a political dimension and from political themes, an understanding of the *Ethics* requires the introduction contained in the *Treatise* as an essential complementary. As Strauss wrote in a letter to his friend Jacob Klein, the historian of mathematics and interpreter of Plato:

Philosophy is the attempt to replace opinion with knowledge; now, opinion is the proper element of the *polis*; consequently, philosophy is subversive [...]. In other words, while the proper character of the philosopher's thinking is a kind of *mania* [madness], the philosopher's public discourse is *sophrosyne* [moderation].¹⁷

14 During the seventeenth century, this was the position within so-called academic scepticism. On the other side, Spinoza, in his *Theological-Political Treatise*, likewise criticises the religious scepticism within Judaism, represented by the attitude of Judah Alfakar, who denies every certainty to reason and relies only on faith.

15 Leo Strauss, *Die Religionskritik Spinozas als Grundlage seiner Bibelwissenschaft. Untersuchungen zu Spinozas Theologisch-politischem Traktat* (1930), in Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften, Band 1: Die Religionskritik Spinozas und zugehörige Schriften*, ed. Heinrich Meier, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2001), 1–355. The volume also contains other essays Strauss wrote about Spinoza, such as "Cohens Analyse der Bibelwissenschaft Spinozas" (1924) (363–388), "Zur Bibelwissenschaft Spinozas und seiner Vorläufer" (1926) (389–414), and "Das Testament Spinozas" (1932) (415–422).

16 Harry Austryn Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza: Unfolding the Latent Processes of His Reasoning*, repr. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983).

17 Leo Strauss and Jacob Klein, "A Giving of Accounts," *The College* 22 (1970): 4.

Strauss's ideas finally found systematic form in his *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (1952),¹⁸ in which he interprets Spinoza and Hobbes, as well as Maimonides (whom he had already studied during the 1930s in his book on Spinoza and in *Philosophie und Gesetz*) and the Arabic and Jewish philosophers of the Middle Ages, as careful writers of philosophical treatises that reveal nothing at first sight, but carefully address their respective audiences. The historian Carlo Ginzburg, in his essay "Virtue, Justice, Strength. On Machiavelli and Some of His Readers," quotes Strauss when describing the relationship between writing and persecution and stresses that the influence of persecution on literature consists precisely in pushing all those writers, who think heterodoxically to develop a very precise literary technique: that technique to which we allude when we speak of "writing between the lines." His claim seems to condense the value of Ginzburg's research, as he in fact comments on Strauss's words by observing that research also consists of the attempt to grasp something that is written between the lines, "in invisible ink, on the fragmentary evidence of the past."¹⁹

In *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, Strauss focuses on the distinction between the esoteric aspect of philosophy (that is, the part that pertains to philosophy as a rigorous science in Husserlian terms) and its exoteric aspect. The discovery of this distinction, which, according to Strauss, was recognised by ancient and medieval philosophers as well as by Spinoza, should be considered a modern discovery. In his view, this can be attributed to the German and Spinozist philosopher Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, the author of *Nathan der Weise* and other seminal works (who, as Strauss himself writes, inspired a change of orientation in him regarding his way of reading past philosophers). In 1939, when Strauss was writing about Lessing, he was about to face the most terrible years of his life: he was to lose his entire family to the Nazis' persecution, and later also his brother-in-law, Paul Kraus, who was found dead in Cairo in 1944 (and with whom he conducted a fruitful collaboration, as the footnotes of their unpublished studies reveal).²⁰

18 Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1952).

19 In these lectures, in which Ginzburg focuses on the value and importance of philology for the work of the historian and in everyday life, he quotes Strauss frequently: see Ginzburg, *Occhiacci di legno. Dieci riflessioni sulla distanza* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2019), 296; Ginzburg, *La lettera uccide* (Milan: Adelphi, 2021) xi–xii, 55, 103, 174, 228. On Ginzburg's reading of Strauss's interpretation of Machiavelli, see also Cristina Basili, "Leer entre líneas: Carlo Ginzburg, Leo Strauss y el problema teológico-político," in *Arcana del pensamiento del siglo XX*, ed. José L. Villacañas, Roberto Navarrete, and Cristina Basili (Barcelona: Herder, 2021), 299–328.

20 For more on this relationship, see Giovanni Licata, "Leo Strauss, Paul Kraus e la riscoperta

In fact, starting from the rediscovery of the figure of al-Fārābī, who is understood as the thinker who traced the development of Arab-Islamic and Jewish philosophy up to Averroes and Maimonides, Strauss was able to arrive at a complete understanding of the *falāsifah* and a new interpretation of the Platonism of the Arabic philosophers. In recent years, various essays and monographs have been published that recognise the value and originality of Strauss's interpretation of medieval Islamic philosophy. Indeed, it is significant that both the contributions dedicated to Strauss's relationship with Arab-Islamic philosophy and the works that deal with his life and thought in general sideline or completely omit, with few exceptions, Kraus's importance for his intellectual evolution, as if it were important to downplay his philological skills or his seriousness in order to advance instead an image of a philosopher who manipulates ancient texts to demonstrate a controversial theory based on suspicion and elitism.

Although al-Fārābī and Maimonides were the philosophers through whom Strauss seems to have discovered the problem of esotericism in premodern philosophy, it is in fact a modern philosopher, Lessing, who, as mentioned above, probably represents the most important initial source of his ideas. As Hannes Kerber pointed out,²¹ it is in his 1939 essay "Exoteric Teaching" that Strauss makes his first attempt to explain the concept of esotericism in general terms. Moreover, compared to essays published at the end of the 1940s collected in *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, Strauss, in discussing the question of esotericism, does not focus on the medieval world, but rather presents the issue from a "Western" perspective. In fact, "Exoteric Teaching" focuses mainly on Lessing, a non-Jewish German philosopher, and on the Protestant theologian Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher (especially on his interpretation of Plato). Other big names in European philosophy are also mentioned in the text, including Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

Now, why is it that this essay, which is Strauss's first essay devoted entirely to the question of esotericism, lacks any mention not only of the *falāsifah*, but also of Maimonides? If his intention was to circumscribe the esotericism of medieval Islamic and Jewish thinkers as a phenomenon of little importance on

di Al-Farabi nella prima metà del xx secolo," in *Costruzione e distruzione di memorie. Riflessioni storiche e filosofiche*, ed. Irene Kajon and Giuseppe Trotta (Rome: Lithos, 2023), 225–247.

21 Hannes Kerber, "Strauss and Schleiermacher on How to Read Plato: An Introduction to 'Exoteric Teaching,'" in *Reorientation: Leo Strauss in the 1930s*, ed. Martin D. Yaffe and Richard S. Ruderman (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 203–204.

the world stage, then his own writings devoted to the *Guide* from 1941 onwards would be no more than “minor” texts. However, as Kerber explains, things are more complicated:

Even more perplexing is the fact that, while Maimonides is left out of the typescript, he is mentioned in an early handwritten plan of the essay. In this plan, the title for the penultimate section of the essay’s first part is: “Lessing—Leibniz—Hobbes (vera-pia dogmata)—Spinoza—RMbM—.” In the corresponding section of the manuscript, which was written before the typescript, Strauss [...] does mention Maimonides at the end of the sequence of exoteric writers.²²

As if this were not enough, writes Kerber, in another version of the typescript, Hobbes has been replaced by Descartes, but Maimonides does not appear at all. Furthermore, in the last version of the essay, the title of the passage in question is slightly altered, though this change does not solve the problem: “Lessing—Leibniz—Spinoza(—RMbM).” What do the brackets mean? Did Strauss drop the reference to Maimonides after completing the manuscript, or did he want to emphasize the implicit presence of Maimonides in a section ostensibly devoted only to Western thinkers? This question leads to two hypotheses. The first is that it is possible to trace a history of Western esotericism without mentioning the *falāsifah*. The second, which is perhaps even more important, is that although Maimonides’s name was excluded from the actual text, this does not necessarily mean that it should also be excluded from a deeper reading of this plan. The differences between these hypotheses become secondary if one reads Strauss’s entire work on medieval Arabic philosophy as a step on the path backwards from modern philosophy and the radical Enlightenment (which Lessing also critiques) and towards a more authentic Enlightenment.²³

In fact, Lessing attributed the distinction between exoteric and esoteric truths to all past philosophers. He did so as someone who does not simply accept this distinction as a strange fact of the past, but rather sees it as an intelligible necessity of all times and therefore as a principle guiding his own literary activity against the ideas of his contemporaries. Lessing did indeed break with

22 Kerber, “Strauss and Schleiermacher,” 203. For an analysis of the importance of Lessing for Strauss’s writings, see also Michah Gottlieb, “Leo Strauss on Lessing’s Spinozism,” in *German Jewish Thought between Religion and Politics (Festschrift in Honor of Paul Mendes-Flohr on the Occasion of His Seventeenth Birthday)*, ed. Christian Wiese and Martina Urban (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012), 291–317.

23 Kerber, “Strauss and Schleiermacher,” 204.

the ideals of the Enlightenment. Strauss thought that Lessing's intransigent classicism, his considered view that a close study of the classics is the only way in which a diligent and thinking man can become a philosopher, led him first to notice the esotericism of some ancient philosophers and later to understand the esotericism of all premodern philosophers. As a critic of the Enlightenment from within the horizon of the Enlightenment itself, Lessing disclosed to Strauss something that Strauss himself had already learned from Jewish sources like Spinoza and Maimonides, and, in another way, from his contemporaries such as Cohen and Husserl. For Cohen, it was important to consider Maimonides as the classic figure of rationalism in Judaism, to see himself as an enlightened thinker, and to confirm that the replacement of myth by science is also a Jewish need. However, he seemed not to fully grasp the political problem inherent in this replacement. As Strauss remarked during a conference dedicated to Cohen and Maimonides:

Socrates knows a lot ... then how it is that he remains with the question? The answer is that he wants to remain with the question ... because questioning matters. A life without questioning is not a worthy life. [...] Questioning about life itself [...] There is no doctrine of Socrates. [...] Even this knowing about not knowing is no doctrine: Socrates is also not a sceptic. A doctrine, a philosophical doctrine at least, is an answer to a question. Socrates, however, answers nothing. The apparent answer that he gives (knowing about not knowing) is only the most penetrating expression of the question. Socratic philosophising means: questioning.²⁴

4 Conclusion

If ancient philosophers like Socrates viewed their philosophical activity as questioning, as Cohen explains, then Husserl's conception of philosophy as a rigorous science and an asymptotic inquiry towards truth can be seen as having been inspired by ancient philosophy, particularly Socrates. The most striking feature of Husserl's and Socrates's philosophy is their consciousness of method. As Michael Landmann put it in 1941:

24 Leo Strauss, "Cohen und Maimuni" (1931), in Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften, Band 2: Philosophie und Gesetz—Frühe Schriften*, ed. Heinrich Meier (Stuttgart: Metzler Verlag, 1997), 413; my translation.

The new direction which he gave to investigation through his peculiar method of questioning constitutes the real—and the influential—discovery of Socrates, much more than do the concrete answers he even denied receiving. In a similar way, while phenomenology is an investigation of the phenomenon, it is almost no less an exposition and defense of the method of this investigation, by the application of which “a new realm of being” shall be disclosed “which has never before been marked out in all its peculiarity.”²⁵

Besides the influence of Socrates, also “the Skeptics’ *epoché* is revitalized by Husserl as a permanent way of challenging the dogmatic naiveté of life in the natural attitude”²⁶ and can therefore be considered the first step in the philosophical method that phenomenologists were attempting to articulate. Strauss sees Husserl as a contemporary philosopher who, unlike others, does not view ancient philosophy through a historicist lens, instead learning from the ancients. While consciousness of method, the opening of unexpected horizons, and the will to be scientific are common to both Socratism and phenomenology, they are not peculiar to these two movements. Husserl himself, in a 1911 text titled “Philosophie als strenge Wissenschaft,” which Strauss read, placed the revolution of Socrates and Plato alongside those of Descartes and Kant, seeing them as attempts to return to the true beginnings and to clarity about the conditions of the proper method, and generally as akin to his own revolution in purpose.²⁷ According to Strauss, Husserl could have been more radical in what Strauss once called *das lesende Lernen* [learning from the texts of the ancients]. In fact, he does not explicitly recognise the importance of a

25 Michael Landmann, “Socrates as a Precursor of Phenomenology,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 2, no. 1 (1941): 15.

26 See Dermot Moran, “Husserl and the Greeks,” *The Journal for the British Society for Phenomenology* 52 (2021): 98–117. Husserl would remain fascinated by the figure of Socrates as an ethical reformer until the [late 1910s and early 1920s/late nineteenth and early twentieth century], especially in his “Introduction to Philosophy” (1916–1920) and his “First Philosophy” lecture series. He also presents the Platonic and Socratic effort as an attempt to defend scientific philosophy against the relativism and scepticism of the Sophists. Later still, in the 1930s, Husserl read Helmut Kuhn’s study of Socrates (Kuhn, *Sokrates: Ein Versuch über den Ursprung der Metaphysik* [Berlin: Die Runde, 1934]), which he acknowledged as the first philosophy book in a long time that he had read from cover to cover. Strauss himself had a dialogue with Kuhn on ancient philosophical dogmatism and scepticism: see Strauss, *Naturrecht und Geschichte*, 333–340.

27 Edmund Husserl, “Philosophie als strenge Wissenschaft,” *Logos. Internationale Zeitschrift für Philosophie der Kultur* 1 (1911): 292; recently republished in Husserl, *Philosophie als strenge Wissenschaft*, ed. Eduard Marbach (Hamburg: Meiner, 2009), 87.

political philosophy that reflects on the relationship between philosophy as a rigorous science and a *Weltanschauung* (i.e., opinions or beliefs), as an ancient philosopher like Socrates or other premodern philosophers would have done. Even though the way in which Husserl describes philosophy as a rigorous science should imply a reflection on the inevitable conflict in which philosophy finds itself—caught between *Weltanschauungen*, or the different views of the world, ideologies, and opinions in which politics and societies are rooted. Similarly, the neo-Kantian philosopher Hermann Cohen,²⁸ one of Strauss's most significant contemporary sources, also engaged in a peer-to-peer dialogue with ancient philosophers, although according to Strauss, he failed to recognise that ancient philosophers were much more aware of the constitutional and therefore unavoidable conflict between politics (or religion) and philosophy than modern thinkers.

Strauss's scepticism is at the same time an anti-scepticism; that is, a non-dogmatic scepticism, which consisted of an attitude that treats philosophy as an infinite inquiry and questioning about the truth—one that nevertheless cannot be grasped as a definitive truth. It was influenced and/or inspired by Husserl's distinction between philosophy as a rigorous science and a *Weltanschauung*, as well as by Cohen's original interpretation of critical idealism. If we are correct, we may conclude that from these two very different contemporary philosophers, Strauss learned to engage with ancient and premodern thinkers who better understood the first and fundamental problem of philosophy: freedom, or, as Spinoza would have put it, the lack of freedom within various societies.

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28 For Cohen, there was no difference between the doctrine of Plato and that of Socrates; According to Strauss this fact prevented Cohen from seeing the inevitable conflict between philosophy and politics: see Strauss, *Jerusalem and Athens: Some Preliminary Reflections* (New York: City College, 1967). Strauss refers to Cohen's essay "Das Soziale Ideal bei Plato und den Propheten" (1916), in Cohen, *Hermann Cohens Jüdische Schriften*, ed. Bruno Strauss, intro. by Franz Rosenzweig (Berlin: Schwetschke, 1924), 1:306–330, and Hermann Cohen, *Werke, Band 17: Kleinere Schriften VI, 1916–1918*, ed. Helmut Holzhey, Julius H. Schoeps, and Hartwig Wiedebach (Hildesheim: Olms, 2002).

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Gershom Scholem's Unpublished Notes on Isaac Luria and the Question of Pantheism

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Abstract

This article contains the first edition of Gershom Scholem's unpublished German notes on Isaac Luria's concept of creation. This early analysis of the possibility of pantheistic thought in the kabbalistic tradition provides valuable insights into Scholem's reconstruction of Lurianic teachings, particularly concerning their potential pantheistic dimensions. The authors trace the development of Scholem's ideas from his early years, with special attention to his contributions to *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. This study demonstrates how Scholem's German notes facilitate a biographical understanding of his efforts to reconcile pantheism with a theistic interpretation of Lurianic Kabbalah. The contextualisation of the edited notes offers a fresh perspective on Scholem's meticulous scholarly work on Lurianic Kabbalah and illuminates his nuanced evaluation of the complex and influential role of pantheism in the history of Jewish mysticism.

Keywords

Gershom Scholem – Lurianic Kabbalah – pantheism controversy – German Enlightenment – theism – Scholem Archive

1 Introduction

One of the main disputes that Gershom Scholem regarded as crucial to understanding the history of Jewish mysticism was the so-called pantheism controversy.¹ This dispute began during the height of the Enlightenment movement in Germany and involved the most eminent thinkers of that time, and its implications reached until Leo Strauss's revival of Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi's argument against Moses Mendelssohn in the 1920s.² The connection to Kabbalah, however, draws in the earlier history of metaphysics, whose interaction with Jewish mysticism Scholem had attempted to reconstruct time and again since publishing his dissertation on the book *Bahir*, although this arguably does not show any sign of such a phenomenological or comparative historical-religious approach.³ This article aims to illustrate Scholem's engagement with the issue

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- 1 Gershom Scholem, "Die Wächtersche Kontroverse über den Spinozismus und ihre Folgen," in *Spinoza in der Frühzeit seiner religiösen Wirkung*, ed. Karlfried Gründer and Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggemann (Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1984), 15–25; Scholem, *Lurianic Kabbalah: Collected Studies by Gershom Scholem* [Hebrew], ed. Daniel Abrams (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2008). Gerold Necker presented a preliminary version of this article at the conference on "Heretical Religiosity and Nihilism" organised by Elke Morlok and David Ohana at the Nietzsche-Haus in Sils Maria, Austria, from 4 to 7 October 2021; the appendix is based on a transcription by Vladislav Slepoy. It goes without saying that the present article is the responsibility of both authors.
 - 2 Frederick C. Beiser, *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 44–126; Brian A. Chance and Lawrence Pasternack, "Rational Faith and the Pantheism Controversy," in *Kant and His German Contemporaries, Volume 2: Aesthetics, History, Politics, and Religion*, ed. Daniel O. Dahlstrom (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 195–214; David Janssens, "The Problem of the Enlightenment: Strauss, Jacobi, and the Pantheism Controversy," *The Review of Metaphysics* 56 (2003): 605–631.
 - 3 The term "gnosis" is not even mentioned in the published part of his dissertation: see Scholem, *Das Buch Bahir. Ein Schriftdenkmal aus der Frühzeit der Kabbala auf Grund der Kritischen Neuausgabe von Gerhard Scholem* (Leipzig: Drugulin, 1923). Considering Scholem's preoccupation with this issue in later times, the missing connection to other religious phenomena in his dissertation is highly conspicuous, as Moshe Idel recently noted in his talk at the conference on "Innovations in Kabbalah Research, in Commemoration of the Fortieth Anniversary of Gershom Scholem's Death" [Hebrew] in Jerusalem on 23 February 2022. One could guess that the lost introduction that accompanied Scholem's translation in his dissertation—and which he later cut out—was based on a phenomenological approach: see his letter to Robert Eisler from the mid-1920s published in Lou H. Silberman, "Scholem to Eisler on the Publication of 'Das Buch Bahir,'" *Studies in Bibliography and Booklore* 16 (1986): 5–12. Silberman suggests that the main part of the "missing introduction" was channelled into Scholem's German entry on "*Bahir*," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, ed. Jakob Klatzkin and Ismar Elbogen, 10 vols. (Berlin: Eschkol, 1928–1934), vol. 3 (1928), cols. 969–979, but this does not explain why he broke his promise that "die fehlende Einleitung [to his already printed translation] u.s.w. wird

of pantheism from his early years until his celebrated Hilda Strook lectures delivered at the Jewish Institute of Religion in New York in 1938 and his classical entries for *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (1971–1972), as well as some reverberations in his later publications. To this end, it will reconstruct his understanding of pantheism and its implications for Judaism. The main topic of this article, however, is an examination of Scholem's unpublished German notes from the Scholem Archive, which are edited in the appendix, in order to illustrate how, when, and on the basis of which sources he threw the relation between Lurianic Kabbalah and pantheism into sharp relief. An overview or comprehensive description of the role of pantheism in the history of Kabbalah would not only go far beyond the scope of this article,⁴ but would also require us to scrutinise the not inconsiderable number of scholarly discussions, essays, and studies on this topic. We do not aim to explore the concepts in terms of the *Historical Dictionary of Philosophy* or the companion piece for Kabbalah that we might desire, but rather to contextualise the way in which pantheism was a key driving factor for (the young) Gershom Scholem. Ultimately, our contribution invites the reader to reconsider Scholem's approach to Lurianic Kabbalah based on our findings, which we present with due modesty.

When it comes to the issue of pantheism, two names are inevitably bound to the history of philosophy on the one hand and to German cultural history on the other. One might expect that Scholem would have focused on the works of both in his years of study before leaving for Jerusalem in 1923. However, in March 1918, Scholem, then twenty years old, noted in his diary: "There are exceedingly important things I still don't know, nor will I anytime soon. Among these are Goethe and Spinoza." About ten days later, he changed his mind, thanks to Grete Brauer, the sister of his friend Erich, and wrote: "Today a miracle happened. For the first time in my life, I longed to read Goethe. This too is a consequence of Grete's letters. Now I want to read Goethe's letters." Apparently,

selbstverständlich gedruckt bei uns" (Scholem's emphasis) and made sure that no copy of this early analysis would remain (Silberman, "Scholem to Eisler," 10–11).

4 Among the studies that could be mentioned in this context (though they are not discussed in the present article) are Mark Verman, "Pantheism and Acosmism in the Kabbalah," *Studia Mystica* 10 (1987): 25–37, and Moshe Idel, "Deus sive natura—The Metamorphosis of a Dictum from Maimonides to Spinoza," in *Maimonides and the Sciences*, ed. Robert S. Cohen and Hillel Levine (Dordrecht: Springer, 2000), 87–110; see also Cristina Ciucu, "Kabbalistic Pan(en)theism: Neoplatonic Philosophy and Mystical Practice," in *The Oxford Handbook of Jewish Philosophy*, ed. Yitzhak Melamed and Paul Franks (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming) and Elliot R. Wolfson, *Open Secret: Postmessianic Messianism and the Mystical Revision of Menahem Mendel Schneerson* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 66–129 and 338.

this miracle did not last long,⁵ since the only statement that he considered valuable during these years was Goethe's maxim that one should "not search behind the phenomena, for the phenomena themselves are the teaching [Lehre]," on which he commented: "Very good. *Science*, however, they are *not*. The Teaching is a religious phenomenon. [...] Goethe's statement is true mysticism."⁶ It took Scholem even longer to find his way to Spinoza. In fact, he appreciated Leo Strauss's approach in his *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, which appeared in German in 1930. However, Scholem himself turned late to "the old heretic" [dem alten Ketzler], as he called Spinoza in a letter to Strauss,⁷ only doing so in 1974, in his introduction to Friedrich Häussermann's German translation of Christian Knorr von Rosenroth's Latin paraphrase of Isaac Aboab's *Ša'ar ha-Šamayim*, a Hebrew rendering of Abraham Cohen de Herrera's Spanish treatise *Puerta del cielo*.⁸ Four years later, in 1978, Scholem's slightly extended Hebrew version of this introduction was published as a separate book by the Bialik Institute in Jerusalem.⁹ The relationship between Herrera and Spinoza still formed the core of Scholem's explanation of how Lurianic Kabbalah came to attract the attention of German idealist philosophers. In particular, he noted the impact of Johann Georg Wachter's Janus-faced elaboration of Herrera's

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- 5 Diary, 26 March 1918: "Goethe spielt in meinem Leben keine Rolle, auch nicht in dem Sinne, den Goethe meinte, als er zu Eckermann sagte, Kant habe auf ihn (Eckermann) gewirkt, auch ohne daß er ihn läse" (see Gershom Scholem, *Tagebücher nebst Aufsätzen und Entwürfen bis 1923. 2. Halbband: 1917–1923*, ed. Karlfried Gründer and Friedrich Niewöhner [Frankfurt am Main: Jüdischer Verlag, 2000], 162).
- 6 Diary, 19 June 1919: "Sehr gut. Aber *nicht* sind sie die *Wissenschaft*. Die Lehre ist ein religiöses Phänomen. [...] Goethes Satz ist wahre Mystik" (see Scholem, *Tagebücher*, 457). Goethe: "Das Höchste wäre: zu begreifen, dass alles Faktische schon Theorie ist. Die Bläue des Himmels offenbart uns das Grundgesetz der Chromatik. Man suche nur nichts hinter den Phänomenen: sie selbst sind die Lehre. In den Wissenschaften ist viel Gewisses, sobald man sich von der Ausnahme nicht irremachen läßt und die Probleme zu ehren weiß" (see Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Maximen und Reflexionen: Text der Ausgabe von 1907*, ed. Max Hecker [Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 2003], 116 [N° 575]; see also Goethe, *Sprüche in Prosa: Sämtliche Maximen und Reflexionen*, ed. Harald Fricke [Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 2005], 57 [N° 1308]).
- 7 Gershom Scholem, *Briefe 2: 1948–1970*, ed. Thomas Sparr (Munich: Beck, 1995), 86 (N° 57, 13.12.1962); cf. also Leo Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, trans. Elsa Sinclair (New York: Schocken, 1965) (and see the foreword about the difficult times for writers in Germany in the years 1925 to 1928). For the English translation, see Gershom Scholem, *A Life in Letters: 1914–1982*, ed. and trans. Anthony D. Skinner (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 388.
- 8 Gershom Scholem, "Abraham Cohen Herrera—Leben, Werk und Wirkung," in Abraham Cohen Herrera, *Das Buch שער השמיים oder Pforte des Himmels*, trans. Friedrich Häussermann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974), 7–67.
- 9 Gershom Scholem, *Avraham Cohen Herrera: Ba'al 'Ša'ar ha-Šamayim': Hayyaw, Yeširato we-Hašpa'ato* (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1978).

work, firstly his *Der Spinozismus im Jüdenthumb, oder die von dem heutigen Jüdenthumb und dessen Geheimen Kabbala Vergötterte Welt* (Amsterdam, 1699), and secondly, performing a *volte-face*, in his *Elucidarius Cabalisticus* (Halle an der Saale [allegedly Rome], 1706), which confirms Kabbalah's consistency with Spinoza without the accusation of pantheism, but rather applauds the fact that both drew a distinction between the infinite divine substance and its creation, the world. In the 1978 Hebrew version, Scholem added Johann Gottlieb Buhle's negative judgement of Herrera in *Geschichte der neuern Philosophie* (Göttingen, 1800), following the philosophical historiographies of Jacob Brucker and Dietrich Tiedemann. All three of them had been studied by the era's geniuses, *gedoley ha-dor*, as Scholem notes, including Goethe, who read Buhle's book in March 1809.¹⁰

It comes as no surprise that Scholem, despite his unsuccessful attempt to read Spinoza, had already discussed the significance of pantheism in his early notes. When Gerda Goldberg, the later wife of Ḥayyim Arlosoroff, who described herself as an atheist,¹¹ asked Scholem to explore his philosophy in July 1917, he merely offered his understanding of Torah. Scholem identified Torah with Teaching [Lehre] and saw it as “the epitome [Inbegriff] of religious traditions of Jewry,”¹² “the principle upon which the orders of things are arranged,”¹³ which is ultimately “the language of God.”¹⁴ In addition, he confessed to Gerda that his relationship to God was not based on “belief” [Glaube] in the Christian sense of the word. On the contrary, he declared: “I have no taste for pantheism, which goes completely against my principles—indeed, I reject it absolutely. Requirement¹⁵ as well as self-denial vanish in a world that is divine, and the intense (a-zionist) life is precisely in line with the sphere of

10 In a footnote, he refers to volume 9 of Erich Trunz's new edition of Goethe's collected works (Goethe, *Werke. Hamburger Ausgabe. Band 9: Autobiographische Schriften 1*, ed. Erich Trunz [Hamburg: Christian Wegner, 1955], 719 [sic, corr.: 159]). Goethe borrowed the book from the ducal library on 25 March: see Karin Schutjer, “Goethe's Kabbalistic Cosmology,” *Colloquia Germanica* 39 (2006): 22.

11 Goldberg only affirmed “the law of things,” regarding the Torah as “a book of laws that gives state and private norms of behavior to the people” (quoted in Marina Cavarocchi Arbib, “Gershom Scholem: Judaism and Philosophy. Stages in a *Bildungsprozess*,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 8 [2001]: 171).

12 “Inbegriff der religiösen Überlieferungen der Judenheit” (Gershom Scholem, *Briefe 1: 1914–1947*, ed. Itta Shedletzky [Munich: Beck, 1994], 89).

13 “Das Prinzip, nach dem die Ordnungen der Dinge gestaltet sind” (Scholem, *Briefe 1*, 89).

14 “Nach der Ansicht des Judentums nun ist dies[es] Prinzip als Sprache Gottes auch, und sogar in besonderer Weise, in den Überlieferungen der Menschen erkennbar” (Scholem, *Briefe 1*, 89).

15 “Dass es mir vielmehr darauf ankommt, ob die Thora bejaht wird, also ein Gesetz, eine Forderung als metaphysisch begründet in unser Leben aufgenommen wird” (Scholem, *Briefe 1*, 89).

pantheism.”¹⁶ The crucial question, therefore, was not the supposed denial or affirmation of God, but rather how to recognise the “spiritual essence of things” [das geistige Wesen der Dinge], to which Scholem applies the category of “order of creation.” Accordingly, it is imperative not to believe in God, but rather to accept the idea that being is centrally structured; in other words, to accept the Torah, or at least Scholem’s vision of it. To be sure, no-one knows the centre of this order, which he considers to be only the starting point of a possible approach to God. However, he makes it very clear that for him, that centre is Zion.¹⁷

Hence, we can record firstly that Scholem’s view of “the order of creation” is incommensurable with pantheism, the possibility of recognising God in terms of his relationship to the world notwithstanding, and secondly that Scholem’s ethical concept, which he defines in relation to the biblical requirement of holiness,¹⁸ excludes living out freedom in a peripheral, non-Zionist way. Before analysing Scholem’s approach to Kabbalah in relation to pantheism—which has already been discussed in an article by his disciple Joseph Ben-Shlomo,¹⁹ but which will now be presented in the light of unpublished lecture notes found in the Scholem Archive—it will first be appropriate to clarify the meaning of the philosophical terminology in question, as far as Scholem may have understood it in his youth.

The Latin term *pantheismus* emerged at the end of the seventeenth century in *De spatio reali seu ente infinito*, which was written by Joseph Raphson (1648–1715), a fellow countryman of Isaac Newton, in the wake of the early reception of Christian Knorr von Rosenroth’s *Kabbala denudata* in England.²⁰

16 Scholem, *Briefe 1*, 90 (Brief 32 [6 August 1917]): “Mir liegt meiner ganzen Auffassung nach der Pantheismus gar nicht, ich verwerfe ihn sogar *absolut*. Mit der Göttlichkeit der Welt schwinden Forderung und Verzicht, und eben das intensive (unzionistische) Leben entspricht ganz der Sphäre des Pantheismus.” Cavarocchi Arbib, “Gershom Scholem,” translates only the second sentence: “With the world being divine, [moral] requirement and renunciation vanish and just the intense [anti-Zionist] life completely corresponds to the sphere of pantheism” (185).

17 Scholem, *Briefe 1*, 90.

18 Cf. Scholem’s letter to Aharon Heller, Scholem, *Briefe 1*, 71 (Brief 26 [9 July 1917]): realising Zionism means realising Torah according to Exod 19:6 (“And you shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation”).

19 Joseph Ben-Shlomo, “Gershom Scholem on Pantheism in the Kabbala,” in *Gershom Scholem: The Man and His Work*, ed. Paul Mendes-Flohr (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1994), 56–72, and cf. the longer but not substantially different Hebrew version, Ben-Shlomo, “On Pantheism in Jewish Mysticism According to Gershom Scholem and His Critics” [Hebrew], *Da’at 50/52* (2003): 461–481.

20 See Stephen H. Daniel, “Toland’s Semantic Pantheism,” in *John Toland’s Christianity Not Mysterious: Text, Associated Works and Critical Essays*, ed. Philip McGuinness, Alan Harrison, and Richard Kearney (Dublin: Lilliput, 1997), 312. See also Gary Suttle, “Raphson,

It was soon adapted by John Toland, who was the person first to call himself a pantheist and whose definition in *Origines Judaicae* (Den Haag, 1709) determined the term's later usage: "There is no divine entity separate from matter and this world, and nature itself, that is, the entirety of things, is the only and highest God."²¹ In the course of the eighteenth century, the new term was growing in popularity, and it either replaced or supplemented what was previously called "Spinozism." As a matter of fact, Spinoza's concept of "substance" comes as close to the coinage of "pantheism" as his adversaries could have wished, for it actually signifies a divine being; namely, "what is in itself and is conceived through itself,"²² as Spinoza defines the self-causing activity of nature (known by the scholastic term *natura naturans*, in distinction to all the modes of God's attributes, or *natura naturata*). Of course, Spinoza's most popular phrase, *Deus sive natura*, has been understood as a battle cry against the monotheistic *creatio ex nihilo*. Given that the reception of Spinoza's work was mainly polemical in nature, pantheism became synonymous with atheism—presumably implying that when allowing for an exclusively immanent understanding, the transcendent God dissolves, *horribile dictu*, into nothingness. This is the reason why the so-called Spinozism controversy after Lessing's death was followed by the atheism controversy after Mendelssohn's death, which found its somewhat tragic hero in Johann Gottlob Fichte, the self-appointed "first" philosopher of "freedom," who was forced to resign his professorial position at Jena University.²³ His opponent, Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi—whose affiliation with Jewish mystical concepts Scholem never tired of recalling²⁴—introduced the term "nihilism" to

Joseph," in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, ed. Bron Taylor (London: Continuum, 2008), 2:1341–1342; Martin Bollacher, "Pantheismus," in *Online Encyclopedia Philosophy of Nature/Online Lexikon Naturphilosophie*, ed. Thomas Kirchhoff (2020), <https://doi.org/10.11588/oe pn.2020.0.75960>. Raphson distinguishes between two forms: 1) "panhylists," who believe that God comprises matter and that everything derives from matter, the ultimate reality; and, 2) "pantheists," who believe that God comprises space as the ultimate reality ("a certain universal substance, material as well as intelligent, that fashions all things that exist out of its own essence"; Raphson, *De spatio reali*, translated in Suttle, "Raphson," 1342). Cf. also Christoph Schulte, *Zimzum: Gott und Weltursprung* (Berlin: Jüdischer Verlag, 2014), 166–168.

21 Quoted in Benjamin Lazier, *God Interrupted: Heresy and the European Imagination between the World Wars* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 73–74.

22 Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics*, trans. Robert H.M. Elwes (New York: Dover, 1955), 45.

23 Fichte described his philosophy as "the first system of freedom"; cf. Allen W. Wood, *The Free Development of Each: Studies on Freedom, Right, and Ethics in Classical German Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 165.

24 See David Biale, "Gershom Scholem on Nihilism and Anarchism," *Rethinking History* 19 (2015): 61–71.

oppose Fichte's subjective idealism,²⁵ which in his eyes was nothing but "inverted Spinozism,"²⁶ garnished with amoral egoism.²⁷ Eventually, the philosopher Karl Friedrich Krause, who based himself on Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling's *Philosophy of Nature* as well as on his *Philosophical Inquiries into the Essence of Human Freedom*, coined the term "panentheism" in his lectures on "The System of Philosophy" in 1828.²⁸ Thus, a new concept was born, maintaining, by its very etymology, a distinction between an all-inclusive essence and the universe contained therein, where, according to Krause, humankind and the world itself constitute a single organism.²⁹ This understanding naturally filled the definitional gap resulting from deifying nature instead of presuming a divine unity of nature. Hence, the door was open to an affiliation between neo-Platonic and mystic thought, an approach taken by Wilhelm Dilthey, one of Scholem's early favourites.³⁰ In his *Introduction to the Humanities*, he stated that the so-called speculative theology evolved from mysticism.³¹ This, in his view, was due to the continuous influence of panentheism, which played a

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- 25 Cf. Jacobi's letter of 6 March 1799 in Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, *Brief über den Nihilismus*, ed. Ives Radrizzani, trans. Perihan Göceri (Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 2018); cf. also Walter Jaeschke, ed., *Transzendentalphilosophie und Spekulation: Der Streit um die Gestalt einer Ersten Philosophie (1799–1807). Quellenband* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1993), 3–43 (Jacobi an Fichte [Sendschreiben] [1799]).
- 26 Cf. George di Giovanni and Paolo Livieri, "Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2020 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2020/entries/friedrich-jacobi/>.
- 27 In 1811, accusing both Schelling and Hegel, Jacobi, who called for a belief in a living, external God, initiated the third stage of the pantheism controversy with his "Of Divine Things and Their Revelation."
- 28 However, Novalis wrote as early as 1798: "The time will come when political entheism and pantheism are bound together in mutual interaction"; see Ulrich Dierse and Winfried Schröder, "Pantheismus," in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, ed. Joachim Ritter, Karlfried Gründer, and Gottfried Gabriel (Basel: Schwabe, 1989), 59–63, <https://doi.org/10.24894/HWPh.2922>.
- 29 Karl Christian Friedrich Krause, *Das Urbild der Menschheit: Ein Versuch* (Dresden, 1811), 287: "Die Menschheit des Weltalls ist ein organisches Wesen in Gott, als das eine Vereinwesen der Vernunft und der Natur, von Gott ewig geschaffen."
- 30 Scholem held him in high esteem: see "Amtliches Lehrgedicht der Philosophischen Fakultät der Haupt- u. Saats-Universität Muri," in Scholem, *Tagebücher*, 307 ("nur Diltheys Name rettet D / er ist dessen Deo-Dizee"), and cf. the motto in Scholem's *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah, 1626–1676*, trans. Raphael J. Zwi Werblowsky (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973), which is quoted from the correspondence of Count Paul Yorck von Wartenburg and Wilhelm Dilthey ("Paradox is a characteristic of truth. What *communis opinio* has of truth is surely no more than an elementary deposit of generalizing partial understanding, related to truth even as sulphurous fumes are to lightning").
- 31 Wilhelm Dilthey, *Gesammelte Schriften, Band 2: Weltanschauung und Analyse des Men-*

key role in understanding religious concepts such as revelation, inspiration, or grace long before the modern “pantheism” appeared on the European stage in Giordano Bruno’s time, stimulated by new knowledge about the universe.³² Of course, this general sketch could be illustrated in more detail; in the present context, however, it is sufficient to refer to the second volume of Franz Joseph Molitor’s *Philosophie der Geschichte oder über die Tradition*, another favourite of the young Scholem, which expounds, preceding an explanation of theological concepts on the basis of kabbalistic principles, a sharp demarcation between materialism and pantheism.

2 Scholem’s Unpublished Notes on Isaac Luria Concerning “The Question of Pantheism”

Among Scholem’s unpublished material from the Scholem Archive are twelve handwritten pages entitled “Die Pantheismusfrage bei Lurja—Vital” [The Question of Pantheism in (the Thought of) Luria (and) Vital] (see appendix),³³ written in the German *Kurrent* script. Although there is no indication of when or where this manuscript was written, the handwriting and, as will be shown, the content of the paper allow us to date it to the 1930s. Scholem numbered the first ten pages of the manuscript. Half of the text is divided into eight paragraphs followed by a collection of additional findings, and both parts are written in a rather loose, elliptical style.

At first sight, it may be surprising that Scholem connected pantheism to Lurianic Kabbalah at all, since he himself frequently stressed that the teaching of God’s self-contraction (*šimšum*) in order to leave space for the creation of the world was a highly theistic concept, and, in fact, the only serious attempt to allow for the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*.³⁴ It is worth considering, however,

schen seit Renaissance und Reformation, 11th ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991), 77.

32 Dilthey, *Gesammelte Schriften* 2, 326, 330, 331.

33 Jerusalem, National Library of Israel, Gershom Scholem Archive ARC. 4* 1599 / 03 / 105. For a list of unpublished material from the Scholem Archive concerning Lurianic Kabbalah, see Daniel Abrams, “Introduction” [Hebrew], in Scholem, *Lurianic Kabbalah*, 15–16.

34 As “the quintessential expression of God’s absolute freedom in the act of creation”; see Ben-Shlomo, “Gershom Scholem,” 65. Cf. also Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken, 1961), 261–262: “This paradox of *Tsimtsum*—as Jacob Emden said—is the only serious attempt ever made to give substance to the idea of Creation out of Nothing [...]. The theory of *Tsimtsum* also acted as a counterpoise to the pantheism which some scholars think is implied by the theory of emanation.” See also Scholem, *Über*

that some trends in Lurianic Kabbalah may have inspired the pantheistic-sounding statements made by Hasidic thinkers, though their “acosmic” tendencies are not synonymous with old-school pantheism.³⁵ Scholem even regarded some radical formulations, in particular those of the Maggid of Mezeritch, the Beshṭ’s disciple Dov Baer, to come close to the concept of *unio mystica*, but not without absolving the Maggid from adhering to a pantheistic worldview.

In the following, we offer an English translation of selected passages from Scholem’s *Pantheismusfrage*, followed by an explanation. The first paragraph reads:

In my opinion, Vital’s statements are completely clear and accurate in themselves, if one interprets them from the correct vantage point and also does not disregard the testimony of Ibn Tabul, who transmits L[uria’s] authentic doctrine in accordance with V[ital]. It is, however, unquestionable that in numerous places in *‘Eṣ Hayyim*, Vital chose formulations that come closer to Cordovero’s point of view, especially if interpreted vaguely or from the wrong point of view. As a result, Luria’s teaching fell between the two extremes, both based on Vital!³⁶

Scholem considers the difficulty of reconstructing Luria’s own view, since his disciples offered different interpretations of his oral teaching.³⁷ Apparently,

einige Grundbegriffe des Judentums (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), 87: “Die Möglichkeit einer theistischen Konzeption von Schöpfung” (regarding the continuous act of *šimšum*).

35 Cf. Gershom Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality* (New York: Schocken, 1971), 224, regarding the “veil of Maya” as denial of “real existence,” and further: “For if one looks closely into the context of such [apparently pantheistic] passages, all that remains of the high-flown formulas is always the omnipresence of the divine influx, *shefa*, and *hiyut*, the vitalizing power, instead of that of the divine substance.” For this passage, see Ben-Shlomo, “Gershom Scholem,” 67.

36 “§1 Die Äußerungen Vitals sind zwar m.E. an sich völlig klar und genau, wenn man sie vom richtigen Punkt her interpretiert, und auch die Bezeugung Ibn Tabuls, der die authentische Lehre L’s mit V. übereinstimmend wiedergibt, nicht außer Acht läßt. Aber zweifellos hat Vital an mehreren Stellen des *Ez Chajim Formulierungen* gewählt, die den Standpunkt Cordoveros näherkommen, besonders wenn sie unscharf oder vom falschen Ort aus interpretiert werden. So ist dann in der Folge wirklich die Lehre Lurias zwischen die beiden Extreme gekommen, die sich beide auf Vital berufen!” (appendix, 1 [the page numbers refer to the manuscript]).

37 Scholem’s article “The Authentic Kabbalistic Writings of R. Isaac Luria” [Hebrew], in Scholem, *Lurianic Kabbalah*, 240–261, summarises that the evidence for kabbalistic texts written by Luria himself is mainly found in his so-to-speak “pre-Lurianic” zoharic commentaries, which betray the strong influence of Cordovero. For a comprehensive overview, see Joseph Avivi, *Kabbala Luriana* (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 2008), 3:1109–1129.

Ḥayyim Vital and Josef ibn Tabul converge at times on what Scholem reconstructed as Luria's authentic view, which differed from that of Cordovero, whom he classified as the "most systematic exponent of pantheistic tendencies."³⁸ Cordovero's position culminated, however, in the *panentheistic* statement that "God is all that exists, but not all that exists is God," which Scholem quoted in his subchapter "Theologie der Kabbala und Pantheismus" in the German edition of *Encyclopaedia Judaica*.³⁹

In the following, Scholem explains the two extremes. The first is a "radical theistic" view as found in Immanuel Hai Ricchi's *Yošer Levav*,⁴⁰ according to which after *šimšum*, there is an unbridgeable gap separating creation and "the very personally conceived *En Sof*" [dem ganz persönlich gedachten *En Sof*].⁴¹ In fact, the uppermost divine manifestation within *Adam Qadmon* is closer to the "lowliest worm than to *En Sof*" [der oberste *iggul* steht dem untersten Wurm im Prozeß näher als jener dem *En Sof*].⁴² Scholem adapted this telling comparison once again in his entry on "The Kabbalah and Pantheism" in the English *Encyclopaedia Judaica* in 1971.⁴³ The second view that Scholem mentions is the "radical pantheistic teaching" found in the writings of the Chabad movement, which wholeheartedly followed the Cordoverean theory of the all-encompassing substance.⁴⁴

38 Scholem, "Cordovero, Moses," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica* ed. Klatzkin and Elbogen, vol. 9 (1932), col. 701. See also Scholem, "Vulliauds Übersetzung des Sifra Di-Zeniutha aus dem Sohar und andere neuere Literatur zur Geschichte der Kabbala," *Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums* 75 (1931): 347–362, 444–455, esp. 452–455. See also Scholem, "Zu Mose Cordovero," *Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums* 76 (1932): 167–171 (answering Samuel Horodezky's critical remarks on page 167–168. against Scholem's review of Horodezky's book on Cordovero). Here, Scholem adds a reference to a possible influence from Sufism on Cordovero (170). Cf. Scholem, "Isaac Luria and His School" [Hebrew], in Scholem, *Lurianic Kabbalah*, 210–211.

39 Cf. Ada Rapoport-Albert, "Gershom Scholem," *The American Scholar* 54 (1985): 544. See also Ben-Shlomo, "Gershom Scholem," 62 ("most consistent expression of the pantheistic tendency").

40 See appendix, 1, referring to the 1742 Amsterdam edition, fol. 11^b.

41 See appendix, 1.

42 Concerning the linear revelation of God's light, *qaw* (*ha-yašar*), see Scholem's footnote on Ricchi's *Yošer Levav*, fol. 11^b: "*qaw* is part of the creation [erfährt die Schöpfung], but does not create it!" (appendix, 1).

43 "Even the highest circle of the *Sefirot* of the *Adam Kadmon*, they argued, was closer to the lowliest worm than to *En-Sof*" (Gershom Scholem, "The Kabbalah and Pantheism," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, ed. Cecil Roth and Geoffrey Wigoder, 16 vols. [New York: Macmillan, 1971–1972], vol. 10 (1971), col. 606; cf. Scholem, "The Kabbalah and Pantheism," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica: Second Edition*, ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik [Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007], 11:651).

44 The notion of Chabad does not appear in Scholem's entries on pantheism, but rather in the German subchapter on the Lurianic theory of creation (Scholem, "Cordovero, Moses,"

Next, Scholem provides a detailed analysis of Vital's *Gate of the Four Worlds*. This work offers a highly developed exposition of the emanation process, which is blocked by a "curtain" [*masakh*] that causes a "sliding back" [Rückgleiten] of the divine substance to one side of it, but a radiation into the lower three worlds as "sparks of power" [Kraftfunken], "lights" [*orot*] emitted from the divine substance, to the other.⁴⁵ Hence, the purpose of the curtain is separation. The same applies to Ibn Tabul's definition of the light of the "garments" of *En Sof* in the World of Emanation, *Ašilut*, as well as to Vital's quotation from a text addressed to his brother-in-law, Gedalyah ha-Levi.⁴⁶ Scholem is convinced that these three arguments represent Luria's original idea. Nevertheless, he detects possible pantheistic implications, in particular concerning the first divine impulse, the ray of light, and the concept of *Adam Qadmon*:

- a) In a certain sense, the emission of the ray, the קו, overrides the *kenoma*⁴⁷ generated through *šimšum*. This resembles שתף מדה הדין [מדת] עם מ[דת] in the Midrash,⁴⁸ as all kabbalists have also noted. The positive side of the cosmogonical process harks back to the קו [the ray of *En Sof*], the negative to the צמצום. This creates an atmosphere that eases the way for pantheistic tendencies.
- b) The question is: Is the *Adam Qadmon* God or not? אל מתגלה [the expression "manifest God"] is acceptable—but God? Is there not strong evidence for this? (the ostensible גשמיות [corporeality]; the gematria of אד"ם = הו"ה, etc.)⁴⁹ Vital considers him to be [God].⁵⁰

col. 694). Scholem refers there to Isaac Misses, who based his book on Jewish esotericism, *Darstellung und kritische Beleuchtung der jüdischen Geheimlehre* (Cracow, 1862), on the writings of Chabad.

45 Appendix, 2.

46 *Eš Ḥayyim* 47:6 (ed. Yehuda Švi Brandwein [Jerusalem, 1987/1988], 367). Scholem used the Warsaw edition: see appendix, footnote 5.

47 Greek term for "emptiness," the phenomena of the lower world, in contrast to the *pleroma* [fullness], corresponding to the Platonic world of ideas (following Valentinus's gnostic system).

48 E.g., *Gen. Rab.* 12:15 ("he joined the attribute of mercy with the attribute of judgment and created the world") or *Pesiq. Rab.* 40, quoted, e.g., in Yehuda Ḥayyaṭ's commentary on *Ma'arekhet ha-Elohut*, chapter 8; and cf. *Pardes Rimmonim* 12:2.

49 The divine name of forty-five according to *milluy* (counting the numerical value of each letter of the Tetragrammaton written in the "filled out" form; see Lawrence Fine, *Physician of the Soul, Healer of the Cosmos: Isaac Luria and His Kabbalistic Fellowship* [Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003], 170 and 276), when filling out the letters with *Alefs*, corresponds to the numerical value of Adam.

50 Appendix, 3:

"§ 6 Nun gibt es natürlich auch noch andere Gesichtspunkte.

As an additional third argument, Scholem notes the ambiguity of the term *hitlabbešut* [clothing], exemplified by a sharpened phrasing in Vital's *Ša'ar ha-Haqdamot* [The Gate of Principles], which—after the text refrains from distinguishing between the essence of *Ašilut* and the other three worlds, *ber'ah*, *yeširah*, and *'asiyyah*—reads as follows:⁵¹

[And when the illuminated (kabbalist) opens the eyes of his intellect, he understands] how all of the worlds share a single mode of being as garments of *En Sof*, so that *En Sof* clothes itself in them and surrounds [sovev] them and nothing goes beyond it. Everything can be seen under one aspect and all the worlds are bound to the Emanator. And this shall suffice, since [which means: although caution decrees that] it would be inadvisable to reveal more of this matter (*Haqdamat* 4).

This quotation appears again, in English translation, in Scholem's entry on Kabbalah and pantheism in the first edition of *Encyclopaedia Judaica*.⁵² However, in his German notes, he added:

In my opinion, this mysterious ending actually points to a different Vital, one who has not yet forgotten that he is Cordovero's disciple and one who secretly cherishes his [former teacher's] conception of God. The other theory is not his theory, but Luria's. These lines, however, could not have been written verbatim by L[uria], but only by Cordovero.⁵³

a) In gewissem Sinne ist die Aussendung des Strahls, des קו, ja eine Aufhebung des im Zimzum erzeugten Kenoma. Es ist hier etwas von הדין 'עם [מדת] עתף שמת' הרחמ' עם [מדת] הרחמ' עתף שמת des Midrasch, wie auch alle Kabbalisten gemerkt haben. Die positive Seite der Weltentstehung geht auf den קו zurück, die negative auf den צמצום. Das erleichtert pantheist. Neigungen stimmungsmäßig den Weg.

b) Die Frage: Ist der Adam Kadmon Gott oder nicht? אל מתגלה אלוס meinerwegen—aber doch Gott? Spricht nicht ungeheuer viel dafür? (d. scheinbare גשמיות; die Gematrie אד"ם = אד"ה usw.) Vital hält ihn dafür (Scholem's emphasis)."

51 Ḥayyim Vital, *Ša'ar ha-Haqdamot* (Jerusalem, 1850; repr. 1909), fol. 7^a (cf. Vital, *Ša'ar ha-Haqdamot: Kol Kitvey ha-Ari*, vol. 5, ed. Yehuda Švi Brandwein [Jerusalem, 1987], 17):

איך כל העולמות בחינה אחת לבוש' הא"ס והאין סוף מתלבש בתוכם וגם טובב עליהם ומחיה את כלם ואין דבר יוצא ממנו והכל בחינה אחת וכל העולמות נקשרים במאציל ודי בזה כי אין ראוי לגלות יותר בענין דרוש זה.

52 Scholem, "The Kabbalah," col. 606.

53 Appendix, 4: "Dieser so mysteriöse Schluss deutet m.E. wirklich auf einen anderen Vital, einen der noch nicht vergessen hat, daß er Schüler Cordoveros ist, und der dessen Gottesauffassung [noch] im Geheimen mit sich trägt. Die andere Theorie ist nicht seine, sondern die Lurias, aber diese Zeilen hätte wörtlich nicht L. sondern Cordovero schreiben können."

In Scholem's eyes, therefore, this phrasing is not in line with Luria, but could have been written word-for-word by Cordovero. In contrast to this, Scholem concludes from a thorough analysis of the third chapter of Vital's *Ša'arey Qeđušah* [Gates of Holiness], which was intended for a wider audience—in Scholem's words, "for simple-minded people" [für einfache Gemüter]—that Vital had had to change the suspiciously ambiguous terminology that he had used in *'Eš Ḥayyim* in order to present what Scholem calls a "theistic theology." Scholem revealed how ambiguous formulations in *'Eš Ḥayyim* even influenced the text's transmission. At first, he summarised Vital's "basic panentheistic feeling"⁵⁴ [das 'panentheistische' Grundgefühl] by noting that "God is not just to be identified with *En Sof*, but also with the illumination, *ha'arah*, as an all-pervasive effect of the [divine] substance" [auch jene הארה, jener Reflex der Substanz, der überall hindringt, ist Gottheit]. In the appendix to the second volume of Molitor's *Philosophie der Geschichte*, Scholem found a quotation that he suspected to have originated from a Munich manuscript that Molitor had used.⁵⁵ He contrasted the idea of a divine substance being immanent in the emanated worlds with this text: "Precisely the illumination from *En Sof*, but not its substance. And this corresponds to 'He [the Holy One blessed be He] is the place of the world but the world is not His place' [*Gen. Rab.* 68:9], because his substance does not go forth, only his light."⁵⁶

Scholem assumed that this distinction between *En Sof* and the light of *En Sof* was an annotation to Vital's text. While this can be proved to be correct, his suspicion that the text belonged to a Munich manuscript of *'Eš Ḥayyim* cannot be confirmed. We do not know which manuscript of *'Eš Ḥayyim* Molitor used, although almost fifty quotations are listed under this title in Katharina Koch's book about him.⁵⁷ Nevertheless, at least concerning the real source of this short remark, the riddle can be solved. Scholem identified Molitor's introductory German sentence as referring to gate 1, chapter 2 of Vital's *'Eš Ḥayyim*.⁵⁸ However, it in fact paraphrases a statement found in Jacob Šemah's

54 Emphasis ours.

55 Franz Joseph Molitor, *Philosophie der Geschichte oder über die Tradition. Zweiter Theil* (Münster, 1834), 256–257.

56 דוקא הארה [מ]הא"ס אבל לא עצמותו. וזהו הוא מקומו של עולם ואין העולם מקומו כי עצמו אינו מתפשט רק אורו.

57 Forty-seven quotations are listed under the title *'Eš Ḥayyim* in Katharina Koch, *Franz Josef Molitor und die jüdische Tradition* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2006), 211–212. Molitor notes that this quotation belongs to "Etz haChaiim Fol. 13."

58 Molitor writes: "So heißt es in Etz ha Chaiim [...] bei der Stelle: Es zog sich aus Ainsopf (*sic*) eine grade, feine Linie nach der Art eines Canals, darunter ist zu verstehen," and Scholem comments: "[Molitor] found the following in his (Munich?) *'Eš Ḥayyim* text regarding אור א"ס נמשך דרך קו א' בצינור דק."

Oṣrot Ḥayyim and is drawn from an annotation made to this work by Moses Zacuto (ca. 1610–1697)!⁵⁹ This indicates that a strong case against latent pantheistic ambiguities became part and parcel of the spread of Lurianic Kabbalah.

In his additional remarks under the heading “Luria’s ‘Pantheism’—Pure Nonsense!” [“Pantheismus” Lurjas—reiner Unsinn!], Scholem denies any pantheistic trace in Luria’s thought and concludes that he had a clear conception of God’s transcendent relationship to all the worlds.⁶⁰ However, the way in which his teaching was transmitted by Ḥayyim Vital’s reframing of the term “illumination” caused it to be interpreted pantheistically. Ibn Tabul also played a role in obfuscating Luria’s view, as he is the one who can be credited with introducing the concept of a “comprehensive light” [*ha-or ha-meqif*]. Although both lights are essentially divine, this second light seeps down through the “curtain” rather than returning, just as the “inner light” [*ha-or ha-penimi*] does. Despite these extreme expressions, a powerful theistic interpretation accompanied Luria’s reception history before the rise of Hasidism and its new perspectives.⁶¹

59 Curiously, in MS Budapest, Library of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Kaufmann A 197, we find this precise quotation on page 13 (fol. 2^a in the additional Hebrew pagination), and Zacuto’s notes are not found in the margin, but are rather incorporated (in brackets) into the text; unfortunately, this is the only coincidence, and Molitor’s other references are not in line with the pages of the manuscript. The text according to this manuscript reads as follows:

ושם צמצם עצמו אל הסביבות והצדדין ונשאר חלל בנתים (לאו דוקא חלל כי נשאר שם רשימו מן האור אבל לגבי הא”ס נק’ חלל וזה הוא מקומו של עולם ר”ל א”ס ב”ה היה בתחילה במקום העולם שהוא היה ממלא כל החלל, אבל אין העולם מקומו כי אעפ”י שחוזר להתפשט אורו ע”י הקו אינו מקומו כי עצמותו אינו מתפשט רק אורו כדלקמן) ...
והנה כאשר צמצם עצמו אז דרך צד א’ מן החלל העגול הזה (דוקא הארה מן הא”ס אבל לא מעצמותו ב”ה וזהו המשיך ר”ל מאורו בלבד האיר למטה) דרך קו אחד ישר דק כעין צנור א’ אור הנמשך מן הא”ס אל תוך החלל וממלא אותו אבל נשאר מקום פנוי.

Apparently, Molitor combined the two glosses (which is quite understandable, since in the first gloss Zacuto himself refers to the next remark). Annotations by Moses Zacuto, the main kabbalistic authority in Italy in the second half of the seventeenth century, along with those of other kabbalists, were first printed by Yiṣḥaq Ṣaba’ in *Meqom Binah* (Saloniki, 1713) (where the quotations appear on fol. 1^a).

60 These remarks were apparently written at a later date and appear on a separate sheet of paper.

61 With special emphasis presented by Ramḥal, who burned all bridges between the divine *Aṣilut* as God’s manifestation and the other three worlds that God created by his free will.

3 Conclusion

How do Scholem's undated notes fit into the chronology of his writings? It is evident that his entry on Kabbalah and pantheism in the German edition of *Encyclopaedia Judaica* lacks the specific information regarding Lurianic contexts. On the other hand, obvious adaptations from these notes appear in the seventh lecture in *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, which discusses Isaac Luria and his school; for example, Vital's deliberate implementation of theistic terminology in his popular treatise *Ša'arey Qedušah*. It took Scholem thirty years to provide comprehensive information on this subject, including literal quotations of his notes for his entry on Kabbalah in the English *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. It is noteworthy that he described the panentheistic Cordoverean tendencies that he detected in the Lurianic writings as somewhat resistant "germs" that "nourished" later movements. Scholem's personal discomfort with pantheism, which he first expressed in his letter to Gerda Goldberg, resurfaced in his analysis of Lurianic texts. This was the background for his impassioned plea in the seventh of his *Ten Unhistorical Aphorisms on the Kabbalah*, published in 1958:⁶²

The doctrine of emanation is perhaps the true tragedy of Kabbalah (sharing with many forms of mysticism the fate of failing to metamorphose

62 First published in 1958 (Gershom Scholem, "Zehn unhistorische Sätze über Kabbala," in *Geist und Werk: Aus der Werkstatt unserer Autoren zum 75. Geburtstag von Dr. Daniel Brody* [Zürich: Rhein-Verlag, 1958], 209–215); republished in the third volume of his collected essays (Scholem, *Judaica 3: Studien zur jüdischen Mystik* [Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1981]). In 1985, David Biale republished the "Ten Aphorisms" together with an English commentary: see Biale, "Gershom Scholem's Ten Unhistorical Aphorisms on Kabbalah: Text and Commentary," *Modern Judaism* 5 (1985): 67–93; the revised version, published in Biale, *Jewish Culture between Canon and Heresy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2023): 178–203, includes an English translation (p. 194) that differs from ours, which is at times paraphrasical: "Als das eigentliche Unglück der Kabbala darf man vielleicht (wie bei vielen nicht nach Hause gekommenen Formen der Mystik) die Emanationslehre betrachten. Die Einsichten der Kabbalisten betrafen Strukturen des Seienden. Nichts ist verhängnisvoller, als den Zusammenhang dieser Strukturen mit der Emanationslehre zu konfundieren. Diese Konfusion pervertiert ihre aussichtsreichsten Ansätze zugunsten der bequemsten und denkfaulsten aller Theorien. Cordovero wäre als Phänomenologe eher nach Haus gekommen denn als Schüler Plotins. Der Versuch, das Denken der Kabbalisten ohne Benutzung der Emanationslehre aufzubauen (und zu Ende zu denken), wäre die Begleichung der Schuld, die ein echter Schüler Cordoveros auf sich zu nehmen hätte, wenn es einmal einen geben sollte" (83). Cf. Scholem, "Zu Mose Cordovero," 169: "Es wäre eine der fruchtbarsten Aufgaben, der systematisch so interessanten und eindrucksvollen Deduktion Cordoveros bis zu ihren Wurzeln nachzugehen."

into a shape fitting to its roots).⁶³ The kabbalists' profound insights apply to the structures of being. Nothing is more detrimental than confusing the relationship between these structures and the doctrine of emanation. This confusion perverts the most promising kabbalistic approaches in favour of the most easygoing and laziest way of thinking through a theory. Instead of staying among the students of Plotinus, Cordovero could indeed have found his way back home, if he had taken the road of phenomenology. The attempt to conceive (and intellectually to complete) the thinking of the kabbalists without using the doctrine of emanation would be the debt that a true disciple of Cordovero⁶⁴ would have to pay off, if such a disciple were to finally appear.

It is obvious that Scholem had himself in mind when looking for someone to fulfil this task,⁶⁵ whose goal would be "to raise the philosophical antitheses to pantheism to a higher level" [zu einer höheren Ordnung aufzuheben],⁶⁶ as he wrote in his famous birthday letter to Zalman Schocken in 1937.⁶⁷ This relationship, in addition to the palaeographical dating and the quotations and references he used in his later publications—first and foremost in the Hilda Strook lectures, which began in 1938—make a strong case for the view that this was the exact same time when he wrote his remarks on the issue of pantheism in Lurianic Kabbalah.

63 Scholem often used the German idiom "nach Hause kommen," implying here that the doctrine of emanation indicates the unredeemed condition of Kabbalah, left in a state of *tohu*, as it were.

64 Cf. Scholem's remark about Vital, who "has not yet forgotten that he is Cordovero's disciple" (see above, footnote 49).

65 Later, he set his hopes on Joseph Ben-Shlomo, whom he asked to contribute the entry on Cordovero in Roth and Wigoder, *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol. 5 (1971), cols. 967–970 (cf. Joseph Ben-Shlomo, "Cordovero, Moses ben Jacob," in Skolnik and Berenbaum, *Encyclopaedia Judaica: Second Edition*, 5:220–221), although his disciple had proposed a doctoral thesis "contrary to his regarding pantheism." However, in his assessment, Scholem remarked that all arguments could also "support the opposing view" (cf. Ben-Shlomo, "Gershom Scholem," 64n25: "I wish only to add that I have become convinced in the meantime that he was right").

66 Apparently, this means taking a dialectical approach into consideration, because the kabbalistic relationship between God and the world implicates "a continual equivocation between two inherently conflicting views." A radical solution would be to apply the idea of *creatio ex nihilo* to the three lower worlds and to maintain that *Asilut* is not a "world" at all (as did Moses Ḥayyim Luzzatto; cf. Scholem, "The Kabbalah," col. 606).

67 Cf. David Biale, *Gershom Scholem: Kabbalah and Counter-History*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 155.

Appendix⁶⁸

Jerusalem, National Library of Israel, Gershom Scholem Archive ARC. 4* 1599 / 03 / 105.⁶⁹

Editorial remarks

The transcription follows the orthography, emphasis (underlining), and punctuation of the original. A slight adjustment of the punctuation has been applied only to the long Hebrew quotations in order to adapt it to right-aligned writing. Hyphenation at the end of lines will not be retained; editorial hyphenation applied as needed.

<aaa> Scholem's additions

{aaa} Scholem's deletions

??? doubtful reading

[...] editors' additions (if not stated otherwise)

All footnotes are editorial. The only note by Scholem is marked as note 1) and appears on pages 151–152.

Die Pantheismusfrage bei Lurja-Vital⁷⁰

1

§ 1 Die Äußerungen Vitals sind zwar m. E. an sich völlig klar und genau, wenn man sie vom richtigen Punkt her interpretiert, und auch die Bezeugung Ibn Tabuls, der offenbar die authentische Lehre L's [Lurja's] mit V. [Vital] übereinstimmend wiedergibt, nicht außer Acht läßt. Aber zweifellos hat Vital an mehreren Stellen des Ez Chajim Formulierungen gewählt, die dem Standpunkt Coroveros näherkommen, besonders wenn sie unscharf {und} oder vom falschen Ort aus interpretiert werden. So ist dann in der Folge wirklich die Lehre Lurjas zwischen die beiden Extreme gekommen, die sich beide auf Vital berufen!

a) radikal theistische These des לבישׁר לבב¹: Alles nach dem Zimzum ist Creatur, eine echte Wesenseinheit mit dem ganz persönlich gedachten En Sof besteht für nichts nach dem Z. [Zimzum] mehr, und der oberste עגול steht dem untersten Wurm im Prozeß näher als jener dem En Sof. Hier d. [das] Moment

68 We wish to thank Michela Torbidoni for her ongoing advice and support in editing and formatting this paper.

69 The watermarks of the manuscript show the following text: "EXTRA STRONG MADE IN FINLAND." The paper was produced in the second half of the 1920s, cf. the watermark dated 1928 at <https://www.huuto.net/kohteet/kolme-tyotodistusta-v1926-1928-ja-1930/607847979>, and see *China Filatelie* (Bulletin of the Studiegroep China Filatelie, <https://www.chinafilatelie.nl/pages/bulletins.html>) 3, no. 1 (1971): 18–19.

70 The first page of the manuscript is not numbered.

der Schwierigkeit, in den unendlichen <פרצופים> בחינות etc. nicht den lebendigen Gott zu verlieren. Dieser Knoten wird hier eben durchhauen!

b) radikal pantheistische These der Chabad[-]Schriften, die ganz zu Cordoveros Theorie von der allumfassenden Substanz zurückkehren, wenn auch unter ganz neuen Voraussetzungen.

§ 2 Die Wahrheit liegt in der Mitte. Die These der alten Kabbalisten vom אל מתגלה der Aziluth ist hier in einem Sinn beibehalten (En Sof waltet in der Aziluth untrennbar), in einem anderen aber durch den den Alten ja unbekanntem Abgrund gestört, der doch nun zwischen dem מאציל und das, was hier nun עולם האצילות heißt, {{{?}}? gelegt ist. Sie sind doch ganz anders auseinandergerückt. Aber da eben steht Lurja. Lurja ist kein Pantheist: sowohl die Zimzumlehre als eben die von der Ausbreitung der Aziluth bis zu {m}<r> Aziluthwelt allein entfernen ihn vom P. [Pantheismus] sehr nachdrücklich, ohne daß sie natürlich vermocht hätten, sein System vor Umdeutungen, wie sie allem Kanonisch gewordenen widerfahren, zu schützen. Lurjas Lehre bei Tabul ist sogar noch vorsichtiger und einschränkender als die Hauptstelle Vitals in dem שער אבי"ע Cap. 1.

1) Ed. Amsterdam 11^b.⁷¹ Der קו hält die Schöpfung, schafft sie aber nicht! Diese ist aus Nichts geschaffen.

2 § 3 Ibn Tabul sagt gleich zu Anfang seiner דרושים § 1:⁷²

כל העולמות נקראים שמו שכולם מלבושים לו זה למעלה מזה. ויש הפרש גדול בין כל עולם ועולם שהרי האצילות מתלבש שם עצמותו עד שאמר בתיקונים הוא וגרמוי חד בהון וכו'. ומשם ולמטה כולם מקבלים ע"י מסך שבין עולם לעולם ... ואפילו באצילות האור במדרגותיו אינו שוה כי העצמות אינו מתפשט אלא באריך וכחודה של מחט באבא.

Diese Theorie Tabuls ist als „dritte Meinung“, ohne ihn zu nennen, von Vital angeführt in שער אבי"ע § 2, sicher aus T's [Tabul's] Schrift entnommen! (Siehe aber § 8)

§ 4 Vitals Hauptstelle ist ganz klar, m. E.: sie geht etwas weiter als Tabul, bezieht die ganze עצמות in die עולם האצילות ein, konstatiert von da an einen klaren und mutigen Einschnitt. Die Stelle steht als § 1 der שער סדר אבי"ע im Ez Chajim und ist in klarem Zusammenhang mit Cordoveros Pardes geschrieben.

71 Immanuel Hai Ricchi, *Mišnat Ḥasidim, Yošer Levav* (Amsterdam, 1742) (*Sefer Yošer Levav* has a separate title page). See Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 273 and footnote 90.

72 Apparently, Scholem knew the text of the oldest version (dated 1618), MS Budapest, Library of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Kaufmann A 201 [F14693], fol. 130^a, but he relied (as he did below, see § 8) on the second oldest version (beginning of the seventeenth century), MS Parma, Biblioteca Palatina, cod. Parm. 3466 [F34177, F13974], fol. 1^a (without quoting the additions in brackets). However, he misread the preposition in "שהרי באצילות" and replaced it with the definite article.

b) Die Frage: Ist der Adam Kadmon Gott oder nicht? אל מתגלה meinetwegen—aber doch Gott? Spricht nicht ungeheuer viel dafür? (d. [die] scheinbare גשמיות; die Gematrie אד"ם = הו"יה usw.⁷⁷) Vital hält ihn dafür.

c) Der Begriff der התלבשות, auf dem das ganze lurjanische Weltbild ruht, ist zweideutig. Sind die כלים דאצילות wie etwa die כלים מלבושים nun alle⁷⁸ קמצא כהדין wie etwa die כלים דאצילות von denen V. [Vital] das ausdrücklich sagt (Ed. Warschau II fol. 106^a Zeile 1),⁷⁹ oder sind nicht die späteren immerhin von dem sie belebenden Zentrum entfernt. Anders ausgedrückt: Muß man gehen, um vom לבוש bis zum Inneren vorzudringen, oder genügt es etwa einfach, wie die Pantheisten unter den Kabbalisten tun, die לבושים aufzuheben, und am selben Ort der עשיה erscheinen in Wahrheit alle Welten bis zum Ensof!?

§ 7 Mehrfach läßt zudem Vital jene Exaktheit der Begriffsfassung, die seine Lösung des Problems enthält, vermissen und es entsteht dann eben ein Eindruck, der die weitergehenden {pant} Interpretationen rechtfertigt. In diesen Stellen ist Vital ganz im Bannkreis Cordoveros, z. B.:

שער ההקדמות (1850)⁸⁰ fol. 6d (הקדמה ד')

hier ist keine Differenz von Aziluth und בי"ע, sondern in allen gibt es בחינת {??} עצמות אורות המתפשט מן האין סוף בתוכם להאירם ולהחיותם ודבר זה נמשך בכל העולמות מן הנקודה הראשונה ... עד הנקודה התחתונה שבכלם שהוא הארץ התחתונה אשר שוכנים בה בני אדם.

Und weiterhin dort vor allem die zugespitzte Formulierung: Der Mystiker verstehe,⁸¹

4 איך כל העולמות בחינה אחת לבושי הא"ס והאין סוף מתלבש בתוכם וגם סובב עליהם ומחיה את כלם ואין דבר יוצא ממנו והכל בחינה אחת | וכל העולמות נקשרים במאציל ודי בזה כי אין ראוי לגלות יותר בענין דרוש זה.

Dieser so mysteriöse Schluß deutet m. E. wirklich auf einen anderen Vital, einen der noch nicht vergessen hat, daß er Schüler Cordoveros ist, und der dessen Gottesauffassung {noch} im Geheimen mit sich trägt. Die andere Theorie ist nicht seine, sondern die Lurjas, aber diese Zeilen hätte wörtlich nicht L. [Luria] sondern nur Cordovero schreiben können. Der מסך etc. sind weggefallen, die {Ein} geheime Einheit von En Sof und allen Welten steht noch in ihrem dunklen Glanz <da> als das wahre Geheimnis, das der Mystiker hütet.

77 The numerical value of אד"ם (45) equals the numerical value of the Tetragrammaton spelled with *Alef* (יהוה = 20 + 6 + 13 + 6).

78 Cf. *‘Eš Ḥayyim*, vol. 1, fol. 51d (p. 102); the phrase is taken from *Gen. Rab.* 21:5.

79 *‘Eš Ḥayyim*, vol. 2, fol. 106^a (p. 211).

80 First edition: Jerusalem, 1850 (actually 1865).

81 *Ša‘ar ha-Haqqdamot* (Jerusalem, 1850), fol. 6d.

§ 8 Etwas ganz Unerwartetes findet sich dann aber doch in den דרושים des Ibn Tabul (Hs. Parma fol. 5^b).⁸² Hier erörtert er dieselbe מסך-Lehre wie Vital in שער אבי"ע § 2, aber fügt Folgendes Neue hinzu, das freilich eine ganz wesentliche Einschränkung mit sich bringt:

... כולם ע"י מסך שהאור מכה במסך ספירי ומכהו ועובר ומאיר לבריאה וכן כולם וכל זה לאור פנימי אבל לאור מקיף אין מסך כלל.

Da nun aber der אור מקיף grade der העצמות ist, wären wir mit diesem kleinen Sätzchen völlig auf Cordoveros Stufe wieder angelangt! Es ist nun die Frage: Hat er das von Lurja oder selbst erspekuliert?? <Weiß denn> Vital {scheint} davon nichts? {zu wissen}!! Und die Sache ist doch eigentlich so wichtig, daß er sie hätte erwähnen müssen. * {Hier scheint mir ein charakteristischer Fall vorzuliegen, wo Vitals Beschwerde, dass die חברים oft auch Eigenes aber Mißverständliches zugefügt hätten, berechtigt sein wird.} Doch—er weiß es auch und in der Tat sind wir also hier auf echtem lurjanischen Boden und die Sache muß mit Benutzung dieser zweiten wesentlichen Äußerung neu formuliert werden! Vital sagt im 3. Kapitel (סדר האצילות בקצור מופלג) § 1 gleich am Anfang die entscheidenden Sätze:⁸³

ראשונה אין סוף ברוך הוא מקיף את כל העולמות וגם הוא מוקף מהם ומתלבש בתוכם עד סוף עולם האצילות ואינו נוגע ודבוק זולתו בעולם האצילות לבד ולא בבי"ע ולכן משם ולמטה ישתנה מהותם ויקרא בי"ע. אך בחינת המקיף דבוק ונוגע בכל הארבעה אבי"ע.

Dieser Satz in Verbindung mit dem Tabul muß also in seiner Bedeutung interpretiert werden.

Pantheismus

5

Das Resultat ist also: Das Lurjanische System ist auch in dieser Frage der Immanenz der göttlichen Substanz in der Welt, wenn auch nicht nur in ihr, dem Cordoveros näher als es den Anschein hat. Freilich scheint L. keine volle Klarheit gewonnen zu haben, und seine beiden wichtigsten Äußerungen (§§ 4 und 8 oben!) widersprechen einander mindestens durch Auslassungen. Immerhin läßt sich folgendes sicher sagen: Die spätere pantheistische Deutung des Systems hat gute Stützpunkte in einer grundsätzlichen Haltung. Was bei Cordovero die העצמות התפשטות war, ist hier die der מקיפים! Es gibt also einen doppelten Stand: Einerseits gibt es eine Linie der Aziluth, die im Fortschreiten des קו schließlich nur התלבשות der Substanz in eine in sich nicht mehr von göttlicher Substanz erfüllte Weltenreihe sich entfaltet. Andererseits gibt es aber eine Linie des אור מקיף die in der Tat alles durchdringt bis ins Unterste hin! Der

82 MS Parma, Biblioteca Palatina, cod. Parm. 3466 [F34177, F13974].

83 *Eṣ Ḥayyim*, vol. 1, fol. 16^b (p. 31).

mögliche Erklärung vorträgt (im עץ חיים, Cap. 40 § 8, II 82^a)⁸⁹ daß in den Welten בי"ע ja עצמות und כלים, die in אצילות nicht verwandelt werden, in einander sich verwandeln:

כי משם [מאצילות] ולמטה כלים דאצילות נעשה נשמה לבי"ע והבן זה הסוד הגדול {שלכן} שלכך אין בי"ע נקרא אלהות גמור יען אפילו נשמתם הם כלים לבד דאצילות ולא אורות; אך להיותן מן האצילות נקרא אלהות [לכלים] אשר שם וזהו ג"כ טעם גדול כמה נבדלות בי"ע מן האצילות והוא כי אור העצמות הנמשך מלמטה נשלם ומסתיים באצילות לבד ואפשר שעל דרך זה יהיה [המעבר] מבריאה אל יצירה ומיצירה אל עשייה.⁹⁰

Also hier die Beziehung auf das Pantheismusproblem und seine theistische Lösung besonders deutlich!

Zur Pantheismusfrage bei Vital

7

Die Frage ist völlig eindeutig zu Gunsten einer rein theistischen Theologie (also wirklich in einem gewissen Sinn wie bei Rikki) und gegen panth. [pantheistische] Deutung entschieden durch die an Deutlichkeit weit über alle עץ חיים—Rezensionen herausgehenden Ausführungen Vitals in שערי קדושה Teil III, 2.⁹¹ Hier wird das kosmologische System am deutlichsten gegeben: Es gibt folgende Bereiche dort, unter dem אור אין סוף!!

1. אלהות גמור ist עולם הי"ס oder מחצב הספירות
2. מחצב הנשמות die „Seelensubstanz“
3. מחצב המלאכים
4. מחצב הקליפות oder אור חשוך
5. die רקיעים jeder Welt, die גוף der betr. [betreffenden] Welt heißen, aus ihnen erst stammen die תולדות העולם ההוא.

1 bis 4 sind jedes ein Licht (sogar die קליפות!!) בצורת אדם.

5 steht außerhalb von allen diesen Lichtern.

1 bis 4 haben die genau gleiche Struktur! Sie sind immer eine innerlicher als die andere, aber nicht etwa identisch. Also ist das geheime Leben Gottes das 1 beschreibt, zwar paradigmatisch <seiner Struktur nach> mit dem des Menschen identisch, aber nicht essentiell!!

Im Ez Chajim ist diese Lehre theosophisch verfeinert, vor allem in Cap 28.⁹²

1 und 2 sind zwei Aspekte derselben Welt:

- 1) עולמות ist בחינת חיצוניות aus ihr die Welten
- 2) נשמות ist בחינת פנימיות aus ihr die Menschenseelen

89 *Eṣ Ḥayyim*, vol. 2, fol. 82^b (p. 163) (Scholem quotes *Eṣ Ḥayyim* not according to the columns, but by recto and verso alone).

90 The square brackets in this quotation are Scholem's (referring to the context).

91 *Ḥayyim Vital, Ša'arey Qeḏuṣah* (Jerusalem, 1926) (first edition).

92 Gate 28, chapter 1: *Eṣ Ḥayyim*, vol. 2, fol. 18^b (p. 35): החיצוניות הם מציאת העולמות ופנימיות: הם בחי' הנשמות.

Hat er also etwa gar in שערי קדושה für einfache Gemüter sein System einfacher und theistischer gestellt als er es für die Adepten in עץ חיים hielt?! Das wäre sehr möglich.

Vitals Schwanken im עצמות–Begriff ist am besten aus עץ חיים Cap, 40 (שער 'פנימיות וחיצון') §14 zu ersehen!⁹³ Hier ist die Verbindung zu der שערי קדושה Stelle handgreiflich—und doch ist von deutlicher Fernhaltung pantheistischer Deutungsmöglichkeiten keine Spur zu finden!

- 8 Wir haben also das wichtige Ergebnis, daß das lurjanische System in populäreren Darstellungen Vitals selbst eine theistische Theologie ist, während grade die dort so deutlichen Grenzlinien zu pantheistischen Möglichkeiten in den nicht esoterischen Darlegungen wieder verwischt werden. Das Schwanken ist hier also in den Texten selbst begründet. Was dort in עץ חיים zwei בחינות sind: Welten und Seelen, das sind in שערי קדושה nun zwei verschiedene אורות! Natürlich läßt sich dann die בחינות–Aussage auch so deuten, und <alle> בחינות sind ja in der Tat für Vital Lichter für sich—aber dennoch ist da ein Unterschied! In [שערי קדושה] ש"ק spricht er darüber ganz anders, als ob diese אורות nach außen über den עולמות der Sefiroth liegen, während sie in עץ חיים grade das nun wirklich nicht tun, sondern grade immer nach innen zu lokalisiert werden. Und da sind wirklich dieselben Dinge gemeint: die Bereiche aus denen die Menschenseelen stammen! Cf. [confer] aber p. [pagina] 9!

Sehr bemerkenswert ist dazu die תשובה in שו"ת רב פעלים des בן יוסף חיים בן ר' יוסף חיים in Bagdad (Jerus[alem] 1901) Vol. 1 fol. 3 c/d, wo die theistische Wendung besonders {???giert ist} hervortritt. Dort ist einfach ב"ע = מחצב נשמות!! und אצילות = מחצב ספירות, wie in der Schule Scharabis.

- 9 Ausgezeichnet ist das Problem dieser שערי קדושה Stelle, die ja anscheinend einen חדוש darstellt, von dem in den andern Werken Vitals niemals die Rede ist (der Begriff der מחצבים), schon von R. Josef Chajim b. Elija aus Bagdad gesehen worden, der darüber vor allem in seinem (posthum gedruckten) ס' דעת ותבונה (posthum gedruckten) Cap. 19 eingehend gehandelt hat.⁹⁴ Er erklärt die Stelle so, daß Vital in [שערי קדושה] ש"ק die Terminologie geändert habe, aber die Sache in den andern Schriften klar behandelt sei, nämlich die drei בחינות des Ez Chajim seien mit den drei מחצבים identisch:

Es gibt im עץ חיים ja in jeder Welt

- 1) בחי' [בחינות] כלים im Gegensatz zu בחי' [בחינות] עצמות
Dies nennt [שערי קדושה] ש"ק allein הספירות, und hiervon gilt, daß die עצמות nicht von den בירורים berührt wird, wofür er fol. 68^a eine sehr schlagende Stelle aus dem שער הכוונות anführt (דרוש ענין שינוי תפילות)⁹⁵

93 *Eṣ Ḥayyim*, vol. 2, fol. 85d–86^a (p. 170–171).

94 Yosef Ḥayyim ben Elijah al-Hakam, *Sefer Da'at u-Tevunah* (Jerusalem, 1911).

95 Yosef Ḥayyim ben Elijah al-Hakam, *Sefer Da'at u-Tevunah* (Jerusalem, 1911), chapter 19. Cf.

2) מחצב הנשמות בחי' [בחנינת] פנימיות בכלים

Dies aber sind einfach die:

3) מחצב המלאכים בחי' [בחנינת] חיצונית בכלים

Diese Erklärung ist wohl in der Tat die richtige, wobei aber die Tatsache, daß Vital in [שערי קדושה] ש"ק sich größer und theistischer ausdrückt als in [חיים] ע"ה bestehen bleibt. Der wirklich schlagende Beweis ist <(wie der Autor dort (fol. 67d–68) ausführt)>, daß die Verse die im [שערי קדושה] ש"ק auf diese מחצבים gedeutet werden (הן אראלים צעקו), in den שמונה שערים in der Tat eben auf diese 2 בחינות der כלים bezogen sind!

Ferner ist eine Stelle in Lurjas Idra sutta Kommentar über diese 2 בחינות sehr einleuchtend und zeigt schon die oben p. [pagina] {7} 8 erwähnte Paradoxie.

Die Rede Vitals vom אור, das die Seelenheimat ist, und über dem [הספירות] אור הספירוי liegt, usf. ist also wirklich zu verstehen—aber schwierig bleibt, wie er dann die קליפות und רקעים direkt anschließt! Und auch die hier gegebene Identifikation hat ihre | Theologischen und spekulativen Konsequenzen!! Sind also nur wie [שערי קדושה] ש"ק es betont, die אורות oder die עצמות Gott schlechthin, die כלים aber nicht, gut—so haben wir theistische Mystik. Was aber, wenn alles, inklusive der כלים in den פרצופים als zur Einheit Gottes gehörig erklärt wird!! Stammt doch die Seele der Gerechten aus dem וזוג der כלים פנימיים in Seir Anpin (unter Assistenz der חצוניים)!

10

Cf. [Confer] zu dieser Frage: was ist in der Aziluth אלהות und was wird אלהות? Auch Scharabi in שלום fol. 35^a–37^a:⁹⁶ die כלים דאצילות sind אלהות ואחדות כלים דאצילות עד סוף מלכות דעשיה שלהם im Unterschied zum Ort der Ofanim und Chajoth, der in den כלים דבי"ע ist.

Diese Theologie führt vor allen dazu, dass dann R. Josef Chajim in der Tat (ebenso wie seine Kollege Elia Mani) die Meinung vertreten hat, die einigermaßen sensationeller Natur ist, daß die שבירה nur im מחצב נשמות, jedenfalls nicht im מחצב הספירות האמיתי passiert sei (weiter sein Responsum in סוד ישרים § 6 am Ende von רב פועלים II fol. 125)

Hierzu ist weiter der große דרוש im ספר הלקוטים Jerus. [Jerusalem] 1913 fol. 62d zu vergleichen, wo es heißt: הוא אלהות עד סוד הרוח שבו הוא אלהות אבל מהרוח ולמטה הוא עולמות (!!) ... {?} אבל הכלים שבהם ⁹⁷[בגנר"ן] הוא אינו אלהות וגם בכלים אלה יש גנר"ן שאינן אלהות. Unten 63^a noch mehr dazu. Klare, wenn auch sehr abstrakte Scheidungen! Cf. [Confer] auch in עץ חיים Cap. 43

Vital, *Ša'arey Qedušah*, fol. 47^a (gloss) and the end of the (unpaged), introduction by Zeev Wolf Ashkenazi.

96 Shalom Shar'abi, *Nehar Šalom* (Jerusalem: Heilprin, Voldokh, 1910).

97 Scholem's abbreviation in brackets reads: בגנפ"ש רוח נשמה.

darum zu tun gewesen, nicht dem Pantheismus zu verfallen! (Das ist vollkommen richtig!)

Andererseits ist bemerkenswert, daß auch hier der Autor des עמק המלך (שער הבריאה §1 fol. 167d)¹⁰⁴ eine Relation gibt, die umgekehrt ganz ins Pantheistische schlagen würde, von עצמות gar nichts weiß und einfach nur meint כי בסוף האצילות נתעבה האור עד שאי אפשר לקראתו אצילות ונקרא בריאה שהוא יותר עב ... ודרך מסך זה ירדה מלכות דאצילות פ' [also sozusagen bloße Namenssache!!] תחתוניות שבה והיתה ראש לשועלים ע"ס דבריאה. Natürlich ist das nicht eben Lurja selbst in die Schuhe zu schieben.

Hauptstellen über die אלהות der Aziluth, und die Creation von בריאה im ausdrücklichen Unterschied dazu sind:

1) עץ חיים Cap. 42 (שער דרושי אבי"ע) §5 und 13/14, wo das Problem direkt behandelt wird! והנה ... ממש אלהות [שבה]¹⁰⁵ כל האצילות הוא אלהות גמור כי הכלים¹⁰⁶ ג' עולמות ב"ע כולם כלים גמורים ולכן אינם אלהות anders als die dann in R. Gedaljas Namen im Cap. 47 §2 gegeben!!¹⁰⁷

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104 Naftali Bacharach, *Emeq ha-Melekh* (Amsterdam, 1648).

105 Scholem's addition.

106 *Eṣ Ḥayyim*, vol. 2, fol. 91c (p. 182).

107 See above, footnote 8.

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God without Signs

Spinoza's Critique of the Miraculous

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Abstract

This article examines Spinoza's critique of miracles through the lens of the interaction between our perception of reality and our preconceptions. I argue that Spinoza's rejection of miracles is not primarily based on their incompatibility with his monism, but rather on how believers in miracles interpret anomalous events to fit their preconceptions, thereby turning their ignorance into a limitation of nature's power. In stark contrast to this approach, Spinoza posits that an adequate notion of the divine nature ensures our cognitive access to reality as it truly is. Thus, the divine cannot reveal itself through the mysterious and anomalous, but rather through the intelligibility and transparency of reality to the human mind. I further show that Spinoza sees our cognitive power to grasp reality as the true divine revelation. Unlike traditional revelation, this intellectual revelation is self-validating and does not require external signs—such as miracles—to prove its truth and divine origin. Ultimately, Spinoza's rejection of miracles is a rejection of heteronomous religiosity.

Keywords

Baruch Spinoza – miracles – revelation – God – nature – power

1 Introduction

Among all the doctrines that scandalized the early readers of the *Theological-Political Treatise*, surely none was as shocking as the critique of miracles presented in chapter 6.¹ In a letter to Spinoza dated 1675 (Ep. 71), Henry Oldenburg declares:

1 I am following Edwin Curley's translations of Spinoza's works from Spinoza, *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, 2 vols. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985–2016). References

I can only approve your intention to clarify and soften the things in the *Theological-Political Treatise* which caused trouble to your Readers [...]. Many think you deny the authority and value of miracles, the only possible support for the certainty of Divine Revelation, as almost all Christians are convinced.

As Oldenburg points out, miracles play a crucial role for Christians—and, it could be added, for all followers of a revealed religion—in validating and certifying their creed. Indeed, the miracles performed by prophets and those worked by Jesus Christ serve—among other functions—to corroborate and confirm that the message they convey is genuinely of divine origin, and not merely human.² Without these “certificates of authenticity” that miracles provide, the revealed message would lack certainty and would be indistinguishable from any other discourse. Consequently, by questioning the “authority and value” of miracles, Spinoza appears, in Oldenburg’s view, to be questioning divine revelation itself, as he deprives it of its essential foundation.

Yet Spinoza’s audacity does not stop at questioning the value and authority of miracles. In the seventeenth century, it was common for proponents of natural religion and advocates of the new science to dismiss miracles as proof of the divine.³ Hugo Grotius, for example, argues that miracles may have been useful at one time—that is, in less “enlightened” eras—to generate certainty about God, but today such proofs are unnecessary and of lesser dignity compared to natural regularity itself, which manifests the divine sovereignty over

are to Spinoza, *Opera*, ed. Carl Gebhardt, 4 vols. (Heidelberg: Winter, 1925) = G. I have used the following conventional abbreviations to refer to Spinoza’s writings: TIE = *Treatise of the Emendation of the Intellect* [*Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione*]; KV = *Short Treatise on God, Man, and His Well-Being* [*Korte Verhandelng van God, de Mensch en deszeelvs Welstand*]; Ep. = *Letters*; TTP = *Theological-Political Treatise* [*Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*]. When referring to the *Ethics*, I have used the following abbreviations: a = axiom, c = corollary, D = definition, d = demonstration, p = proposition, s = scholium, app = appendix, l = lemma. Therefore, E1p10 refers to proposition 10 of part 1 of the *Ethics* and E2p40s2 to scholium 2 of proposition 40 of part 2 of the *Ethics*.

2 Regarding the different roles of miracles and how their probative or evidential role becomes the dominant one in modern times, see Peter Harrison, “Miracles, Early Modern Science, and Rational Religion,” *Church History* 75 (2006): 493–510.

3 See Jacqueline Lagrée, *La raison ardente. Religion naturelle et raison au XVII^e siècle* (Paris: Vrin, 1991), 75–77. For an overview of the discussions around miracles in the seventeenth century, see Georges Gusdorf, *Les sciences humaines et la pensée occidentale, Tome III: La révolution galiléenne* (Paris: Payot, 1969), 1199–281; also Winfried Schröder, “Wunder,” in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie. Band 12: W–Z* (Basel: Schwabe, 2004), cols. 1058–1061. For the discussion in seventeenth-century British philosophy, see Robert M. Burns, *The Great Debate on Miracles: From Joseph Glanvill to David Hume* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1981).

creation in a more convincing manner and in accordance with the human intellect.⁴ Yet dismissing something and declaring it obsolete does not equate to rejection: the “datedness” of miracles as proof of religion does not imply that they are impossible, or that they cannot serve this evidentiary role in other circumstances. From this point of view, God still retains the power to alter or contravene the natural order he instituted, even if this method is unworthy of divine wisdom. Spinoza’s stance is clearly distinct from this approach and much more drastic: the occurrence of miracles—understood as God’s violations of the laws of nature—is absolutely impossible, for the power of nature does not differ from divine power (which is the very essence of God!). Consequently, if God were to contravene the laws of nature, then he would contradict his very essence.⁵ Thus, in Spinoza’s view, the miraculous ceases to be a proof of divinity and becomes its exact opposite: if miracles truly existed, then they would be evidence of the nonexistence of God and the prevalence of chaos (anomy, lawlessness). Due to its radicalism, Spinoza’s position on miracles was unique and unparalleled in “the great debate”⁶ of the seventeenth century, but precisely for this reason, it constituted the central stimulus of the discussion and shaped its tone.⁷

Spinoza’s position on miracles has been the subject of numerous studies, yet the issue is far from being exhausted.⁸ In the reflections that follow, I intend

4 See Lagrée, *La raison ardente*, 76–77.

5 TTP, chapter 6, G 3:83: “Therefore, if anything were to happen in nature which was contrary to its universal laws, it would also necessarily be contrary to the divine decree, intellect and nature. Or if someone were to maintain that God does something contrary to the laws of nature, he would be compelled to maintain at the same time also that God acts in a way contrary to his own nature. Nothing would be more absurd than that.”

6 A reference to Roger M. Burns’s classic monograph *The Great Debate on Miracles*.

7 See Schröder, “Wunder,” 1059–1060.

8 Among the abundant literature, I would like to highlight the following references: George Henry Radcliffe Parkinson, “Spinoza on Miracles and Natural Law,” *Revue internationale de philosophie* 8 (1977): 35–55; Manfred Walther, “Spinoza’s Critique of Miracles: A Miracle of Criticism?”, in *Spinoza: The Enduring Questions*, ed. Graeme Hunter (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), 100–112; Lee C. Rice, “Spinoza’s Account of Miracles,” in *Piety, Peace and the Freedom to Philosophize*, ed. Paul J. Bagley (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1999), 25–44; Leora Batinzky, “Spinoza’s Critique of Miracles,” *Cardozo Law Review* 25 (2003/2004): 507–518; Graeme Hunter, “Spinoza on Miracles,” *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 56 (2004): 41–51; Steven Nadler, *A Book Forged in Hell: Spinoza’s Scandalous Treatise and the Birth of the Secular Age* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), chapter 5; Susan James, *Spinoza on Philosophy, Religion and Politics: The Theologico-Political Treatise* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 130–136; Carlos Fraenkel, “Spinoza on Miracles and the Truth of the Bible,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 74 (2013): 643–658; Warren Zev Harvey, “Spinoza on Biblical Miracles,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 74 (2013): 659–675.

to reconstruct Spinoza's stance from a particular angle: that of the complex interaction between our perception of reality and our preconceptions. As I will argue, Spinoza does not primarily reject the miraculous because of its incompatibility with his so-called monism or his equation *Deus sive natura*; this is rather a corollary of a more fundamental criticism. As evidenced in his correspondence with Oldenburg, Spinoza criticises the way in which the believer in miracles "interprets" anomalous and inexplicable events and accommodates them to his preconceptions about God and nature. For the believer in miracles, anything that contradicts his ordinary understanding of nature (*ex consuetudine*) is due to the action of an unknowable cause rather than to a defective conception of reality on his part. Belief in miracles thus surreptitiously turns a subjective limitation—namely, ignorance of the causes—into an objective one—namely, limitation of the power of nature—exempting the believer from revising his familiar conceptions and assumptions. Insofar as it reinforces our preconceptions and stifles rational inquiry, the miraculous manifests our ignorance rather than the divine nature. In sharp contrast to this approach, Spinoza assigns the notion of God the role of breaking our cognitive alienation and ensuring our cognitive access to reality *ut in se est*. For this very reason, the divine cannot possibly reveal itself in the anomalous and mysterious, but does so rather in the intelligibility and transparency of reality to the human mind. Insofar as the human mind understands reality through an adequate intellectual grasp of the divine nature, its cognitive power can be considered the true divine revelation. In contrast to traditional revelation, this intellectual revelation is endowed with certainty and does not need to rely on a sign to corroborate its truth and divine origin—it is *self-validating* and *self-contained*.⁹ At its core, Spinoza's rejection of miracles is the rejection of heteronomous, externally determined religiosity.

To substantiate these statements, I will proceed as follows. In the next section, I will examine Oldenburg and Spinoza's discussion of the issue of miracles in their letters. After outlining their respective positions, I will show that the root of their disagreement lies in their diverging assessments of our cognitive limitations. Additionally, I will argue that Spinoza's position—unlike

9 It is important to acknowledge the prevalent distinction among scholars between the epistemic and social functions of miracles as signs in Spinoza's philosophy. In this paper, I will focus exclusively on the epistemic dimension of miracles as signs and on Spinoza's treatment of this aspect. For an in-depth discussion of their social role, see Mogens Lærke's insightful reflections in his recent monograph *Spinoza and the Freedom of Philosophizing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021). I am grateful to an anonymous referee for highlighting this distinction.

Oldenburg's—is marked by an acute awareness of the perspectival nature of human knowledge. In the subsequent section, I will show that Spinoza's remedy for our epistemic isolation coincides with knowledge of the divine and also how his equation *Deus sive natura* follows from this. Finally, I will explain how Spinoza's critical examination of miracles impacts his understanding of revelation, a notion that he does not reject *per se*, but subjects to an essential modification.

2 Miracles and the Observer's Idea of God¹⁰

In what follows, I will examine Oldenburg and Spinoza's epistolary exchange regarding miracles. The discussion will revolve around Spinoza's equation of miracles with ignorance, an assertion that Oldenburg found startling. Adhering to the traditional viewpoint, Oldenburg regards miracles as the cornerstone of the certainty of divine revelation. He argues that miracles reveal our ignorance of divine power, as they are phenomena that cannot be brought about by nature alone. Consequently, in his view, miracles substantiate God's existence as a power external to nature. Spinoza, however, contends that miracles are mere ignorance, a cognitive void, incapable of serving as the basis of any certainty. Both thinkers perceive intellectual arrogance in the other's position: Oldenburg believes that Spinoza unjustly restricts God's power by dismissing miracles, while Spinoza argues that Oldenburg unjustly confines the power of nature. The essence of their debate hinges on the interpretation of the inexplicable. Spinoza shows that Oldenburg's reverence for the mysterious conceals a form of dogmatism. In contrast, Spinoza's repudiation of the enigmatic, along with his affirmation of the intelligibility of reality, emerges as the more modest and non-dogmatic approach. Let us delve deeper into this examination.

Oldenburg initiates the discussion (Ep. 71; G 4:304) by highlighting the issues that have caused dismay among readers of the TTP. The first is the ambiguous way in which Spinoza talks about God and nature, as he seems to confuse them, and the second is his seeming denial of the authority and value of miracles. In his reply (Ep. 73; G 4:306–309), Spinoza clarifies that his identification of

10 I have taken the expression “the observer's idea of God” from G.F. Woods, who aptly observes: “Very probably, there is a complex interplay between observing what are taken to be miracles and the observer's idea of God. Experience and theology have a mutual influence upon one another.” See Woods, “The Evidential Value of the Biblical Miracles,” in *Miracles: Cambridge Studies in their Philosophy and History*, ed. Charles Francis Digby Moule (London: A.R. Mowbray & Co., 1965), 24–25.

God and nature should be understood as asserting that God is the immanent cause of all things and that—as Paul preached at the Areopagus—“all things are in God and move in God” (Acts 17:22–31). The identification is mistaken, however, if it reduces nature to a certain mass or corporeal matter. As to miracles, Spinoza argues that the certainty of divine revelation should be based only on the wisdom of revealed doctrine, not on miracles, which he equates with ignorance.¹¹

Oldenburg’s reply (Ep. 74; G 4:309–311) rejects the identification of miracles with “culpable ignorance,” for miracles such as “the raising of Lazarus from the dead [...] seem to surpass the whole power of created Nature, and to belong only to the divine power,” which “necessarily exceeds the limits of a finite intelligence, bound within certain constraints.” Spinoza responds (Ep. 75; G 4:313) that basing religion and the existence of God on miracles is like revealing “something obscure through something more obscure.” In this way, he acknowledges with Oldenburg the limitation of our knowledge (“human weakness,” *imbecillitas*), yet argues that it is preferable to suspend our judgement regarding the incomprehensible and to base religion solely on the wisdom of doctrine (Ep. 75; G 4:315). In his response (Ep. 77; G 4:325), Oldenburg objects to Spinoza’s claim that miracles are merely a product of human ignorance, arguing that this perspective seems to confine divine power and human understanding within the same limits—as if God’s power were restricted by what human beings can comprehend. Spinoza rejects this interpretation in his reply (Ep. 78; G 4:328), insisting that equating miracles with ignorance does not imply a parity between divine power and human knowledge. Yet Oldenburg remains unconvinced. In his subsequent letter (Ep. 79; G 4:330), he maintains that Spinoza’s position stems from the misguided assumption that a created being can and must have a clear grasp of the infinite power and wisdom of its creator. For Oldenburg, this assumption is patently mistaken, as it erodes the necessary distinction between the finite and the infinite, between what can be known and what is inherently beyond human comprehension.

11 Spinoza also declares in this letter (G 4:307^a–308^a): “Here I add only this, that I understand this to be the chief difference between Religion and Superstition, that the latter has ignorance as its foundation, and the former, wisdom.” In light of this statement, one might ask what the actual distinction between superstition and miracle is, given that both are rooted in ignorance in Spinoza’s view. While a more thorough exploration of this issue is necessary, I concur with Vinciguerra’s characterisation of superstition—originating as an individual behaviour—as a fully developed “régime” and a “système de représentation,” within which the miraculous plays an integral role. See Lorenzo Vinciguerra, *Spinoza et le signe: La genèse de l’imagination* (Paris: Vrin, 2005), 250–253. I am grateful to an anonymous referee for bringing this issue to my attention.

The underlying disagreement between Oldenburg and Spinoza stems from a fundamental divergence in their assumptions. Oldenburg, adhering to the traditional and most widespread view, postulates an unbridgeable gap between natural power and divine power—a divide that Spinoza categorically rejects. Thus, Oldenburg contends that certain phenomena—such as the resurrection of the dead—lie entirely beyond the scope of natural explanation and therefore serve as undeniable evidence of a superior power. In his view, such events are the effects of unknown causes, which are not merely unknown to us—in which case they could still have natural causes—but unknown *simpliciter*; that is, absolutely inaccessible to any form of *scientia naturalis*.¹² In this dichotomy, the “natural” encompasses all that is intelligible through the *lumen naturale*, as opposed to the “supernatural.” For Oldenburg, denying the existence of events that are inherently inexplicable would amount to diminishing God’s power, implying that it does not surpass the power of nature and that, in principle, everything could be accounted for through natural causes, even if not always in practice. This explains why, in his view, Spinoza’s identification of miracles with ignorance unavoidably leads to the scandalous identification between the human and the divine intellects. By reducing miracles to mere ignorance, Spinoza is seen as committing an act of intellectual hubris, arrogantly asserting that no mystery or enigma lies beyond the reach of *scientia naturalis* and the human intellect.

For Spinoza, however, the true perpetrator of intellectual hubris is Oldenburg (and believers in miracles in general). In response to the accusation that he is identifying the human and the divine intellects, Spinoza sharply counters (Ep. 75; G 4:315) that attributing certain events to a power that is distinct from the natural power means arbitrarily limiting the latter and presuming that our finite intellect can determine the limits of nature’s capabilities. Indeed, once we acknowledge our finitude and our *imbecillitas*, nothing authorises us to assert the actual extent of nature’s power. An honest believer in miracles must admit that what he calls a “miracle” is simply an event whose causes he does not know. If such an event appears to violate the laws of nature, it is only because it conflicts with his usual, customary [*ex consuetudine*] understanding of nature, not with nature *ut in se est*.¹³ Therefore, by deeming certain

12 I take the distinction between what is unknown to us and what is unknown *simpliciter* from Thomas Aquinas, who in the *Summa contra gentiles* (3, cap. 101) characterises God—understood as the agency behind miraculous interventions in the natural order—as “*causa simpliciter occulta omni homini*.”

13 See TTP, chapter 6, G 3:81: “For the common people think God’s power and providence are established most clearly when they see something unusual happen in nature, which is contrary to the opinion they have of nature from custom [*ex consuetudine*].”

anomalous events miraculous, the believer in miracles is turning a subjective limitation—his ignorance—into an objective limitation of nature’s power. Thus, belief in miracles stems from a surreptitious projection of our partial perspective into objective reality, resulting in an illegitimate “objectivation” or “reification” of our intellectual weakness.

This “surreptitious projection” reveals several traits that are characteristic of worldviews that accept the “miraculous.”¹⁴ The believer in miracles “imagines” nature as a power that is subordinated to divine authority, yet endowed with efficiency and ontological self-sufficiency.¹⁵ Thus, he envisions it as a kind of secondary divinity or “viceregent” of God, even though his belief in miracles is grounded in the certainty of God’s *absolute sovereignty* over everything created.¹⁶ This leads to the paradoxical view that when nature operates, God is idle, and conversely, when God “intervenes” in the natural causal system, the

14 We should pay heed to the fact that the notion of miracles has changed considerably over time. The modern understanding of miracles as violations of the laws of nature is the outcome of a long and complex historical development and cannot be uncritically projected into previous contexts, such as the Bible or pagan antiquity. For a panoramic overview of the philosophical discussions around miracles throughout history, see Schröder, “Wunder,” 1052–1071. Regarding miracles in classical and late antiquity, see Robert M. Grant, *Miracle and Natural Law in Graeco-Roman and Early Christian Thought* (Amsterdam: North-Holland Publishing Company, 1952). For the development of the notion in Jewish thought, see Kenneth Seeskin, “Miracles in Jewish Philosophy,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Miracles*, ed. Graham H. Twelftree (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 254–270. More specifically, a comprehensive survey of medieval Jewish discussions of miracles can be found in Howard Kreisel, “Miracles in Medieval Jewish Philosophy,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 75 (1984): 99–133. Regarding the connection between Spinoza and medieval Jewish thought on this issue, see Nadler, *A Book Forged in Hell*, chapter 5.

15 TTP, chapter 6, G 3:81: “So they imagine two powers numerically distinct from one another, the power of God and the power of natural things. Nevertheless, they think the power of natural things is determined by God in a certain way—or (as most think today instead) created.”

16 The expression “‘viceregent’ of God” is taken from Robert Boyle, who, in his *Free Inquiry into the Vulgarly Received Notion of Nature*, ed. Edward B. Davis and Michael Hunter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), denounces the lingering pagan elements within the scholastic view of nature, which he sees as attributing it a semi-divine status and a collaborative role with God in the administration and governance of the world. As for the crucial changes in the view of nature that take place in the transition from scholasticism to modern thought, see Dennis Des Chene, *Physiologia: Natural Philosophy in Late Aristotelian and Cartesian Thought* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996). Regarding some aspects of this change in Spinoza, see my article “The Death of the Heavens: Crescas and Spinoza on the Uniformity of the World,” *Anales del Seminario de Historia de la Filosofía* 41 (2024): 183–194.

system is temporarily “suspended.”¹⁷ This conceptualisation of the relationship between God and nature clearly mirrors the civil order: it is a hierarchy where nature is the subject and God the lawgiver, yet they remain two distinct entities, and therefore their relationship is accidental and dissolvable.¹⁸ God, as a sovereign, is not bound by the laws he has established and can override or suspend them at will.

Besides being heavily anthropomorphic, this conception resists critical inquiry. By interpreting anomalies as divine interventions in a natural system that is presumed to be already understood, the believer in miracles exempts himself from revising his preconceptions. Belief in miracles, therefore, stifles critical examination.¹⁹ Instead of expanding the mind and opening it to otherness, such a belief confines it within its prior assumptions, reinforcing epistemic isolation. Miracles validate a pre-fashioned deity: in events that seemingly surpass the power of nature and reveal the absolutely unknown, a believer in miracles actually encounters—without realising it—his own idea of God. Thus, the *deus absconditus*—the inscrutable deity of the believer in miracles—is paradoxically a fabricated, human-like divinity.

In contrast to this dogmatic and reifying conception, Spinoza’s approach is marked by its scrupulousness and its resistance to projecting our subjective view onto reality as it is in itself. When we are confronted with an anomalous event that appears unexplainable through natural causes, Spinoza warns against inferring anything beyond our own ignorance (Ep. 75; G 4:315). Therefore, we must, as Spinoza himself suggests, suspend our judgement. We cannot

17 TTP, chapter 6, G 3:81: “For they think that God does nothing so long as nature acts according to its usual order. Conversely, they think the power of nature and natural causes are inactive so long as God acts.”

18 This “legislative” understanding of the relationship between God and the world has been aptly characterised by David R. Lachterman in the following terms: “In the next place, however, and even more crucially, the *translated* (and thereby rectified) concept of laws must be shorn of all apparent reference to a *legislator* at liberty to institute such-and-such laws or to substitute others for them. Thus, Spinoza emphasizes that talk of God as a ‘lawgiver or prince’ is merely talk *ex captu vulgi*, accommodating itself to the ‘deficiency of cognition’ characteristic of the multitude in all ages. Consequently, optionality disappears from both sides of the ‘legislative’ relation, from the authors as well as from the recipients of law; this disappearance leaves behind as the *core* of the law ‘taken absolutely’ the intertwined notions of necessity, comprehensiveness, and precision or adequacy.” See David R. Lachterman, “Laying Down the Law: The Theological-Political Matrix of Spinoza’s Physics,” in *Leo Strauss’s Thought: Toward a Critical Engagement*, ed. Alan Udoff (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1991), 132.

19 TTP, chapter 6, G 3:81: “Partly from devotion, partly from a desire to oppose those who cultivate the natural sciences, they don’t want to know the natural causes of things.”

conclude, for instance, that a divine intervention is temporarily suspending the laws of nature. Instead, we should infer that such an event is governed by natural laws that are currently unknown to us, but potentially discoverable in the future.²⁰ Unlike the absolutely hidden cause of a miraculous event, these laws are not unknown *simpliciter*, but only to us and *ad interim*. Observe the curious reversal: the suspension of judgement, rather than obstructing knowledge, makes the entirety of nature accessible to the *lumen naturale*.

Thus, the perceived disruptions of the natural order, the alleged violations of the laws of nature invoked by the advocate of miracles, are merely illusions stemming from our cognitive limitation. If we witness inexplicable prodigies and wonders, then this is due to our finitude and *imbecillitas*. Only a finite mind, viewing things from a limited perspective, can perceive reality as incoherent, fragmented, and dislocated. It is reasonable to suppose that such discontinuities do not exist in the natural order itself; rather, the appearance of fragmentariness, which leads to belief in miracles, is a consequence of our being part of that order. It is precisely because we are situated and embedded in nature that it appears to us as a limited power, sporadically overruled by an unknown deity. The very fact that “we live and move and are” (Acts 17:28) within nature prevents us from perceiving its limitless uniformity and inviolable order.

Let us take stock. The disagreement between Oldenburg and Spinoza centres on how to interpret the inexplicable. According to Spinoza’s analysis, Oldenburg’s assumption that there are events in nature whose causes are absolutely unknowable—hence outside of the natural order—reflects a dogmatic mindset that is unaware of its situatedness within nature. In contrast, Spinoza’s assumption of the integral intelligibility of natural phenomena—even of those that seem utterly inexplicable to us—and of the inviolability of the natural order emerges as the logical and non-dogmatic approach of a mind that clearly perceives its own *imbecillitas*.²¹ An important aspect of Spinoza’s rejection of miracles—namely, the invulnerability of natural legality—thus receives its justification. However, what about the other doctrine that caused dismay among

20 Regarding Spinoza’s multifaceted conception of law and the laws of nature, see Lachterman, “Laying Down the Law,” 123–153; Jon Miller, “Spinoza and the Concept of a Law of Nature,” *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 20 (2003): 257–276; Donald Rutherford, “Spinoza’s Conception of Law: Metaphysics and Ethics,” in *Spinoza’s Theological-Political Treatise: A Critical Guide*, ed. Yitzhak Y. Melamed and Michael A. Rosenthal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 143–167.

21 Pierre-François Moreau has convincingly shown how Spinoza’s bold denial of incomprehensible facts that surpass the reach of the human mind’s cognitive power derives from the human mind’s consciousness of its own finitude: see Moreau, *Spinoza: L’expérience et l’éternité* (Paris: PUF, 1994), 539–549.

the readers of the *TTP*; namely, Spinoza's identification of natural and divine power? What authorises us to make the crucial step from affirming the inviolability of nature to asserting its identity with the divine itself? This issue will be examined in the next section.

3 God and the Overcoming of Situatedness

We have seen how belief in the miraculous reinforces our epistemic isolation, whereas the acknowledgement of our *imbecillitas* opens up the entirety of nature to rational inspection. Yet a crucial issue remains to be clarified: How does a human mind, aware of its situatedness, transcend its subjective confinement and grasp the order of nature in a way that is not affected by its partiality? In other words: How can the human mind go beyond itself without relapsing into the reifications and subjective projections that Spinoza denounces? Clarifying this issue will provide the key to Spinoza's identification of natural and divine power, as well as his equating of belief in miracles with atheism and uncertainty. To this end, we will focus on chapter 6 of the *TTP*, specifically on an abstruse—and quite neglected—passage contained in *G* 3:84–85.

The world-picture of the believer in miracles features divides and discontinuities, which—as has been shown—are the effect of an unacknowledged situatedness within nature. It is reasonable to suppose that such discontinuities do not exist in the natural order itself and that this order is, in fact, absolutely inviolable. Therefore, if this order is to be adequately grasped, it must be through notions that express absolute inviolability and immutability. In other words, the notions that provide us with cognitive access to reality *as it truly is*, devoid of perspectival contamination, must be *absolute* notions; that is, unquestionable and immune to relativisation or qualification. Only through such absolute notions can the human mind reasonably expect to transcend its partial standpoint, characterised by its relativity and dubitability. From the absoluteness of these notions, other defining features are derived. Such notions must be fundamental or basic, underivable from prior notions, for otherwise they would be relative to something else. They must also express infinity, as anything finite or particular could be questioned or relativised by something external to it.²² In sum, the mind transcends its partiality through concepts that embody absolute and all-embracing limitlessness.

22 I explore these two senses of absoluteness in Spinoza in my article “‘Verum index sui et falsi’: Certidumbre y duda escéptica en Spinoza,” *Ideas y Valores* 72, no. 10 (2023): 72–92.

If genuine knowledge can only be had of a self-sufficient reality existing “independently of that knowledge,”²³ then only a mind in possession of the aforementioned absolute notions can be said to know in the proper sense of the word. A mind imprisoned in its situatedness grasps only fleeting and fragmentary contents, which are subject to doubt and mirror its subjectivity rather than the objective order of things. Yet at the same time, the features of the aforementioned absolute notions coincide with properties traditionally ascribed to the divine. Indeed, infinity and absolute self-sufficiency, strictly speaking, belong only to God. Therefore, the notions that allow the mind to transcend its situatedness and grasp reality are the same ones through which it apprehends the divine nature. The antithesis of situatedness and relativity is not merely objectivity, but absoluteness and unrestricted infinity. God is not a *tertium quid* above the self and the objective world, but the absolute reality that encompasses the self and provides solid anchorage to its perceptions: “in eo vivimus et movemur et sumus.” Thus, we see how the equation *Deus sive natura*, rather than representing a dogmatic mindset on Spinoza’s part, in fact expresses a profound caution regarding our cognitive powers. The identification between God and nature results from the acute awareness of the perspectival and situated character of our knowledge.

All the elements are now in place to make sense of the following passage, which, although somewhat cryptic, is crucial for understanding Spinoza’s critical approach to the miraculous (TTP, chapter 6; G 3:84–85):

Since God’s existence is not known through itself, it must necessarily be inferred from notions whose truth is so firm and steady that no power can be or be conceived by which they could be changed. At least, so they must appear to us when we infer God’s existence from them, if we want to infer it beyond any chance of doubt. For if we could conceive that the notions themselves could be changed by some power, whatever in the end it was, we would doubt their truth, and consequently also doubt our conclusion, viz. God’s existence, so that we could never be certain of anything. Next, we know that nothing agrees with nature (or is contrary to it) except

23 Cf. Bernard Williams, *Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978), 48: “Knowledge does have a problematical character, and does have something in it which offers a standing invitation to scepticism. [...] This starts from a very basic thought, that if knowledge is what it claims to be, then it is knowledge of a reality which exists independently of that knowledge, and indeed (except for the special case where the reality known happens itself to be some psychological item) independently of any thought or experience. Knowledge is of what is there *anyway*.”

what we have shown to agree with those principles (or to be contrary to them). So if we could conceive that by some power (whatever in the end it was) something could happen in nature which was contrary to nature, that would be contrary to those first notions, and we would have to reject it as absurd—either that, or we would have to doubt the first notions (as we have just shown) and consequently, doubt God and all things, however they might have been perceived.

Note that the passage equates certainty about God with certainty *as such*: if we were to doubt the notions through which we form an adequate idea of God—and from which God's existence necessarily follows—then we would have to doubt *all things*. Now, this is not due to an arbitrary identification between God and the entirety of reality on Spinoza's part, but is rather because the notions that provide indubitable knowledge *as such* necessarily possess the same characteristics as those that express the divine nature; namely, absoluteness and inviolability. The fundamental elements of human cognition and the divine attributes necessarily coincide; we cannot grasp them separately, as if they belong to different spheres, precisely because they both convey the same steadiness and self-sufficiency that are lacked by the fragmentary perceptions of a situated mind. The very cognitive act through which the finite mind transcends its situatedness and grasps *something real*—that is, uncontaminated by its partiality—is the same one through which it apprehends the divine nature.

Yet what exactly makes such notions absolutely indubitable and unsusceptible to relativisation? The passage gives a clear answer: because we cannot conceive of any power external to them that could “override” them. Doubt about a given content arises when we can conceive of *another* content that could cancel or refute it. However, this is not possible when the content under consideration is limitless and all-encompassing, because in that case, no *otherness*, no externality, can be conceived with respect to it.²⁴ This exclusion of any possible otherness is precisely what constitutes the absoluteness of the notions under discussion: because of it, there is no conceivable superior power that could modify them. In other words, these notions absolutely exclude the possibility of divine intervention coming from the outside, *viz. a miraculous event*. If such an external intervention were conceivable, then these notions would immediately cease to be absolute and indubitable, leaving the mind devoid of any firm anchorage in reality. Since the basic elements of cognition coincide

24 Here, I am drawing on my previous analyses of Spinoza's approach to doubt, as presented in my articles “The Place of Skepticism in Spinoza's Thought,” *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 35 (2018): 1–19, and “Verum index sui et falsi.”

with divine attributes, for the reasons just given, the admission of miracles that could alter the essential outlook of reality would *eo ipso* entail the denial of the divine itself. That is why, in the end, Spinoza must necessarily reject the miraculous, not just as something superfluous and dismissible, but as a notion utterly opposed to the divine itself and to solid cognition. Miracles are thus tantamount to atheism and universal uncertainty.

Finally, which notions are these? The passage under consideration does not specify, but we can reasonably assume that Spinoza is referring to thought [*cogitatio*] and extension [*extensio*], which, as is well known, Spinoza considers both basic elements of reality and divine attributes (see especially E1p10, E2p1, E2p2). It is a fundamental tenet of Spinoza's philosophy that each of these realities is infinite and self-contained, and, as such, uncaused and unsusceptible to external alteration or modification. Furthermore, these notions fundamentally express power [*potentia*]: far from being mere latent realities, thought and extension are active principles, generating sources from which everything derives and in which everything subsists (E2p3s). Thus, the cognitive power through which the human mind grasps absolute realities—such as thought and extension—is God's very essence as unlimited knowing power (see Ep. 32; G 4:174^a). As I will show in the next section, this sameness at the core of the human mind and the divine nature has far-reaching implications, not just for the notion of miracles, but for the traditional understanding of revelation itself.

4 Signs vs. Self-Manifestation

With this bold operation, Spinoza has effectively severed the traditional link between miracles and religious certainty, transforming miracles into proofs of atheism and universal uncertainty. After his thorough critique of the assumptions underlying the belief in miracles, religious consciousness can no longer naively rely on their probative value. Consequently, divine revelation, as Oldenburg understands it, loses its foundation and its "certificate of authenticity." What, then, becomes of the concept of revelation once its certifying foundation is removed? As the ensuing reflections show, Spinoza does not abandon the notion of revelation, but instead subjects it to a profound transformation.

As discussed in the introduction, Oldenburg—in conformity with the traditional view—perceives miracles as the necessary complement of revelation: they validate the revealed message and certify its divine origin. This implies that revelation—which Spinoza defines as "the certain knowledge of some matter which God has revealed to men" (TTP, chapter 1; G 3:15)—is inher-

ently devoid of certainty.²⁵ Indeed, God's revelations to the prophets always occur through the medium of imagination—that is, through words and/or visible forms—and “imagination does not, by its nature, involve certainty” (TTP, chapter 2; G 3:30). As shown in the previous section, certainty belongs only to absolute notions that express infinity and exclude the possibility of any external force or agency that could deny them. Due to its particular and fragmentary nature, imagination lacks this privilege. Therefore, nothing prevents the revealed message from being false, a mere hallucination, or a delusion. Consequently, the prophet requests supplementary signs to convince both himself and others of the certainty of the message he has received, and this supplementary sign takes the form of the miracle: “So the Prophets were not certain about God's revelation by the revelation itself, but by some sign” (TTP, chapter 2; G 3:30).

The revealed message also lacks certainty because its origin is external and alien to the prophet's mind. This paradoxically means that despite being externally received, *or precisely because of this*, it neither provides cognitive access to an external reality nor allows us to transcend our epistemic isolation. The source of revelation, as it is an irreducible *otherness* inscrutable to our mind, prevents us from going beyond ourselves. Spinoza repeatedly emphasizes this point: revelation does not broaden our knowledge and leaves our preconceptions and prejudices unchallenged. “So Prophecy never made the Prophets more learned” (TTP, chapter 2; G 3:30). As a result, God's revelations to the prophets are tailored to their preconceptions, biases, and idiosyncrasies (TTP, chapter 2; G 3:30). In other words, revelation manifests an already-known God, a deity crafted by ourselves and conforming to our standards. The accompanying miracle, as discussed in the second section, underscores this “fashioned” character of the deity. Therefore, what is revealed in both the revelation and its accompanying miracle is not divinity as such [*quoad se*], but in relation to us [*quoad nos*].

Nevertheless, Spinoza does not reject the concept of revelation; he explicitly asserts that God manifests himself and makes himself known to man (see, for instance, KV 2, chapter 24; G 1:106–107). However, if true revelation makes God known to man *quoad se*, rather than in a way relative to us [*quoad nos*], then this manifestation cannot occur as a received message, extrinsically transmitted and symbolically mediated through signs and words. Its origin cannot be

25 Regarding Spinoza's approach to prophecy and revelation in connection to the medieval Jewish tradition, see Howard Kreisel, *Prophecy: The History of an Idea in Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2001).

external; its “cause” must reside within the human mind itself. Consider the following passage (TTP, chapter 1; G 3:16; italics mine):

Therefore, since our mind—simply from the fact that it contains God’s Nature objectively in itself, and participates in it—has the power to form certain notions which explain the nature of things and teach us how to conduct our lives, we can rightly maintain that *the nature of the mind, insofar as it is conceived in this way, is the first cause of divine revelation.* For whatever we clearly and distinctly understand, the idea and nature of God dictates to us (as we have just indicated), not indeed in words, but in a far more excellent way, which agrees best with the nature of the mind.

In this passage, we find the same identification between knowledge of the divine and knowledge as such discussed in the previous section: the notions “which explain the nature of things” also reveal the divine itself. However, the aspect to be underscored is that according to the passage, divine revelation—that is, manifestations of the divine nature—must be sought in the nature of the mind itself, in its cognitive power, which it possesses precisely because it “participates” in God’s nature (which consists in unrestricted knowledge). Thus, true revelation does not unveil anything alien or beyond the mind’s own powers and resources. Instead, it reveals that God is intimately connected to the human mind, as *the very core of its being.*

One might argue that this conception of revelation imprisons us in our subjectivity more decisively than received revelation corroborated by signs. Is it not utterly incompatible with the notion of divine self-manifestation *quoad se* that it is self-generated by the mind? This is not the case if we assume that God is not alien to the human mind, but the very substance of its being. This connaturality with the divine is a necessary corollary of the awareness of our finitude, compelling us to acknowledge that we are part of a greater reality that *exceeds us and at the same time constitutes us.* Otherwise, in supposing that God is alien to our nature—namely, a force that is external to nature itself—we would dogmatically assume the limits of nature, taking our fragmentary perception of nature as nature itself. As shown in the second section, this supposition would reinforce our cognitive isolation.

One of Spinoza’s well-known dictums asserts that the truth is the index both of itself and of the false (“verum index sui et falsi”; Ep. 76; G 4:320^a). In other words, truth manifests itself directly, without intermediaries or signs of any kind.²⁶ Otherwise—as Spinoza’s *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*

26 Regarding the difference between “index” and “signum” in Spinoza, see Vinciguerra, *Spino-*

clearly shows—the truth would require a sign to validate it, and this sign would need another sign, leading to an infinite regress. This endless mediation would prevent us from ever accessing the genuine truth. The same applies to revelation, understood as a disclosure of truth. The absolute notions discussed in the previous section possess this self-validating and self-certifying character, as they do not derive from prior notions and contain their own justification. They reveal the divine nature directly: *verum index sui* thus amounts to *divinum index sui*.

5 Conclusion

In the great debate about miracles in the seventeenth century, Spinoza's approach stands out for its radicality and audacity. While some thinkers declare miracles superfluous and dispensable for genuine religion, Spinoza goes further by directly declaring them contrary to religion. Yet the most innovative aspect of his treatment of miracles, as the preceding reflections have shown, is his elucidation of the "complex interplay between what are taken to be miracles and the observer's idea of God."²⁷ The believer in miracles holds a prior conception of God and his relationship to the world, which he projects onto events that he cannot explain through available natural explanations. A key aspect of this conception is the belief that God's essence is unknowable and that His interventions in the natural order are recognisable precisely for their inexplicability in purely natural terms. Spinoza points out the difficulties of identifying inexplicable phenomena with divine interventions and critiques the questionable assumptions underlying this claim. The outcome of his critical examination is implacable: the *deus absconditus* is in fact a deity fashioned according to human standards, an anthropomorphism.

Amos Funkenstein coined the expression "transparency of the divine" to describe the transformation in early modern thought from viewing God as a *deus absconditus*, inscrutable to the human mind, to conceiving the divine

za et le signe, 283–286. Vinciguerra convincingly demonstrates that a sign—unlike an *index*—necessarily refers to something other than itself, so that no sign can be *signum sui*. Due to this inherent heterogeneity, any divine manifestation through signs inevitably conceals God's essence, rendering it unknowable. In contrast, Spinoza holds that God's manifestation within the mind is actually a self-manifestation, and therefore that God's essence is adequately knowable, a claim that—as Vinciguerra aptly notes—constitutes "le scandale et la véritable originalité du spinozisme" (284).

²⁷ See Woods, "The Evidential Value of the Biblical Miracles," 24.

nature as an intelligible reality that can be precisely known.²⁸ With certain qualifications, this “transparency of the divine” can be observed in the works of Descartes, Spinoza, Malebranche, and Leibniz.²⁹ Among these thinkers, Spinoza stands out as the most prominent exemplar of this shift. The preceding reflections shed light on the true meaning of this transparency. Rather than representing an arrogant claim by an overtly self-confident mind, it indicates an acute awareness of our situatedness and limitations. Precisely because genuine cognition cannot be taken for granted, and because our natural state is one of blindness and unreality, we cannot legitimately expect to find the divine in our cognitive voids and explanatory gaps. The divine becomes manifest not when the human mind fails—as the believer in miracles pretends—but when it transcends the darkness and confusion of its subjective confinement.

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28 Cf. Amos Funkenstein, *Theology and the Scientific Imagination from the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 25.

29 Regarding this “transparency” in Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz, see Robert M. Adams, “The Priority of the Perfect in the Philosophical Theology of the Continental Rationalists,” in *Rationalism, Platonism and God: A Symposium on Early Modern Philosophy*, ed. Michael Ayers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 90–116. As for the “transparency of the divine” in Malebranche, see Denis Moreau, *Malebranche* (Paris: Vrin, 2004), 133–138.

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Following “Plato’s Method”

Scepticism as a Cultural Method of Learning in the (Jewish) Enlightenment in Berlin and Breslau

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Abstract

Focusing on the German Late Enlightenment and the Haskalah in Berlin and Breslau, this essay describes dialogical learning and Socratic conversations as a teaching method with inherent sceptical elements. In terms of educational philosophy, the enlighteners exploited this cultural scepticism both for epistemological purposes and as a subversive strategy against dogmatic doctrines. The focus is on Moses Mendelssohn’s influential dialogical treatise *Phaedon, or On the Immortality of the Soul* (1767), as well as on the dialogue theories developed by the popular philosophers Johann Jakob Engel in Berlin and Christian Garve in Breslau. On the one hand, this article describes the significance attributed to the introduction of the Socratic method in the general practice of school teaching, while on the other, it analyses the subversive significance of scepticism as a teaching method specifically for maskilim in their efforts to modernise Judaism.

Keywords

Dialogical learning – Socratic teaching method – German Enlightenment – Haskalah – Moses Mendelssohn – Johann Jakob Engel – Christian Garve – Joel Bril Löwe

1 Introduction: The Attitude towards the Socratic Teaching Method in the Nineteenth Century

In 1818, a small brochure appeared in Breslau in which G.R. Freund published his thoughts on the education of Jewish girls (*Ueber die Bildung der Mädchen mosaischer Religion*). According to Freund, this “tender sex” cannot “by its nature” bear abstract ideas, which is why “everything that is presented to a girl” must be “easy, pleasant, and comprehensible.” He therefore recommen-

ded the Socratic method of teaching: "This causes the youthful mind to explore, reveals all the folds of the young heart through plausible and appropriate questions, and leads it to the point of view it wishes to have."¹ With this assessment of femininity, Freund revealed a misogynistic attitude that can be traced back to Plato's gendering of the Logos as masculine. However, unlike Freund, Plato did not describe the dialogues of his teacher Socrates as a suitable method for teaching supposedly less intellectually gifted people, nor would he have seen Socrates's intention as being directed by asking his—exclusively male—students specific questions in order to obtain predetermined answers. In Plato's description, Socrates rather supported his young dialogue partners in developing their own theses by asking questions and verifying their conclusiveness in conversation. He did not present ready-made answers in his dialogues; the discussions often ended unresolved and in *aporia*. Plato was not concerned with results or with the presentation of his own knowledge, but rather with demonstrating argumentation strategies and questioning techniques that were suitable for challenging knowledge in a sceptical way and thus approaching knowledge of deeper truth by means of reason. In the epistemological sense, Socrates's questions were tools for developing one's own views in a communicative debate with other points of view. The dialogue partners, whose characters and positions differed, had the important task of making people aware of the existence of different ways of thinking for the first time and thereby activating movements of reflection. This resulted in a sceptical attitude towards the idea of a sole possibility and exclusivity of inherited and traditional ways of perception.²

The fact that there were rather negative evaluations of the Socratic teaching method in the nineteenth century, of which Freund is just one example, was due to the criticisms of leading educationalists such as August Hermann Niemeyer, Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, and Johann Gottlieb Fichte. As a result, Socratic learning was removed from the didactic agenda.³ For the popular philosophers and reform pedagogues of the German Late Enlightenment,

1 G.R. Freund, *Ueber die Bildung der Mädchen mosaischer Religion. Ein kleiner Beitrag zur Pädagogik* (Breslau, 1818), 7–8. The author's first name appears abbreviated on the title page. Unfortunately, his identity could not be confirmed.

2 See Ruprecht Mattig, "Bildung aus kulturanthropologischer Perspektive," in *Qualitative Bildungsforschung und Bildungstheorie*, ed. Ingrid Miethe and Hans-Rüdiger Müller (Opladen: Budrich, 2012), 85.

3 See Dietmar Till, "Sokratische Lehrart. Das gelungene Gespräch als pädagogische Kommunikationsform im 18. Jahrhundert," in *Gelungene Gespräche als Praxis der Gemeinschaftsbildung*, ed. Angela Schrott and Christoph Strosetzki (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), 109, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110592580>.

however, the Socratic way of teaching was highly valued. It was regarded as a pedagogical approach by which “the growth of understanding and reason flourishes best,” as the philanthropist Ernst Christian Trapp (1745–1818) emphasised, which had “only to do with the culture of the common sense of humankind” and taught “thinking, not knowing.”⁴

This paper’s core thesis is that the method of a cognitive process carried out via questioning dialogue was a sophisticated educational concept whose inherent scepticism was undogmatically and subversively used by some representatives of the (Jewish) Enlightenment as a guiding principle for their Enlightenment goals. In the following, I will describe how some Berlin and Breslau Enlightenment philosophers drew on Socrates’s method and introduced it in a modernised form into both literature and school teaching. I will also point out that this was particularly illustrated by Moses Mendelssohn’s popular philosophical work *Phädon, oder über die Unsterblichkeit der Seele in drey Gesprächen* [Phaedon, or On the Immortality of the Soul in Three Dialogues], which not only provided philosophical evidence for the doctrine of immortality, but also presented examples of dialogical scepticism as a cultural method of acquiring knowledge.⁵ Popular philosophers such as Johann Jacob Engel in Berlin and Christian Garve in Breslau developed their theories of dialogue based on Mendelssohn’s dialogical work, which were subsequently put into practice in some Berlin and Breslau schools. The aim of school teaching according to the Socratic method, as will be shown, was to educate self-thinking individuals who were able to sceptically reflect on traditional customs and doctrines. The fact that dialogue-based learning could be made “easy, pleasant, and comprehensible,” as Freund put it, was a welcome side effect for Jewish and non-Jewish teachers alike, also in lessons intended solely for boys.

2 The Dialogue Method in an Educational Context

The ideal form in which knowledge should be acquired and presented once again became a much-discussed topic in the German Late Enlightenment. It was above all the representatives of popular philosophy who drew on the

4 Ernst Christian Trapp, “Vom Unterricht überhaupt. Zweck und Gegenstände desselben für verschiedene Stände. Ob und wie fern man ihn zu erleichtern und angenehm zu machen suchen dürfe? Allgemeine Methoden und Grundsätze,” *Allgemeine Revision des gesammten Schul- und Erziehungswesens von einer Gesellschaft praktischer Erzieher* 8 (1787): 189–190.

5 On this subject, see also Michela Torbidoni, “Socratic Impulse, Secular Tendency, and Jewish Emancipation: A Comparison between Simone Luzzatto and Moses Mendelssohn,” in *Yearbook of the Maimonides Centre for Advanced Studies* 2019, ed. Yoav Meyrav (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), 11–30.

Socratic-Platonic method of academic scepticism.⁶ Of central importance to them was the comprehensibility of the thoughts or plot [Handlung]; that is, the processual developments and changes in attitude during the conversation. This is how the Berlin writer, popular philosopher, and educationalist Johann Jacob Engel (1741–1802) described an ideal of knowledge transfer based on Socrates. An instructive conversation is

full of true, *present* action; the protagonist does not doctrinate what he has long since made out for himself; it is only now that he weaves the thread of enquiry; it is only now, at this moment, that he brings the fabric to fruition. To this development on the spot—which is so much lacking in the dialogues of most modern [writers], because the gentlemen are almost always dogmatists, who have their fixed system—to this development, I say, no character is so suitable as that which *Socrates* had; a man who never made a decision, and therefore, was always eager for new reasons to make one, who always doubted, always sought, always wanted to learn himself the truths that he propounded.⁷

To Engel, mutual exchange played a fundamental role in the dialogue, because the interlocutors “arranged for this very matter to be investigated” and determined the entire course of the investigation “while the main interlocutor took their particular opinions and attitudes into account.”⁸ Here, it becomes clear that Engel was pursuing a concept of dialogue tailored to current needs, which on the one hand understood the acquisition of knowledge as individual and on the other linked the cognitive process to a counterpart, to the human community, because it is only in dialogue that reasoning is newly structured and self-reflection is set in motion. Accordingly, the Enlightenment philosophers made self-reflection a principle of thought and called for a critical examination of judgement.

Engel therefore introduced the Socratic teaching method at the Joachimsthal Gymnasium in Berlin, where he had been director since 1776.⁹ In 1780, prompted by state demands for school reforms, Engel wrote the *Versuch einer*

6 On popular philosophy and its proponents, see Christoph Böhr, *Philosophie für die Welt. Die Popularphilosophie der deutschen Spätaufklärung im Zeitalter Kants* (Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 2003).

7 Johann Jakob Engel, “Ueber Handlung, Gespräch und Erzählung,” *Neue Bibliothek der schönen Wissenschaften und der freyen Künste* 16 (1774): 213 (emphasis in original).

8 Engel, “Ueber Handlung, Gespräch und Erzählung,” 214.

9 See Alexander Košenina, “Johann Jakob Engels sokratische Lehrmethode am Joachimsthal-

Methode die Vernunftlehre aus Platonischen Dialogen zu entwickeln [An Attempt at a Method for Developing the Theory of Reason from Platonic Dialogues], which he presented in seven “lessons” based on Plato’s dialogue *Meno*. In it, he criticises the authoritarian teaching methods commonly used in schools and calls for equal dialogue between teachers and pupils in lessons:

If the light and luminous dialogues of Plato—and these are pretty much all those that are moral in content—were introduced into schools and read from a philosophical point of view, one would finally arrive at the point of teaching the young not merely philosophy, but philosophising. In almost all of our philosophical lessons, a profoundly learned man sits down on the teacher’s chair, not like Socrates in the midst of his pupils, but far above them; [he] explains, discusses, demonstrates, refutes; astonishes the pupil with his omniscience and infallibility; fills his memory with half-understood words; but does not enlighten his mind, does not sharpen his ingenuity, does not teach him to think.¹⁰

While Engel emphasises the importance of learning to think logically through school-based reasoning training, he fears that pupils at conventional schools will be “forever deterred from thinking” as they are constantly made aware of their inability, leading them to self-doubt.¹¹ The opposite effect would be achieved if the teacher were to meet the pupils at eye level. Engel continues:

This was precisely the great art of teaching that Plato possessed. In the person of his Socrates, he himself becomes so unknowing, equates himself so much with his pupil, wins his love and his confidence so well through this equality; interweaves him so intimately, and yet so unnoticedly, into the interest of the enquiry; does not actually give him the notions, but lets him seek them himself, by merely suggesting them to him; lets him himself go through the operations of the intellect, through which all philosophy arose, and grants him the sweet dream of having invented the truths for himself. How much light must thereby dawn in the intellect!¹²

schen Gymnasium zu Berlin (1776–1787),” in *Johann Jakob Engel (1741–1802). Philosoph für die Welt, Ästhetiker und Dichter*, ed. Alexander Košenina (Hanover: Wehrhahn, 2005), 196–197.

10 Johann Jakob Engel, *Versuch einer Methode die Vernunftlehre aus Platonischen Dialogen zu entwickeln* (Berlin, 1780), 152.

11 Engel, *Versuch einer Methode*, 152.

12 Engel, 153–154.

The fact that there was a need for reform in Prussian schools, but that the recommended Socratic-Platonic teaching method was an art that conventional teachers were unable to master, was satirically illustrated by the writer and pedagogue Johann Gottlieb Schummel (1748–1813) in a fictitious conversation between a teacher named Socrates and some unnamed pupils. Through this classroom dialogue, which Schummel integrated into his educational novel *Spitzbart* (1779), he illustrates the teachers' lack of knowledge of dialogical learning. The Socratic method is absurdly turned into its dogmatic opposite, so that the teacher, after an exemplary demonstration of a Socratic conversation by the school director, comes to the conclusion that "there is no great difference between catechising and Socratising";¹³ in other words, mere memorisation on the basis of a fixed conversation (catechism) is erroneously equated with the pupils acquiring new knowledge through thematically open and undogmatic conversation (Socratism).

Schummel was appointed vice-rector and professor of history at the Protestant Elisabeth-Gymnasium in Breslau in 1788. Thanks to this position and his reputation as an enlightened writer and pedagogue, in 1790, the Silesian provincial government commissioned him to draw up a draft lesson plan for the first modern Jewish school in Breslau.¹⁴ As a result, the *Königliche Wilhelmsschule* [Royal Wilhelm School] opened in March 1791, providing education exclusively for Jewish boys. The inauguration ceremony took place in the presence of many Breslau scholars and schoolmen, among them Schummel and the writer and popular philosopher Christian Garve (1742–1798).¹⁵ According to the prospectuses of the *Wilhelmsschule*, which were used as invitations to the annual public examinations, a number of pupils gave joint talks on these occasions, some of which were explicitly described as "Socratic conversations."¹⁶ Both the conversations conducted in German and Polish and the wide range of topics

13 Johann Gottlieb Schummel, *Spitzbart. Eine komi-tragische Geschichte für unser pädagogisches Jahrhundert* (Leipzig, 1779); Schummel, *Spitzbart. Eine komi-tragische Geschichte für unser pädagogisches Jahrhundert*, ed. Eberhard Haufe (Munich: Beck, 1983), 187.

14 §13 of the royal "Vorschrift, wie es mit dem Juden-Wesen in Breslau gehalten werden soll" [Regulation on How the Jewish System in Breslau Should Be Maintained] of 21 May 1790 ordered that "a proper school consisting of several classes be established in Breslau"; see Friedrich Albrecht Zimmermann, *Geschichte und Verfassung der Juden im Herzogthum Schlesien* (Breslau, 1791), 48.

15 See Aron Heppner, "Aus unserem Gemeinde-Archiv," *Breslauer Jüdisches Gemeindeblatt* (16 May 1927): 71.

16 The rare early prospectuses of the *Wilhelmsschule*, which contain the timetables for the respective examinations, are edited in Joel Bril Löwe in *Breslau. Die Schulprogramme und andere Schriften im Kontext (1790–1802)*, ed. Uta Lohmann and Kathrin Wittler (Münster: Waxmann, 2025).

covered in the talks prove that dialogue-based learning was a teaching method practised across all subjects at the Wilhelmsschule. This is also evidenced by a contemporary report by a visitor to the school, who emphasised that “Professor Löwe’s Socratic method” gave the pupils “the best opportunity to show and develop their talents.”¹⁷

Joel Löwe (also known as Joel Bril, 1761–1802), the first headteacher at the Wilhelmsschule and the author of the early school prospectuses, brings us full circle to the Jewish and Christian Berlin enlighteners and popular philosophers. Before Löwe came to Breslau, he was a private tutor of the sons of the maskil and politician David Friedländer (1750–1834) and his wife Margarete (née Itzig, also known as Blümchen, 1752–1814) in Berlin. During this time, he was an eyewitness to the initial developments at Berlin’s Jüdische Freischule [Jewish Free School], which Friedländer cofounded in 1778.¹⁸ At the time, Löwe also had personal contact with Friedländer’s well-known friend Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786),¹⁹ whose educational philosophy exercised a strong influence on his concept of education.²⁰ Both Mendelssohn and Friedländer

17 Christian Weiss, *Wanderungen in Sachsen, Schlesien, Glatz und Böhmen* (Leipzig, 1796), 168–169.

18 See the fundamental essay on the Freischule by Ingrid Lohmann, “Die jüdische Freischule in Berlin—Eine bildungstheoretische und schulhistorische Analyse. Zur Einführung in die Quellensammlung,” in *Chevrat Chinuch Nearim. Die jüdische Freischule in Berlin 1778–1825 im Umfeld preußischer Bildungspolitik und jüdischer Kulturreform*, ed. Ingrid Lohmann (Münster: Waxmann, 2001), 13–84. See also Shmuel Feiner, “Erziehungsprogramme und gesellschaftliche Ideale im Wandel: Die Freischule in Berlin, 1778–1825,” in *Jüdische Erziehung und aufklärerische Schulreform. Analysen zum späten 18. und frühen 19. Jahrhundert*, ed. Britta L. Behm, Uta Lohmann, and Ingrid Lohmann (Münster: Waxmann, 2002), 69–105 (originally published as Feiner, “Educational Agendas and Social Ideals: ‘Jüdische Freischule’ in Berlin, 1778–1825” [Hebrew], *Zion* 40 [1995]: 393–424); Feiner, “The Freischule on the Crossroads of the Secularization Crisis in Jewish Society,” in *Chevrat Chinuch Nearim*, ed. Ingrid Lohmann, 6–12; Uta Lohmann, *Chevrat Chinuch Nearim:—The Berlin Jüdische Freischule between Mascilic Aims, State Requirements and Bourgeois Demands* (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University, 2006); Michael A. Meyer, “The Freischule as a Mirror of Attitudes,” in I. Lohmann, *Chevrat Chinuch Nearim*, 1–5.

19 On Moses Mendelssohn, see the biographies by Alexander Altman, *Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1973); Dominique Bourel, *Moses Mendelssohn. La naissance du judaïsme moderne* (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), and Shmuel Feiner, *Moses Mendelssohn: Sage of Modernity*, trans. Anthony Berris (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/j.ctt1pn956>.

20 This is particularly evident in his 1791 speech given at the opening of the Wilhelmsschule; see Löwe, “Rede, gehalten von Joel Löwe, Oberlehrer und Inspector der Wilhelms-Schule, und Mitglied des Direktions-Collegii,” in Lohmann and Wittler, *Joel Bril Löwe in Breslau. Die Schulprogramme und andere Schriften im Kontext (1790–1802)*, 70–74. See also Britta L. Behm, “Moses Mendelssohns Beziehungen zur Berliner Freischule zwischen 1778 und

were close friends of Johann Jacob Engel,²¹ who in turn was a very close friend of Christian Garve.²²

As it is not known how the dialogue lessons and Socratic dialogues were conducted at the Wilhelmsschule, and possibly also at the Freischule, the example of another Jewish school, the Israelitische Hauptschule in Prague, may serve as a substitute. Founded in 1782, the Israelitische Hauptschule was one of the earliest modern German-Jewish schools of the Haskalah outside Prussia.²³ In 1791, a conversation "on the immortality of the soul" was presented there as part of the public examinations.²⁴ In this dialogue, the four debating pupils represented different characters with varying sentiments. Each of them took an individual perspective on their topic of discussion, they failed to reach a decision between the differing positions, and the dialogue ended in aporia. The topic of the debate reveals that this was a response to probably the best-known Platonic dialogue of the eighteenth century: Mendelssohn's successful philosophical work *Phädon, oder über die Unsterblichkeit der Seele*, which first appeared in 1767 and was reprinted several times in the following years.

1786. Eine exemplarische Analyse zu Mendelssohns Stellung in der Haskala," in Behm, Lohmann, and Lohmann, *Jüdische Erziehung und aufklärerische Schulreform*, 107–135, and Uta Lohmann, *Haskala und allgemeine Menschenbildung. David Friedländer und Wilhelm von Humboldt im Gespräch: Zur Wechselwirkung zwischen jüdischer Aufklärung und neuhumanistischer Bildungstheorie* (Münster: Waxmann, 2020), 29–87.

- 21 See Uta Lohmann, "David Friedländers Freundschaft mit dem Kreis der Berliner Mittwochsgesellschaft und seine 'Aufklärung über Juden,'" in *Berliner Aufklärung. Kulturwissenschaftliche Studien, Band 4*, ed. Alexander Košenina and Ursula Goldenbaum (Hanover: Wehrhahn, 2011), 101–107.
- 22 The fact that Löwe was a recipient of Engel's and Garve's writings is evident from references to their works in his school prospectuses: see Lohmann and Wittler, *Joel Bril Löwe in Breslau*, 476, 481–482, 501–502.
- 23 See Louise Hecht, "Die Prager deutsch-jüdische Schulanstalt 1782–1848," in Behm, Lohmann, and Lohmann, *Jüdische Erziehung und aufklärerische Schulreform*, 213–252; Hecht, *Ein jüdischer Aufklärer in Böhmen. Der Pädagoge und Reformator Peter Beer (1758–1838)* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2008), 66–110. On the Jewish schools in the Habsburg Empire, see Dirk Sadowski, *Haskala und Lebenswelt. Herz Homberg und die jüdischen deutschen Schulen in Galizien 1782–1806* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010). For an overview of the early Jewish schools, see Mordechai Eliav, *Jewish Education in Germany in the Period of Enlightenment and Emancipation* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Sivan Press, 1960); Eliav, *Jüdische Erziehung in Deutschland im Zeitalter der Aufklärung und Emanzipation*, trans. Maik Strobel (Münster: Waxmann, 2001).
- 24 Published by Moses Wiener, "Gespräch. Über die Unsterblichkeit der Seele," *Jüdisch-deutsche Monatschrift* 1 (Iyar 1802): 122–128.

3 Moses Mendelssohn's *Phaedon* and Dialogue-Based Scepticism as a Method of Knowledge Acquisition

Mendelssohn used Plato's Socratic dialogue *Phaedo*, updated for a contemporary audience, as a model for his *Phaedon*. He admitted that his Socrates was "not the Socrates of history," because he had "put arguments in the mouth of Socrates, which could not have been well known to him, in accordance with the status of philosophy at his time."²⁵ Mendelssohn explains his motivation:

As I had to re-examine the immortality of the soul, and it caused me some trouble to differentiate faith from conviction, the thought occurred to me: by which arguments would a Socrates be able to prove immortality in our time to himself and to his friends? A friend of reason, as he was, would most certainly have gratefully accepted from other philosophers, what in their doctrine is founded on reason, regardless of what country, or religious party they might belong to.²⁶

Mendelssohn was thus concerned with finding the truth through the use of reason. He considered the dialogue form to be particularly suitable for metaphysical investigations. He followed "the method of Plato" because in his opinion, the subject "permits no other treatment" and he preferred "to be inventive, than give up some of the rigor of the argument."²⁷ With *Phaedon*, Mendelssohn not only created a popular philosophical work in which he provided evidence for fundamental religious principles, but also presented a successful example of cognitive processes that develop from speech and contradiction and a constant sceptical questioning of what is said. Without being a sceptic in a strictly philosophical sense, Mendelssohn used scepticism as a means of finding the truth by applying the Socratic method in order to question or verify conventional theorems.

Excerpts from the second dialogue of the *Phaedon* may serve to illustrate this cognitive process. It reports an exchange between Socrates and his students Cebes and Simmias. Remarkably, after a pause in the conversation, Socrates, in the interests of "perfect clarity," invites his students to ask questions and express objections and doubts about the matter under discussion so as to dis-

25 Moses Mendelssohn, "Appendix to the Third Edition of the *Phädon*, 1769," in Mendelssohn, *Phädon, or On the Immortality of the Soul*, trans. Patricia Noble (New York: Lang, 2007), 152.

26 Mendelssohn, "Appendix to the Third Edition," 153.

27 Mendelssohn, 152.

cuss them jointly, either to remove their doubts or to share in their scepticism.²⁸ Mendelssohn has Simmias be the first to fulfil Socrates's request:

If I raise doubts about the immortality of the soul, it is not to contradict the truth of this divine teaching, but rather to challenge the ability to prove it rationally, or more so to contest the way which you have chosen, oh *Socrates!*, to convince us of it through reason. [...] I feel that I cannot contradict the doctrine of immortality, or of God's judgment after this death, without raising infinite difficulties, without seeing everything, which I regarded as true and good, shaken to its foundation. [...] But if that path, which you, oh *Socrates!* pursue, leads us through a simple series of irrefutable arguments to the truth: then we can hope to secure the proof for ourselves and always remember it. A series of clear conclusions can be recalled more easily in thoughts, than that congruence of truths, which to a certain extent demands its own state of mind. For this reason, I have no misgivings to set all the doubts before you, which the most determined opponent of immortality could assert.²⁹

While Simmias has his doubts about the conclusiveness of the argument, Cebes is sceptical about the relevance of the knowledge gained:

Our friend Simmias, he said, seems only to want to possess with certainty that which had been promised to him, but I, my dear *Socrates!*, would like to have more than you promised to us. If your proofs are defended against all objections, still nothing more follows from them, than that our soul continues after the death of our body and has ideas [...]. Now if our soul should sink into a kind of sleep or state of lethargy with its separation from the body, and never awake again, what would we have gained by its continuation?³⁰

In the discussion of the doctrine of immortality between Socrates and his disciples, Mendelssohn provides a concrete example of a dialogue that aims at scepticism and leads to contemplation. The doubts raised are discussed collectively and can only be resolved through a line of reasoning whose arguments can be intellectually understood step by step. However, even if conviction is

28 Mendelssohn, 103.

29 Mendelssohn, 104–105 (emphasis in original).

30 Mendelssohn, 107 (emphasis in original).

achieved in this way, its meaning remains uncertain, leading to an open, unresolved outcome. Even though Mendelssohn generally took a clear position in his philosophical writings, he ends his account of the Socratic dialogue by expressing scepticism towards a doctrine that had previously seemed convincing to everyone. In essence, he offers a philosophical reflection on the uncertainty surrounding the pursuit of true knowledge:

Not only this doctrine, but everything which we knew and believed, seemed to us at that time to become uncertain and indecisive, since we saw, that either we didn't have the capacity to distinguish truth from falsehood, or that truth and falsehood couldn't be distinguished from each other.³¹

Despite all the uncertainty, it is precisely maintaining scepticism that gives rise to further, even perpetual and never-ending enquiries, to lifelong learning and research.

In terms of scepticism fostered by dialogue, Friedländer emphasised in the introduction to the fifth edition of the *Phaedon* (1814) that “doubt is the indispensable requirement for all progress in knowledge, all progress of the intellect, of education, of enlightenment,”³² thereby quoting his friend Engel, who a few years earlier had written in his popular philosophical essay collection *Der Philosoph für die Welt* (1801) that the philosopher must know that “doubt is the indispensable requirement for all progress in knowledge, all enlightenment.”³³ To Engel and Friedländer, methodological doubt was the cause of reflexive intellectual processes. The maskil and philosopher Salomon Maimon (ca. 1753–1800) derived Mendelssohn's (and thus also Engel's and Friedländer's) methodological scepticism from Descartes. In his autobiographical *Lebensgeschichte* (1793), he reported on Mendelssohn's contemplative approach:

31 Mendelssohn, 108.

32 David Friedländer, “Einleitung des Herausgebers,” in Moses Mendelssohn, *Phädon oder über die Unsterblichkeit der Seele. Von Moses Mendelssohn*, ed. David Friedländer, 5th ed. (Berlin, 1814), x. See also Uta Lohmann, “‘Dem Wahrheitsforscher zur Belehrung.’ Die Herausgaben von Moses Mendelssohns *ha-Nefesh* (1787) und *Phädon* (1814–1821) durch David Friedländer: Kontexte, Adressaten, Intentionen,” *Mendelssohn-Studien* 19 (2015): 45–77, and Lohmann, “David Friedländers Rede an den Skeptiker oder Über den Bildungswert der Religion in aufgeklärten Zeiten,” in *Aspekte des Religiösen*, ed. Rainer Kampling et al. (Berlin: Hentrich & Hentrich, 2015), 29–45.

33 Johann Jakob Engel, “An Herrn S**. Über den Werth der Aufklärung,” in Engel, *J.J. Engels Schriften, Zweiter Band: Der Philosoph für die Welt, Zweiter Theil* (Berlin, 1801), 322–323.

Mendelssohn took a different sort of tack. He didn't want to block my drive to explore; in fact, he secretly rather liked it, and he said that even though I was on the wrong path at the moment, I should not curtail my thinking. For as Descartes correctly remarked, "doubt is the beginning of all philosophizing."³⁴

In a very similar way, it was the scepticism of Mendelssohn's young friend Thomas Abbt (1738–1766) that inspired him to write *Phaedon*.³⁵ In their conversation, they debated "the most important things to which all learning must ultimately relate," as Abbt expressed to Mendelssohn, asking him to share his "thoughts and doubts about it."³⁶ Mendelssohn pointed out that Abbt's doubts were aimed at developing new insights that would lead to "the truth being set in a brighter light." Therefore, he elaborated the Socratic dialogues of his *Phaedon* in order to develop "the principal theses" in a didactically comprehensible way,³⁷ in a "series of clear conclusions," as he has Simmias say. Due to this pedagogical intention, Friedländer—who, not least as a cofounder of the Berlin Freischule, was intensively engaged with educational issues—saw Mendelssohn's work as a textbook, thanks to the fact that it made the dialogue participants' thoughts and changes in opinion—that is, the epistemological processes that unfolded in the dialogue—comprehensible.³⁸

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- 34 Solomon Maimon, *The Autobiography of Solomon Maimon: The Complete Translation*, ed. Yitzhak Y. Melamed and Abraham P. Socher, trans. Paul Reitter (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 197, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400890446>. See the German original: Maimon, *Salomon Maimon's Lebengeschichte*, ed. K.P. Moritz (Berlin, 1793), 2:167: "Mendelssohn, der bloß lavirte, wollte sich meinem Untersuchungstrieb nicht widersetzen, hatte sogar innerlich Gefallen daran, und sagte: ich sei zwar jetzt nicht auf dem rechten Weg, man müsse aber den Lauf meiner Gedanken doch nicht hemmen, weil—wie Karthesius sehr richtig bemerkte—*Zweifeln der Anfang des gründlichen Philosophierens sei*." In his preface to *Phaedon*, Mendelssohn himself refers to Descartes: see Mendelssohn, *Phädon, or On the Immortality of the Soul*, trans. Patricia Noble (New York: Lang, 2007), 43.
- 35 On the history of the origin of *Phaedon*, see Avi Lifschitz, "Thomas Abbt and Moses Mendelssohn: Private Correspondence and Public Exchange at the Origins of *Phädon*," in *Jüdische und christliche Intellektuelle in Berlin um 1800*, ed. Cord-Friedrich Berghahn, Avi Lifschitz, and Conrad Wiedemann (Hanover: Wehrhahn, 2021), 51–64, and Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 140–147.
- 36 Thomas Abbt to Moses Mendelssohn, 11 January 1764, quoted from Friedländer, "Einleitung des Herausgebers," x.
- 37 Mendelssohn, *Phädon, or On the Immortality of the Soul*, 41.
- 38 See Friedländer, "Einleitung des Herausgebers," viii–xvi. See also Lohmann, "Dem Wahrheitsforscher zur Belehrung: Die Herausgaben," 68–77.

4 The Dialogue Theories of Christian Garve and Johann Jacob Engel

In his review of Mendelssohn's *Phaedon*, Garve emphasised the work's two-fold significance.³⁹ According to him, *Phaedon* is "an important fragment of philosophy" in terms of content and "an exercise of the Socratic method" in terms of literary form.⁴⁰ He devoted almost all of the first part of his review to the Socratic method, which he called "philosophical dialogue," stating that this method was hardly widespread and its rules were largely unknown, but that it deserved more attention "because of all the methods that philosophy has developed from one century to the other, dialogue is the best for teaching and almost the only one for forming a philosophical genius." A "system of education for good minds" should therefore be "built on this art of dialogue."⁴¹ With this method, "the philosophical ideas that have been regarded as certain and established as principles of behaviour and morals" would have to be re-examined. A teacher who applied this "method of teaching" based on scepticism "would do more for the enlightenment of his nation as a whole, and for the happiness and virtue of the people among whom he lived, than the greatest dogmatists, and even the most profound moralists."⁴²

Garve's statement likely prompted Engel to introduce the Socratic teaching method at the Joachimsthal Gymnasium, just as Joel Löwe was inspired by Mendelssohn (and possibly also by the teaching method at the Berlin Freischule) in his didactic programme for the Wilhelmsschule. Löwe could furthermore draw on Engel's experience of the dialogue method. In Breslau, he may also have been in direct exchange with Garve himself. In his speech at the opening of the Wilhelmsschule, Löwe made it clear that in addition to religious education, he saw the "development of the intellectual powers" as the school's main task. As part of this, he counted the "teaching of the national language and other languages," such as Hebrew and Polish, as well as the teaching of "geography, natural history, history, geometry, and logic."⁴³ Löwe explicitly formulated the goal of education to be self-reflection and the critical examination of conventional principles, the overcoming of superstition and errors,

39 On the theory of dialogue, see Christian Garve, "Ueber Gesellschaft und Einsamkeit," in Garve, *Versuche über verschiedene Gegenstände aus der Moral, der Literatur und dem gesellschaftlichen Leben, Dritter Theil* (Breslau, 1797), 17–25, 81–86, and 148–157.

40 Christian Garve, "Phädon, oder über die Unsterblichkeit der Seele, in drey Gesprächen, von Moses Mendelssohn," *Neue Bibliothek der schönen Wissenschaften und der freyen Künste* 6 (1768): 81.

41 Garve, "Phädon," 82.

42 Garve, 83.

43 Löwe, "Rede, gehalten von Joel Löwe," 73.

and development into an independent individual who is useful to society. This ambition clearly corresponds with Garve's idea of the education of "a philosophical genius."

In his review—which in terms of content goes far beyond a mere book review, as it develops his own ideas regarding the theory of dialogue—Garve combines practical educational considerations with literary theory. According to him, philosophical dialogue unites the rules of drama and philosophical investigation.⁴⁴ As in drama, the writer must convincingly portray the characters and describe an event as well as the time, place, and situation of the plot in a "dialogue style."⁴⁵ For the purposes of philosophical investigation, the dialogue requires "a development of ideas that proceeds through immediate conclusions; but which thereby already prepares every answer through the question."⁴⁶ In philosophical dialogue, no stereotypes appear on the stage of action, but rather "real human beings," whose different characters influence their way of thinking and acting.⁴⁷ Garve concludes that the dialogue contains "not just ideas that are dissected, but also human beings" who are described.⁴⁸ It is precisely this diversity of character, combined with different ideas and ways of thinking, that he sees convincingly demonstrated in Mendelssohn's *Phaedon*:

In our Platonic conversation, besides Socrates, Simmias and Cebes are the real dialogue partners; and although they speak only seldom, although they then only make mere interjections, [...] one recognises that Simmias reveals more imagination and Cebes more profundity; the former calms himself quickly, and sooner doubts again, the other is more difficult to convince, but maintains his conviction more firmly; Simmias looks like a young hothead and Cebes like an older, thoughtful philosopher.⁴⁹

Garve further emphasises Mendelssohn's portrayal of Socrates's character,⁵⁰ using him to describe the ideal of a teacher with a deep capacity for reflection, "who never seems to teach, but only to examine," and who dedicates himself to his inquisitive students with "modest wisdom."⁵¹ He thus proves himself to

44 See Garve, "Phädon," 102.

45 Garve, 88–89.

46 Garve, 89.

47 Garve, 90.

48 Garve, 96.

49 Garve, 91.

50 See Garve, 94–95.

51 Garve, 316.

be a teacher who knows how to apply the dialogue-based teaching method and so responds to the pupils' needs without appearing authoritarian. Teachers and pupils are "joint friends of the truth who seek to enlighten each other."⁵² They are in a mutual educational process, which the teacher leads in a way that is unnoticed by the students, while—in a downright talmudic manner—also being ready to learn from his students himself.

In the further course of his review, Garve refers in detail to the dialogical method of philosophical conversations, which in his opinion are "truly different from dialogues that are dogmatic."⁵³ Here, he most likely had catechisms in mind, which were also based on dialogue, but were focused on the stubborn memorisation of fixed lesson content, as Schummel had satirically illustrated. To illustrate this, Garve gives the example of the inexperienced child from Plato's dialogue *Meno*, who is taught by Socrates. He thus illustrates a process of cognition in which errors are indispensable in order to be able to unmask those things that appear true, but are not:

Socrates lays the case before him [the child] and forces him to make his judgement. Naturally, he says what seems most probable to the senses after the first glance, without reflection. He puts his answer to the test; it is found to be false. The other is already one step removed from sensuality. He sees that the first glance cannot decide. So he begins anew, and even the improvement of his first error prompts the second, but every error he commits is always a step closer to the truth; so one finally finds the right path by continuing on each wrong path until one comes to the conclusion that it is not the right one, and is now moved to turn back.⁵⁴

Garve highlights two important characteristics of the dialogical teaching method: firstly, the teacher's withholding of judgement, which keeps the learner both "in a kind of expectation and suspension" and also in a state of sharpened attention,⁵⁵ and secondly, the openness, open-endedness, and (apparent) purposelessness of the conversations: the dialogue "seems to be nothing arranged, nothing agreed upon; one merely takes one step at random before the next, where the path leads; the present conclusion always seems to be the last intention, but it leads to a new one."⁵⁶ In this way, dogmatic doctrines, adherence to

52 Garve, 95.

53 Garve, 104.

54 Garve, 103–104.

55 Garve, 105.

56 Garve, 105.

existing theorems, and the assumption of ultimate certainty are avoided. This is precisely what characterises the Socratic scepticism shared by Mendelssohn, Garve, Engel, and Friedländer; namely, the doubt regarding the ability to be in possession of the truth. In other words: "The conviction of not already possessing the truth is the Socratic form of scepticism. However, this scepticism does not coagulate into a dogmatic thesis about the unknowability of the existent, but rather becomes a methodically fruitful motif for the joint search for truth" between teachers and students or between interlocutors with different personalities and differing views.⁵⁷

Garve's presentation of the form of dialogical knowledge acquisition and scepticism regarding knowledge was probably a large factor in Friedländer's extremely favourable evaluation of his review. In his view, Garve's explanations of the "rules of the art of dialogue" revealed "a master and authorised critic" and were surpassed "in fineness and fullness of observation" only by Engel's 1774 *Ueber Handlung, Gespräch und Erzählung* [On Activity, Conversation, and Narrative],⁵⁸ In this treatise, Engel, in accordance with Garve, developed an open concept of dialogue characterised by steps of knowledge acquisition that are intellectually comprehensible and open to constant questioning:

The philosophical discourse does not merely provide us, like the paragraph of a compendium, with the final result of the investigation, but with the whole investigation itself; not only the common-sense truth, but also all the steps that have been taken to find it, all the efforts to work through opposing doubts and objections.⁵⁹

The Socrates of Mendelssohn's *Phaedon* served as a model for Engel's dialogue theory. Engel was probably influenced by the Haskalah to no small extent, as he corresponded intensively with Mendelssohn and Friedländer in particular. Both also contributed to the first editions of his popular philosophical magazine *Der Philosoph für die Welt* [The Philosopher for the World] (1775 and 1777, 2nd edition 1787). Engel even dedicated the "increased and improved" 1801 complete edition to his "noble friend" Friedländer.⁶⁰

57 Wolfgang H. Pleger, *Die Vorsokratiker* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1991), 167, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-476-03966-8>.

58 Friedländer, "Einleitung des Herausgebers," xix–xx.

59 Engel, "Ueber Handlung, Gespräch und Erzählung," 207.

60 The interrelationship between the Jewish Enlightenment and popular philosophy is particularly evident in *Der Philosoph für die Welt*. It would be good to investigate whether the Haskalah, with its clear practical approach, was a significant contributory factor to the

Despite all his appreciation of the Platonic dialogues, in *Ueber Handlung, Gespräch und Erzählung*, Engel distanced himself from the Socratic works, which he felt were no longer appropriate for the times, as opinions and principles had “changed so infinitely” since their inception.⁶¹ Like Mendelssohn before him, Engel, in the introduction to his *Versuch einer Methode die Vernunftlehre aus Platonischen Dialogen zu entwickeln*, wondered “how Socrates should perhaps also have responded.”⁶² In fact, Mendelssohn’s *Phaedon* had significantly upgraded the Socratic dialogue in the Enlightenment discourse of the late eighteenth century, not least because of the sentiments expressed by his characters. Plato’s ancient dialogues lacked the expressions of emotions that were considered necessary by the Enlightenment philosophers in order to describe reflection and scepticism, processes of knowledge, and successive changes of mind in a credible and comprehensible way.⁶³ Thus, Engel also demanded that the dialogue include the “analysis of the development of the inner states of the soul; i.e., the representation of feelings and passions.”⁶⁴ In doing so, he was picking up on Mendelssohn, who had already attributed cognitive powers to the emotions in his 1755 *Briefe über die Empfindungen* [Letters on the Sentiments]. Engel emphasises that humans are “created more for feeling than for understanding.”⁶⁵ Consequently, he considers “the thinking and feeling soul” to be the “real arena of all activity.”⁶⁶

In his dialogue theory, Engel emphasised another important aspect of sceptical epistemology: self-reflection. Sometimes, the “philosophical narrative” represents “nothing but the efficacy of a single reflective soul.”⁶⁷ This is the case

development of popular philosophical trends within the Berlin and Breslau Enlightenment. Hypothetically, it can be said that Christian Enlightenment thinkers, such as Grave and Engel, adopted theories on the practice of oral teaching that had been common in Judaism since ancient times. At this point, it is worth remembering that the original Judaism demanded the oral transmission of doctrine, which only needed to be written down under the difficult conditions of exile. It was only with this process of writing down, or rather codification, that a gradual dogmatisation of doctrines took place. The preference for oral instruction continued in talmudic dialectics and later also in dialogical forms of presentation found in Hebrew literature.

61 Engel, “Ueber Handlung, Gespräch und Erzählung,” 211.

62 Engel, *Versuch einer Methode die Vernunftlehre aus Platonischen Dialogen zu entwickeln*, 22.

63 On the cognitive role of sensations, see Sieglinde Grimm, “Johann Jakob Engel: Dichtung und Popularphilosophie,” in Košenina, *Johann Jakob Engel (1741–1802)*, 120.

64 Grimm, “Johann Jakob Engel: Dichtung und Popularphilosophie,” 106.

65 Engel, “Ueber Handlung, Gespräch und Erzählung,” 191.

66 Engel, 201.

67 Engel, 207.

when the intended change lies "in the philosophising mind itself," which wants to teach itself

not for others, but for its own use, to correct, develop, refute, or confirm a thought. This gives rise to a new kind of work, distinct both from philosophical history and philosophical dialogues, which nevertheless assumes to some extent the nature of the latter, in that the philosopher divides himself into several persons, sometimes playing his own part, sometimes the part of others, and, speaking thus, makes interjections from the other's soul, which he then answers from his own.⁶⁸

Engel regarded the presentation of "philosophical soliloquies" as a higher and nobler kind of dialogue treatise, as it does not offer the results without first clarifying the cause of the investigation, the changes to the preliminary results, and the reasons behind them. But even if the author pretends "as if he knew of no listeners and had not yet decided for himself what he wanted to say" at the beginning of a philosophical soliloquy, but is only beginning to think aloud, the reader, who listens as if unnoticed, can be "better and more thoroughly informed about the subject of the enquiry."⁶⁹ In this respect, with regard to the literary forms of philosophical soliloquy, Engel did not consider seemingly absent or passive participants in the conversation to be superfluous, as it is also possible to initiate self-reflection and to guide the course of the conversation from outside the field of vision.⁷⁰

5 Literary Forms of Sceptical Dialogue Culture

A few years before Engel's discussions of philosophical soliloquy, Mendelssohn had published his Hebrew commentary on Ecclesiastes [*Megillat Qohelet*], probably the most sceptical book in the Hebrew Bible.⁷¹ While he had not explicitly called *Phaedon* a textbook, he noted on the title page of his commentary,

68 Engel, 207–208.

69 Engel, 209.

70 See Engel, 214.

71 See Ze'ev Strauss, "'Lernet sie und habet Acht sie zu erfüllen': Jüdische Erziehung, Qohelet und die Emanzipationsdebatte bei Moses Mendelssohn, David Friedländer und Samson Raphael Hirsch," in *Grenzgänge wissenschaftlicher Reflexivität in Judentum, Christentum und Islam*, ed. Tugrul Kurt et al. (Darmstadt: WBG, 2023), 189–219. See also Abigail Gillman, *A History of German Jewish Bible Translation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).

which was described as “the exegetical counterpart” to *Phaedon*,⁷² that it was written “for the benefit of the students” [לתועלת התלמידים].⁷³ In order to be able to more clearly distinguish sections of meaning and trains of thought from one another, Mendelssohn deviated from the traditional chapter division of the text and marked the beginning and end of speeches and counter-speeches, thereby emphasising the dialogical character of the book. Joel Bril (Löwe), who re-edited David Friedländer’s German translation of Qohelet with Mendelssohn’s commentary and his own philological notes, took the same approach as Mendelssohn.⁷⁴ This measure can be interpreted as a strategy against dogmatic determinations of the biblical text.

In his commentary, Mendelssohn explains that King Solomon was engaged in a self-conversation in order to clarify important questions for himself. Not everything in the book of Ecclesiastes is King Solomon’s true opinion:

Rather, he sometimes spoke as if deliberating a matter, posing questions, and answering them as scholars do with syllogisms, searching for the truth through reasoning. They attain their goal by sounding out counter-arguments, proposing all manner of doubt and, *with honest scales and balances* (Prov. 16:11), weighing a notion and its contrary, placing ideas next to each other so that they can distinguish truth from falsehood and the correct from the dubious. Seeing that the author of this book wrote using a method of induction and deliberation, one should properly attribute to him only the pronouncement that he made at the beginning—before doubts and counter-arguments were raised—and what emerges in conclusion after the deliberation at the end of the inquiry.⁷⁵

72 Daniel Krochmalnik, “Kommentar zum Buch des Predigers (*Biur li-megillat Kohelet*),” in Moses Mendelssohn, *Gesammelte Schriften. Jubiläumsausgabe. Band 20,1: Hebräische Schriften I/Deutsche Übertragung*, ed. Michael Brocke et al. (Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 2004), lv.

73 Moses Mendelssohn, *Sefer Megillat Qohelet* (Berlin, 1770). It is noteworthy that Friedländer wrote a pedagogical treatise to accompany his translation of Qohelet, in which he expounds Judaism’s non-dogmatic character: see Friedländer, “Ueber den besten Gebrauch der h[eiligen] Schrift in pädagogischer Rücksicht,” in Friedländer, *Der Prediger* (Berlin, 1788), 3–78, edited in “*Lerne Vernunft!*” *Jüdische Erziehungsprogramme zwischen Tradition und Modernisierung. Quellentexte aus der Zeit der Haskala, 1760–1811*, ed. Uta Lohmann and Ingrid Lohmann (Münster: Waxmann, 2005), 61–81.

74 See Joel Bril, “Introduction” [Hebrew], in *Megillat Qohelet*, ed. Bril (Berlin 1788/89), unpaginated, fifth page.

75 Moses Mendelssohn, “Commentator’s Introduction,” in Mendelssohn, *Moses Mendelssohn’s Hebrew Writings*, introduced and annotated by Edward Breuer and David Sorkin, ed. Edward Breuer (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), 132.

Mendelssohn's description of Solomon's method of sceptical questioning is strikingly like the philosophical soliloquy described by Engel. Its advantage can be seen in the fact that the dialogical "role reversal in the adoption of potential counter-arguments" offers the possibility of "breaking through the perspectivity of one's own cognition and thus making one's own positions the subject of reflection."⁷⁶ As described in Engel's dialogue theory, the interlocutor is absent in Solomon's philosophical soliloquy, but it is precisely in this "high and noble" form that the dialogue is of great self-reflective and epistemological benefit to all recipients who are eager to learn, especially pupils and students. Friedländer comments on the content of the last section of his translation of Qohelet: "The preacher says that his intention [...] was to instruct people about truths that are useful to them."⁷⁷ With his desire to be useful to mankind and to spread knowledge generally, from the point of view of the maskilim, Solomon is a *Philosoph für die Welt* [Philosopher for the World], perhaps the first popular philosopher, who, much earlier than Socrates, brought philosophy from heaven to earth and among mankind in order to make it the touchstone of their attitudes and values.

King Solomon's soliloquy in Qohelet presents various ideas, opinions, and counter-opinions in speech and counter-speech or in debate with himself. In this respect, Qohelet is a collector of different ways of thinking and worldviews, which he brings into dialogue with one another without taking a position himself or laying down dogmatic doctrines. Friedländer reflects on Qohelet's approach, who in his eyes was "not a cold dogmatic teacher, but a fiery, lively investigator of the truth":

The great author did not sketch out a precise plan for himself. He goes through the whole of human life in his own way and throws his remarks on various aspects. He contemplates, teaches, complains, comforts, gives advice, contradicts, and improves.⁷⁸

As he was a "wise man," Qohelet also allowed "opposing opinions" to be voiced: "Regardless of his own system, he takes note of all the objections that can be made to him."⁷⁹ By letting "two voices" talk to each other, he presented to

76 Gunhild Berg and Rainer Godel, "Engels Modell aufklärerischer Selbstbefragung. Selbstreflexivität und Urteilsbildung in *Der Philosoph für die Welt*," in Košenina, *Johann Jakob Engel (1741–1802)*, 65.

77 David Friedländer, *Der Prediger. Aus dem Hebräischen von David Friedländer* (Berlin, 1788), 130.

78 David Friedländer, "Vorrede," in Friedländer, *Der Prediger*, 84.

79 Friedländer, "Vorrede," 84.

the reader “everything that is going on inside him, without restraint, openheartedly.” In short: “He is not afraid *to think out loud*.”⁸⁰

Like Qohelet, Engel's *Philosoph für die Welt* gathers different viewpoints. It brings together many dialogical pieces from different eras and authors that engage in intercultural conversation in the broadest sense. Not least among them are Mendelssohn's and Friedländer's *Proben rabbinischer Weisheit* [Samples of Rabbinic Wisdom], containing extracts from the Talmud and the Midrash.⁸¹ Remarkably, the maskilim regarded these fundamental texts of Judaism as a collection of the most diverse positions and interpretations.⁸² For example, in his *Jeschurun* (1804), an apology for Judaism, Aaron Wolfssohn (1756–1835), Joel Löwe's successor as headteacher at the Wilhelmsschule in Breslau, explained that the Talmud contained, among other things,

laws and customs that were sanctioned only by tradition. But as these laws and enactments were not transmitted from teacher to disciple in writings, but merely and solely by oral discourse and tradition, it was quite natural that the rabbis should soon be divided in opinion about this law and that, about this doctrine and that, depending on whether one disciple wanted to understand or hear the teacher's discourse in this way or in that. In the Mishnah, these different opinions of the rabbis are cited and held against each other wherever the difference is significant, but without the collector of the Mishnah, R. Yehudah, always declaring himself in favour of one opinion or the other, or passing a final judgement on them.⁸³

In this book, Wolfssohn interestingly combines a particularly important characteristic of sceptical dialogue culture with the Talmud: the withholding of one's own judgement.

80 Friedländer, 85.

81 Johann Jakob Engel, *J.J. Engels Schriften, Erster Band: Der Philosoph für die Welt, Erster Theil* (Berlin, 1801), 295–334.

82 In the dialogues of the Talmud, the relationship between hermeneutics and truth is the object of an important discussion. *Bava Metšia* 59^{a–b}, which is well known as the story of the oven of Akhnai, deals with the extreme openness to interpretations of the biblical texts. David Friedländer published this passage in German translation: see Friedländer, “Der Backofen des Achnai. Eine Rabbinische Parabel,” *Berlinische Monatsschrift* 17 (1791): 474–447. He comments that the discussion of the parable expresses a high estimation of reason and doubts whether the sentence “which is peculiar to Judaism, namely: that miracles and marvellous signs are not evidence for or against the truth” could be expressed better or more vividly (*ibid.*, 474).

83 Aaron Wolfssohn, *Jeschurun, oder unparteyische Beleuchtung der dem Judenthume neuerdings gemachten Vorwürfe* (Breslau, 1804), 75–76.

While the reference to Socrates is central to the *Phaedon* and the *Philosoph für die Welt*, Mendelssohn's commentary and Friedländer's notes on Qohelet naturally lack any reference to Socrates. Rather, here, Solomon's contemplative approach is presented as a "well-known principle" and a proven method of gaining knowledge already in ancient Judaism,⁸⁴ and dialogic learning with students gives the impression of being an extension of his contemplative-sceptical approach of philosophical self-talk that was being practised centuries before Socrates and Plato. Dialogue-based learning in Judaism can already be found in pre-talmudic times and was recorded in talmudic dialogues between the rabbis and their students, whose discussions present opinions and counter-opinions that often end in aporia.⁸⁵ However, the dialogue form of presentation can also be found in later periods of Jewish literature, such as in the *Kuzari* by the Sephardic philosopher Judah Halevi (ca. 1074–1141)—which Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803) explicitly used as a model for the discourse on Hebrew poetry and language at the beginning of his well-known work *Vom Geiste der Ebräischen Poesie* (1782)⁸⁶—as well as in numerous publications by maskilim. Mendelssohn's dialogues in his early *Philosophische Gespräche* [Philosophical Conversations] (1755), for example, are worth mentioning. Other maskilim also wrote numerous dialogues, which, for instance, can be found in another collection: the Hebrew journal *Ha-Me'asef* [The Collector]. This journal brings together different ways of thinking, perspectives, and opinions, which are expressed in correspondence, among other forms, whose authors sought to examine their own positions on various topics in a dialogical exchange. In the fictitious letters of Meshullam ben Uriah Haeschtemoi (1789/90), Isaac Euchel provides an educational insight into the way of life and worldview of Sephardic Jews. In the Breslau edition of *Ha-Me'asef*, Aaron Wolfsohn uses the genre of "Dialogues of the Dead" in his *Šikhah be-'Erez ha-Ḥayim* [Dialogue in the Land of the Living] (1794–1797) to put Moses Mendelssohn, the Sephardic philosopher Moses Maimonides (twelfth century), and an unnamed traditional rabbi (presumably the chief rabbi of Prague, Ezechiel Landau, 1713–1793) into dialogue.⁸⁷ Last but not least, the Hebrew Bible itself contains dialogues whose

84 Mendelssohn, "Commentator's Introduction," 132.

85 See Marc-Alain Ouaknin, *The Burnt Book: Reading the Talmud*, trans. Llewellyn Brown (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 82–99.

86 See Johann Gottfried Herder, *Vom Geist der Ebräischen Poesie: Eine Anleitung für die Liebhaber derselben, und der ältesten Geschichte des menschlichen Geistes, Erster Theil* (Dessau, 1782), xii.

87 See Moshe Pelli, "Literature of Haskalah in the Late 18th Century," *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte* 52 (2000): 342–343.

sceptical and contemplative potential for the acquisition of knowledge was developed by the maskilim in their German translations. David Friedländer, for example, published a partial translation of the prophet Micah, which in its form of presentation resembles a theatre play to which explanatory notes and stage directions have been added in brackets. In his introduction, Friedländer refers to the “dialogue form” of the presentation, in which each “sub-speaker is given the verses that belong to him.”⁸⁸ Finally, he specifies the interlocutors: “God, the prophet, and the nation” enter a dialogue,⁸⁹ during which the people of the nation learn to sceptically question its traditional notions of religion.

More than three decades after Mendelssohn’s death, Friedländer also published his fragmentary memoirs *Unterhaltung mit Mendelssohn* [Conversation with Mendelssohn] in the “religious and pedagogical” journal *Jedidja*, which was edited by Jeremias Heinemann (1778–1855).⁹⁰ These biographical memoirs are particularly noteworthy in the context of the cultural scepticism of the Haskalah, as they describe Mendelssohn’s method of instruction in detail. They appeared in a distinctly educational context, as Heinemann also used the journal to publish the prospectuses of his schools for boys and girls, which he opened in Berlin in 1816 and 1818. Friedländer evidently intended to re-establish the sceptical dialogue culture of the Haskalah as a teaching method in the educational discourse of the nineteenth century. *Jedidja*—and with it Friedländer’s description of Mendelssohn’s culture of dialogue—was read in Breslau by Freund, whose treatise *Ueber die Bildung der Mädchen mosaischer Religion* was published there in the same year that Friedländer’s biographical fragments appeared. In his treatise, Freund refers to the fact that Heinemann had “opened a girls’ school in Berlin,” the prospectus of which could be seen “at the publisher of the journal *Jedidja*.”⁹¹ Thus, it is obvious that Freund was inspired by Friedländer’s descriptions when he suggested using the Socratic method for teaching Jewish girls.

88 David Friedländer, “Briefe über das Lesen der heiligen Schriften,” *Zeitschrift für die Wissenschaft des Judentums* 1 (1822): 84.

89 Friedländer, “Briefe über das Lesen der heiligen Schriften,” 85.

90 David Friedländer, “Unterhaltungen mit Mendelssohn, aus der Erinnerung niedergeschrieben (Fragment),” *Jedidja* 2, no. 1 (1818–1819): 14–21; Friedländer, “Ueber Mendelssohn, seinen Charakter, seinen Wirkungskreis und seine Verdienste um die Israeliten,” *Jedidja* 2, no. 1 (1818–1819): 22–31; “Unterhaltung mit Mendelssohn, aus der Erinnerung niedergeschrieben. Zweites Fragment,” *Jedidja* 2, no. 1 (1818–1819): 143–176.

91 Freund, *Ueber die Bildung der Mädchen mosaischer Religion*, 15. See Jeremias Heinemann, “Plan und Einrichtung der Heinemannschen Unterrichts-Anstalt für Töchter gebildeter Aeltern,” *Jedidja* 2, no. 2 (1818–1819): 125–136.

In his memoirs of Mendelssohn, Friedländer not only establishes an ideological connection between Mendelssohn and Socrates,⁹² but also gives a Platonic description of the former's character as an ideal. He points out that even without holding an official teaching position, Mendelssohn had disciples of all kinds, all of whom found conversations with him to be "pleasant, stimulating, and instructive," attributes that correspond to those chosen by Freund to characterise the Socratic teaching method. Friedländer echoed Mendelssohn's criticism of learning solely from books,⁹³ which has a parallel in Plato's sceptical attitude towards written texts,⁹⁴ and he gave a clear preference to oral instruction.⁹⁵ Mendelssohn and younger maskilim who followed him opposed dogmatic teaching based on the written word with oral teaching via dialogue. In his memoirs, Friedländer recalled conversational situations in Mendelssohn's house that provide further insight into his oral teaching method. Friedländer's characterisation of Mendelssohn's unobtrusive manner of conducting conversations is strikingly similar to Socrates's method of instruction as handed down

92 See Uta Lohmann, "Sokrates und Mendelssohn—Zur Bedeutung der Zwillings-Metapher im Bildungskonzept von David Friedländer und Jeremias Heinemann," in *Zwischen Ideal und Ambivalenz. Geschwisterbeziehungen in ihren soziokulturellen Kontexten*, ed. Ulrike Schneider, Helga Völkening, and Daniel Vorpahl (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 2015), 280–301, <https://doi.org/10.3726/978-3-653-04175-0>. See also Miriam Leonard, *Socrates and the Jews: Hellenism and Hebraism from Moses Mendelssohn to Sigmund Freud* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 17–49.

93 It should be noted here that the textbooks written specifically for teaching at the Wilhelmsschule and other modern Jewish schools were expressly intended only for the teachers' use and not for pupils' self-learning.

94 Plato addressed the problem of orality and literacy in *Phaedo* in particular, but also in other dialogues. See Michael Erler, *Der Sinn der Aporien in den Dialogen Platons. Übungsstücke zur Anleitung im philosophischen Denken* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1987), 21–59, <http://www.degruyter.com/doi/book/10.1515/9783110868708>.

95 See Moses Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem oder religiöse Macht und Judentum* (Berlin, 1783), edited in Mendelssohn, *Gesammelte Schriften. Jubiläumsausgabe. Band 8: Schriften zum Judentum II*, ed. Alexander Altmann (Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 1983), 169–171. Friedländer quotes this passage from *Jerusalem* in his memoirs of Mendelssohn; see "Unterhaltung mit Mendelssohn, aus der Erinnerung niedergeschrieben. Zweites Fragment," 145–146. For an English translation, see Moses Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem, or On Religious Power and Judaism*, trans. Allan Arkush, introduction and commentary by Alexander Altmann (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 1983), 103–104. See also Uta Lohmann, "On Enlightenment in Religion: Skepticism and Tolerance in Educational and Cultural Concepts within the Berlin and Breslau Haskalah," in "Skepticism and Tolerance: Moses Mendelssohn, Salomon Maimon, and Jewish Enlightenment Thought," ed. Ze'ev Strauss, Libera Pisano, Michah Gottlieb, and José María Sánchez de León Serrano, special issue, *Religions* 14, no. 3 (2023): 326, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14030326>.

by Plato.⁹⁶ The characteristics of the Platonic Socrates and the features of his dialogue show clear parallels with Friedländer's Mendelssohn. With their virtuous qualities, both act as moral role models for young people, and both gather around them a circle of younger and older friends who are eager to learn. In their conversations, both Plato's Socrates and Friedländer's Mendelssohn are sceptical about their interlocutors' apparent knowledge, but they do not dogmatically represent and express a different opinion. Rather, they both withhold their own judgement and refrain from taking an instructive stance. For them, doubting seemingly certain knowledge is a fundamental method of acquiring new insights. Both of them are therefore greatly concerned with revealing pseudo-knowledge to be incorrect, although they do not claim to be in possession of true knowledge themselves.

6 Conclusion

The descriptions of sceptical dialogue culture point to a method that is thousands of years old, both for teaching students and for the individual educational and cognitive process: Qohelet reports on King Solomon as Plato reports on Socrates and, much later, Friedländer reports on Mendelssohn. Despite all the similarities that were emphasised between Socrates and Mendelssohn, Friedländer referred to Mendelssohn's uniqueness, stylising him into a leading figure, a "master," as called for by Engel's dialogue theory. In his memoirs, Mendelssohn steers the dialogues and conversations between his disciples and friends in an almost imperceptible way. He aids in the development of their own ideas and understanding, whereby trains of thought and modes of action become comprehensible, but also prove to be changeable and thus undogmatic.

According to Maimon, Mendelssohn expanded the dialogical teaching method of Socratic scepticism with Descartes's methodological doubt. He thus established a sense of scepticism towards conventional theorems and weakened their acceptance. This weakening of traditional positions became a prerequisite for reflective knowledge and truthful realisation. The students taught via this dialogical method subversively became self-thinking individuals who, using reason, were able to adopt a sceptical attitude towards traditional doctrines. However, this scepticism should not be equated with a fundamental rejection of religious principles.

96 See in detail Uta Lohmann, "‘Ein Bild von ihm ... wird immer belehrend und erquickend bleiben. Sein Leben lehrte.’ David Friedländers biographische Fragmente über Moses Mendelssohn," *Aschkenas* 33 (2023): 231–244, <https://doi.org/10.1515/asch-2023-2010>.

Socrates, the popular philosophers, and the maskilim each acted from a comparable historical background. Socrates opposed the decline of Attic democracy, the crisis of the polis, and the rigid doctrines of the sophists. In a similar way, the popular philosophers turned against the "school philosophy's doctrine of truth"⁹⁷ in order to counteract its dogmatic tendencies and abstract notions. The maskilim acted against some of the rabbinical authorities of their time, in particular against unquestioned dogmatic interpretations of Scripture and negative attitudes towards modernisation efforts in Judaism. However, the youth also had to be convinced by new pedagogical methods. Realising the parallels between Socrates and the maskilim, Isaac Euchel compared himself to the Greek philosopher in a proposal to establish a Jewish school:

My previous endeavours for the youth of the Jewish nation have always had something in common with the efforts of this sage, with the difference that he was a Socrates, and I am only a layman. To some young people of my nation, I have [...] called out, in a brotherly fashion: "Better stop, you are not going the right way here!"⁹⁸

Above all, it was Socrates's conducting of dialogues that was held against him and that brought him the accusation of corrupting the youth. Mendelssohn and other maskilim were also heavily criticised by Jewish traditionalists. This criticism was directed not least towards their German translations of biblical Scriptures, which they used as textbooks in school lessons and for whose commentaries they drew on explanations by non-Jewish exegetes in addition to traditional rabbinical literature. Comparable to the dialogue between interlocutors with different ways of thinking, this process of examining scriptural exegesis encouraged a different view of the subject under investigation and the rethinking of established doctrines. This could lead either to the rejection of the conventional or to a conviction of its correctness.

Maskilim and non-Jewish Enlightenment thinkers built on the cultural scepticism introduced into the Enlightenment discourse by Moses Mendelssohn through his commentary on Qohelet and, above all, his well-received *Phaedon*. Engel in Berlin and Löwe in Breslau practised the method of dialogue-based teaching in their schools. In doing so, they relied on their pupils' rational

97 Berg and Godel, "Engels Modell aufklärerischer Selbstbefragung," 67.

98 Isaac Abraham Euchel, "Plan zur Errichtung eines jüdischen Erziehungs-Instituts in Kiel" (letter to the Danish king dated 21 October 1784), in *Chevrat Chinuch Nearim*, ed. Ingrid Lohmann, 237.

cognitive ability. Their lessons addressed current topics and needs and aimed to change attitudes towards established beliefs, sometimes in opposition to traditional doctrines that were perceived as dogmatic. The sceptical dialogue culture of the Berlin and Breslau (Jewish) Enlightenment aimed at an undogmatic education of the youth and at the formation of (self-)thinking individuals with their own free will. As free individuals, the students, and with them the next generations, were to be enabled to liberate themselves from (mental) dependency, mythical religious ideas, superstition, and prejudice. In this respect, Socratic conversations and dialogue-based learning had tremendous subversive power. For the Haskalah, the significance of cultural scepticism lay particularly in this explosive power, which paved the way for future generations—and thus for Judaism itself—into modernity.

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The Aesthetic Distance from Evil

Mendelssohn and Kant on the Sublime

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Abstract

Based on the works of Mendelssohn and Kant, this article defines the sublime as a response to the experience of evil through the concept of aesthetic distance. After providing a general definition of the main concepts discussed here—the sublime, evil, and distance—I argue in the second section that the theory of the sublime embodies a key aspect of theodicy; namely, distance from evil. In the third section, I turn to Mendelssohn’s aesthetic reflections on the 1755 Lisbon earthquake. Section 4 delves into Mendelssohn’s theory of mixed sentiments, thus providing a basis for examining the role of distance in the experience of the sublime. In the fifth section, I argue that the notion of distance comes to light in Mendelssohn’s concept of *Frohsein*, which he takes as the best translation for Burke’s concept of delight, and in section 6, I turn to Kant’s reading of the concept of *Frohsein* in the *Analytic of the Sublime*, arguing that his theory of the sublime is also an aesthetic response to the existence of evil. In the conclusion, I outline two sceptical arguments regarding environmental aesthetics of the sublime, questioning the inherent connection between the sublime and moral attitudes towards nature and advocating for a redefinition of environmental aesthetics of the sublime as the aesthetics of evil.

Keywords

Delight – distance – environment – evil – *Frohsein* – sublime – theodicy

1 Introduction: The Sublime, Evil, and Distance

According to Kant’s *Analytic of the Sublime*, an object ceases to be evil as soon as it is regarded from a certain distance. Natural phenomena such as hurricanes, erupting volcanoes, and earthquakes are no longer a threat to the spectator if she or he takes distance from them. This distance is a necessary mediation for

feeling pleasure, or, to be precise, for feeling the sublime. The sight of these natural phenomena, says Kant, “becomes all the more attractive the more fearful it is, as long as we find ourselves in safety, and we gladly call these objects sublime because they elevate the strength of our soul above its usual level.”¹ By examining the relationship between the sublime and the experience of evil, particularly as it is manifested in aesthetic judgements of natural disasters, this article will argue that a safe distance from evil serves as a mediating concept in Moses Mendelssohn’s and Immanuel Kant’s theories of the sublime. In other words, its objective is to articulate the concept of the sublime as a response to the existence of evil through the notion of aesthetic distance. To begin my argument, I would like to briefly outline (1) the connection between the category of the sublime and the existence of evil and (2) why Mendelssohn’s and Kant’s theories of the sublime require the concept of distance to explain the pleasure found in such negative aesthetic objects.

(1) The category of the sublime began to gain philosophical significance between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries due to the widespread reception of Pseudo-Longinus’s treatise *On the Sublime* [*Peri hýpsous*].² However, modern receptions from authors such as Nicolas Boileau or Mendelssohn quickly identified a significant deficiency in Longinus’s views. According to this modern reception, although Longinus provided the rhetorical *means* to evoke the feeling of the sublime, he did not offer a clear and distinct definition of *what* the sublime actually is.³ Nevertheless, this deficiency can be seen as one of the

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- 1 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. and trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 144. I will also refer to the volume and page of Immanuel Kant, *Akademie Ausgabe von Kant’s gesammelte Schriften*, vols. 1–22 ed. Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften, vol. 23 ed. Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin, vol. 24—ed. Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1900–) (henceforth *AA*); here Kant, *KU*, *AA* 05:261. I will quote Mendelssohn’s works according to the *Gesammelte Schriften. Jubiläumsausgabe* (Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 1971–) (henceforth *JubA*). I will use the English version of his *Philosophical Writings*, trans. Daniel O. Dahlstrom (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
 - 2 See the excellent work by Martin Fritz, *Vom Erhabenen. Der Traktat “Peri hýpsous” und seine ästhetisch-religiöse Renaissance im 18. Jahrhundert* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011). For a brief reconstruction of the development of the category of the sublime, see Werner Strube, “Der Begriff des Erhabenen in der deutschsprachigen Ästhetik des 18. Jahrhunderts,” in *Aufklärung und Skepsis. Studien zur Philosophie und Geistesgeschichte des 17. und 18. Jahrhunderts. Festschrift für Gunter Gawlick*, ed. Lothar Kreimendahl, Hans-Ulrich Hoche, and Werner Strube (Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 1995), 272–302.
 - 3 Mendelssohn especially highlights this aspect at the beginning of his 1758 treatise *On the Sublime* (*JubA* 1:193). He noticed this deficiency in Longinus’s theory thanks to Nicolas Boileau, the first French translator of Longinus’s treatise, though he criticises Boileau’s interpretation. See the letter to Lessing from 5 August 1757 (*JubA* 11:143).

favourable conditions that contributed to the great impact of Edmund Burke's *Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*.⁴ Burke's great influence on the evolution of aesthetics was particularly significant due to his redefinition of the sublime. He presented it as a source of complex sentiments, wherein pleasure and delight arise from objects that elicit fear, terror, or awe.⁵

Thanks to Burke's *Enquiry*, Mendelssohn substantially revised his theory of the sublime. Although Mendelssohn initially developed his views on the sublime under the influence of the Longinian tradition, his later writings on the sublime reveal a significant paradigm shift.⁶ After reading the *Enquiry*, Mendelssohn started to regard the sublime under the category of "mixed sentiments" [vermischte Empfindungen].⁷ Following Burke's observations on sublime objects, Mendelssohn argues that "the imperfect, evil, and deficient always arouse a mixed sentiment."⁸ The sublime becomes noticeably associated with the idea of evil by increasingly being regarded as a source of mixed sentiments; it shifted from being merely a rhetorical value to becoming an aesthetic manifestation of a terrifying nature.

(2) The great impact of Burke's *Enquiry* on Mendelssohn's theory of the sublime broadly delineates the way in which the sublime is manifested. Nevertheless, the question of why the sublime—as an object characterised by negative aesthetic qualities—can elicit pleasure remains a separate and distinct issue. In the context of this question, the concept of distance assumes paramount importance.⁹ While Burke remains sceptical about the need for physical or

4 See Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. James T. Boulton (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2005); Werner Strube, "Schönes und Erhabenes: Zur Vorgeschichte und Etablierung der wichtigsten Einteilung ästhetischer Qualitäten," *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte* 47 (2005): 25–59.

5 See Carsten Zelle, *Angenehmes Grauen. Literaturhistorische Beiträge zur Ästhetik des Schrecklichen im achtzehnten Jahrhundert* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1987), and Zelle, *Die doppelte Ästhetik der Moderne: Revisionen des Schönen von Boileau bis Nietzsche* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1995).

6 Anne Pollok, *Facetten des Menschen. Zur Anthropologie Moses Mendelssohns* (Hamburg: Meiner, 2010), 228–240. The paradigm shift in Mendelssohn's works that was motivated by Burke's writing becomes evident when comparing the 1758 edition of his *On the Sublime and Naïve in the Fine Sciences* with the 1771 edition. In both editions of the *Rhapsody* (1761/1771), he recognises that when writing the letters *On Sentiments*, he had "a flimsy concept of the nature of mixed sentiments. But I only saw a flickering of the astonishing and myriad effects of them until I had the opportunity to read the splendid English work on the sublime and the beautiful for the *Library of Fine Sciences*" (Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 146; *JubA* 1:400).

7 Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 144; *JubA* 1:398.

8 Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 134 (translation amended); *JubA* 1:386.

9 It is important to note that the concept of distance does not exhaust the reasons why pleasure can be derived from the sublime. In Mendelssohn and Kant, the source of pleasure in negative aesthetic objects lies within the very nature of subjectivity—whether in the consciousness

rational distance as a mediating factor in the pleasurable dimension of the sublime, both Mendelssohn and Kant regard it as a central component in explaining why terrifying objects can elicit pleasure. For Burke, the aesthetic use of the concept of distance is a “sophism.”¹⁰ Since Mendelssohn and Kant assign a central function to distance, this article will focus on their works, while partially setting aside Burke’s contributions. Therefore, once the relationship between the sublime and the experience of evil has been clarified, this article will argue that the sentiment of pleasure in the sublime arises from an aesthetic distance from evil.

These two points (1 and 2) outline the two main aspects that this article will examine. However, it is important to remark that the intersection of the sublime with the problem of evil extends beyond the domain of aesthetics, prompting an examination of the sublime within an ostensibly different framework; namely, that of theodicy. Mendelssohn’s and Kant’s theories of the sublime vividly embody the justification of the divine order and regularity of the cosmos. In my view, their theory of the sublime functions as an “aesthetic theodicy”¹¹ by converting the negative reality of evil into a source of pleasure and delight. In other words, by transforming evil into an aesthetic experience, Mendelssohn and Kant reframe its reality—not as a source of fear or terror, but as a source of enjoyment, or, as Burke puts it, a source of delight. In this sense, I intend not only to assert that the category of the sublime was shaped in relation to the experience of evil, but also to show that the historical necessity of this category stems from the need to validate, through aesthetic means, the idea that this world is the best possible one.

To describe the theodical function of Mendelssohn’s and Kant’s theories of the sublime, the second section of this article will explore the philosophical domains of aesthetics and theodicy through the concept of distance, draw-

of the soul’s perfection (Mendelssohn) or in the moral purposiveness of our freedom (Kant). Thus, in this article, I consider the concept of distance as merely a *mediator* of pleasure, rather than its source or ground.

10 See Burke, *Philosophical Enquiry*, 48: “So it is certain that it is absolutely necessary my life should be out of any imminent hazard, before I can take a delight in the sufferings of others, real or imaginary, or indeed in anything else from any cause whatsoever. But then it is a sophism to argue from thence that this immunity is the cause of my delight either on these or on any occasions.”

11 For a historical approach to the relationship between aesthetics and theodicy, see Thomas P. Saine, *Die ästhetische Theodizee: Karl Philipp Moritz und die Philosophie des 18. Jahrhunderts* (Munich: Fink, 1971); Wolfgang Braungart, “Die Geburt der modernen Ästhetik aus dem Geist der Theodizee,” in *Ästhetische und religiöse Erfahrungen der Jahrhundertwenden*, ed. Wolfgang Braungart (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1997), 17–34; Ursula Franke, *Baumgartens Erfindung der Ästhetik* (Münster: Mentis, 2018).

ing an analogy between the two. In this section, I will delineate the concept of theodicy through the lens of Odo Marquard's viewpoint, which posits that the efficacy of theodicy is intrinsically linked to the notion of distance. This step seeks to clarify the extent to which the modern theory of the sublime requires the use of the concept of distance. As I will argue, the theory of the sublime depends on distance to transform the existence of evil into a source of pleasure. In the third section, I will introduce Mendelssohn's reflections on the aesthetic effects of the 1755 Lisbon earthquake. In light of this textual evidence connecting the feeling of the sublime and the existence of evil, section 4 will analyse Mendelssohn's theory of mixed sentiments. In the fifth section, I will argue that Mendelssohn's aesthetic use of distance comes to light in the concept of *Frohsein*, which he takes as the best German translation for Burke's challenging concept of delight. In the sixth section, I will explain Kant's reading of the concept of *Frohsein* in the *Analytic of the Sublime* section of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. In the conclusion, I will attempt to outline the contemporary development of the category of the sublime in light of the main thesis of this article; namely, that the modern theory of the sublime can be understood as a philosophical response to the problem of evil.

2 The Concept of Distance in Aesthetics and Theodicy

Before undertaking the historical analysis, I would like to briefly indicate some systematic aspects of (1) the problem of the sublime and (2) the problem of theodicy, in an attempt to outline an analogy between these philosophical realms. In my argument, the synthesis of aesthetics and theodicy comes to the fore in the concept of distance. The analogy can be expressed as follows: just as theodicy takes distance from the reality of evil to justify the harmony and order of the cosmos, so too does aesthetic subjectivity need to take distance from evil to take pleasure in it. I would like to underscore that this argument serves only as an analogy. While the distance working in theodicy is *intellectual*, the distance in the sublime is fundamentally *physical*.¹²

12 This distinction does not, however, diminish the value of interpreting the sublime as an aesthetic response to the existence of evil. As I will elucidate in subsequent sections of this article (sections 2–5), there is a historical correlation between the concept of the sublime and the existence of evil. Although I will base my arguments on classical German aesthetics, my use of the concept of distance aligns with one of its modern senses. According to Edward Bullough's essay on physical distance, the working of distance expresses a sort of ambivalence: "It has a *negative*, inhibitory aspect—the cutting-out of the practical sides of

(1) As indicated in the introduction, after Mendelssohn's reading of Burke, the category of the sublime came to be understood as a source of mixed sentiments. Since this reception, the significance of the sublime has been encapsulated in a single question: Why do we derive pleasure from negative aesthetic objects, such as the suffering, pain, or distress of others? When Lessing sent his copy of the *Enquiry* to Mendelssohn, he also included a series of notes intended to assist him in writing his review for the *Bibliothek der schönen Wissenschaften und der freyen Künste*. In one of these notes, Lessing expresses his perplexity regarding Burke's reflections on the mixed sentiment elicited by the misery of others: "A disaster [Unglück] is imperfection—Can we also get pleasure from imperfections? Is pleasure not merely the intuitive cognition of perfection?—I do not know what to think about this."¹³

For both Mendelssohn and Lessing, pleasure being the intuitive cognition of perfection is one of the keystones of aesthetics. However, this reduction of pleasure to perfection surely rendered the pleasure derived from imperfect objects something extravagant. Indeed, if nature or art do not appear to aim at producing pleasure, one might ask: From whence does the pleasure derived from imperfect objects, such as the pain and distress of others, originate? This issue also drives Kant's *Analytic of the Sublime*.¹⁴ When Kant attempts to deduce the purposiveness of this sentiment, he asks: "How can we designate with an expression of approval that which is apprehended in itself as contra-purposive?"¹⁵ It is worth noting that for Kant, the contra-purposive [zweckwidrig] has the same philosophical function as the concept of imperfection [Unvollkommenheit] for both Lessing and Mendelssohn; namely, the negation of the object.

In this article, I will not dwell on the reasons why the sublime, as a mixed sentiment, was so problematic for classical German aesthetics. Instead, I will concentrate on one of the solutions that both Mendelssohn and Kant proposed to

things and of our practical attitude to them—and a *positive* side—the elaboration of the experience on the new basis created by the inhibitory action of Distance"; see Bullough, "Psychical Distance' as a Factor in Art and an Aesthetic Principle," in *Aesthetics: A Comprehensive Anthology*, ed. Steven M. Cahn, Stephanie Ross, and Sandra Shapshay (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2020), 314. In classical terms, one could say that this distance expresses the mediation of a "mixed sentiment." Here, the "negative, inhibitory aspect" of this distance will be more significant than its "positive side."

13 Lessing in *JubA* 3.1:257; my translation.

14 Katerina Deligiorgi, "The Pleasures of Contra-Purposiveness: Kant, the Sublime, and Being Human," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 72 (2014): 25–35, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/jaac.12060>.

15 Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 128; *KU*, AA 5:245.

address this issue. One of these solutions can be expressed through the concept of aesthetic distance. At the outset of this article, it was stated that according to Kant, the sight of natural disasters “becomes all the more attractive the more fearful it is, as long as we find ourselves in safety.”¹⁶ Physical distance from the object thus becomes a precondition for transmuting imperfect or contrapurposive objects into objects of pleasure. However, this principle is not unique to Kant. Already in his 1755 letters *On Sentiments*, Mendelssohn argued that the pleasurable sentiment of sympathy is possible because “the danger never threatens us ourselves but rather our fellow human being whom we pity.”¹⁷

(2) The aesthetic distance mediating the sentiment of pleasure seems to express a key argument of any rational theodicy; namely, distance from the reality of evil. As Odo Marquard ingeniously states, “distance” from reality is the condition of any successful rational defence of God’s wisdom, viz. theodicy. Following Marquard’s idea, the “pensum of theodicy becomes possible [...] under conditions of distance: therefore, it is representative of the age of distance, the modern age.”¹⁸ Accordingly, the modern age is possible by means of theodicy; that is, by a distant justification of the harmony, regularity, and order of the cosmos.

To support Marquard’s thesis, I would like to refer to some examples in Leibniz’s and Kant’s works. The distance that Marquard stresses appears throughout Leibniz’s famous *Essays on Theodicy*. According to him, “God wills order and good; but it happens sometimes that what is disorder in the part is order in the whole.”¹⁹ From the perspective of the whole, through intellectual abstraction, we can perceive God’s goodness; each individual reality becomes something good for the sake of the whole: “Wisdom only shows God the best possible exercise of his goodness: after that, the evil that occurs is an inevitable result of the best. I will add something stronger: To permit the evil, as God permits it, is the greatest goodness.”²⁰

This intellectual distance from the particular existence of evil also had a clear influence on Kant’s essay *An Attempt at Some Reflections on Optimism* (1759). Here, Kant says: “the whole is the best, and everything is good for the sake

16 Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 144; *KU*, AA 5:261.

17 Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 74; *JubA* 1:110.

18 Odo Marquard, *Apologie des Zufälligen* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1986), 15. See also Marquard, “Schwierigkeiten beim Ja-Sagen,” in *Theodizée—Gott vor Gericht?*, ed. Willi Oelmüller (Munich: Fink, 1990), 91; my translation.

19 Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Essays on Theodicy*, trans. E.M. Huggard (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1996), 201. I will also refer to the part and § of Leibniz’s *Theodicy*. Here: *Essais de théodicée*, part 2, §128.

20 Leibniz, *Essays on Theodicy*, 195; *Essais de théodicée*, part 2, §121.

of the whole.”²¹ The intellectual distance from reality also comes to light in his 1764 *Attempt to Introduce the Concept of Negative Magnitudes into Philosophy*. Kant formulates one of the propositions that define the concept of negative magnitudes in a metaphysical sense as follows: “All the real grounds of the universe [...] yields a result which is equal to zero.”²² By applying this universal sum to the problem of theodicy, Kant arrives at the conclusion that the total sum of evils and goods in the world is equal to zero; this sum gives, according to Marquard, a “zero balance” [Nullbilanz] between goods and evils.²³ Through the intellectual distance from the particular existence of evils, the potential threat that evil poses to God is nullified, thereby allowing God’s cause to succeed.

Taking Marquard’s thesis on the problem of theodicy in a broad sense, the birth of the classical theory of the sublime can be seen as a symptom of the modern age; that is, of the “age of distance.” In other words, the challenging question of why it is possible to find pleasure in another’s misfortune without adopting an immoral stance is resolved by means of distance. Considering the analogy between aesthetics and theodicy, it is possible to conclude that the modern theory of the sublime requires the concept of distance for the same reason it is required in theodicy; namely, to diminish the ontological significance of evil. The physical distance through which the spectator can find pleasure in negative aesthetic objects embodies the intellectual distance through which theodicy downplays the ontological status of evil.

3 Mendelssohn on the Aesthetic Effects of the 1755 Lisbon Earthquake

“Eternal lingering of useless pain! Come, ye philosophers, who cry, ‘All’s well.’” With these words, Voltaire ridiculed optimism in his sceptical “Poem on the Lisbon Disaster.” During the German Enlightenment, however, philosophical reflections on this historical event took a radically different direction. For Kant, for instance, the Lisbon earthquake did not lead him to cast doubt on God’s wisdom. Instead, he saw it as a great opportunity to investigate the geological nature of earthquakes. It has even been suggested that German geology and

21 Immanuel Kant, *Theoretical Philosophy 1755–1770*, ed. David Walford with Ralf Meerbote (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 1992), 35, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511840180; VBO, AA 2:35>. Kant’s emphasis.

22 Kant, *Theoretical Philosophy*, 234; *NG, AA 2:197*.

23 Marquard, “Schwierigkeiten beim Ja-Sagen,” 95.

seismology began with Kant's writings on the Lisbon earthquake.²⁴ According to this scientific approach, natural disasters have no negative impact on human dignity, for, in Kant's view, it is not to be realised in this world: "Man is not born to build eternal huts on this stage of vanity."²⁵

The discipline of aesthetics was drawn into this problem during the German Enlightenment. In Kant's early writings, the role of sentiments in the analysis of natural disasters is distinctly apparent: "Let us [...] accustom our eye to these frightening upheavals as being the ordinary ways of providence and even regard them with a kind of satisfaction [Wohlgefallen]."²⁶ This reflection on the satisfaction aroused by the great contemplation of the downfall of the cosmos is, after all, a mere passing remark. Mendelssohn was indeed the first person to systematically introduce the question of evil into the field of aesthetics. His work *Rhapsody or Additions to the Letters on Sentiments* is significant for my present considerations, as it is here that he employs the 1755 Lisbon earthquake to exemplify his theory of mixed sentiments. In these additions, he makes the following observation:

We disapprove of the evil that has occurred; we wish that it had not happened or that it stood in our power to make things right again. Once, however, the evil has occurred, and if it has occurred without our being in any way responsible for it and without our being able to prevent it, then we are powerfully attracted to the representation of it and long to acquire that representation. Lisbon's demise in the earthquake attracted countless people to take in the sight of this terrible devastation with their own eyes.²⁷

This passage was undoubtedly inspired by Burke's *Enquiry*, from which I would like to quote a rather similar passage:

We delight in seeing things, which so far from doing, our heartiest wishes would be to see redressed. This noble capital, the pride of England and

24 Walter Benjamin, "Erdbeben in Lissabon," in Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften, Band 7,1: Nachträge*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1989), 220–226.

25 Kant, *GNVE*, AA 1:460.

26 Immanuel Kant, *Natural Science*, ed. Eric Watkins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 270, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139014380>; *NTH*, AA 1:319. In his English edition, Olaf Reinhardt translates "Wohlgefallen" as "appreciation." Following Paul Guyer's and Eric Matthews's edition of the third *Critique*, I prefer to translate "Wohlgefallen" as "satisfaction." See Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, xlviii.

27 Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 131–132; *JubA* 1:387.

of Europe, I believe no man is so strangely wicked as to desire to see destroyed by a conflagration or an earthquake, though he should be removed himself to the greatest distance from the danger. But suppose such a fatal accident to have happened, what numbers from all parts would crowd to behold the ruins, and amongst them many who would have been content never to have seen London in its glory!²⁸

Burke is surely alluding to the Lisbon earthquake here. Nevertheless, it is also worth noting that London was shaken by two earthquakes on 8 February and 8 March 1750. This series of tremors gave rise to the prophecy that London would finally be devastated on 8 April, and even triggered an exodus from the city. Regardless of which earthquake Burke may have had in mind when writing this provocative passage, the described situation hints at the geological reason that led to the significant impact of Burke's *Enquiry* in Europe: the more Europe trembled, the more necessary was the theory of the sublime. Evil urgently needed an aesthetic response.²⁹

So far, I have presented enough textual evidence for the equation between the problem of the sublime and the problem of evil. The role of earthquakes in Burke's and Mendelssohn's reflections suggests that the concept of the sublime emerged as an aesthetic response to the reality of evil. Furthermore, in light of the criticisms that Leibniz's theodicy faced during this decade—note that the 1753 prize from the Prussian Academy of Sciences was awarded to Adolf Friedrich Reinhard's treatise against Leibniz's and Alexander Pope's optimism—it can be inferred that the significance of sentiments grew in tandem with reason's declining capacity to uphold the divine order of the cosmos.³⁰ The motto of aesthetic theodicy would be: "Evil ceases to be an evil as soon as it is regarded as a source of pleasure."³¹ In light of this connection between the sublime—conceived as a mixed sentiment—and the problem of evil, it will now be pertinent to examine the role of the concept of distance in Mendelssohn's and Kant's theories. However, before addressing this

28 Burke, *Enquiry*, 47–48.

29 For the context of the sublime in geological investigations in the eighteenth century, see Niccolò Caramel and Davide Poggi, "Se non esistesse un luogo dove stare al sicuro? Terremoto e sublime: Dagli scritti pre-critici alla *Kritik der Urteilskraft*," *Estudos Kantianos* 4, no. 1 (2016): 145–176, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36311/2318-0501.2016.v4n1.0.p145>.

30 Braungart, "Die Geburt der modernen Ästhetik aus dem Geist der Theodizee," 21–22.

31 Although my analysis focuses on the concept of the sublime, I would like to point out that Mendelssohn's aesthetics was also considered a sort of theodicy by Alexander Altmann in *Moses Mendelssohns Frühschriften zur Metaphysik* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1969), 105, 124. See also Pollok, *Die Facetten des Menschen*, 499–574.

issue, I would like to delve further into Mendelssohn's theory of mixed sentiments, thereby laying the groundwork for commenting on the concept of distance.

4 Mendelssohn's Theory of Mixed Sentiments

To begin with, it may be noteworthy that Mendelssohn's thoughts on mixed sentiments started before his reading of Burke. In relation to Abbé Dubos, he suggests that obtaining pleasure from negative aesthetic objects conflicts with his own aesthetic theory. In the letters *On Sentiments*, Mendelssohn rhetorically asks: "It is no longer the beautiful nature; no, it is the fearful, the terrifying nature. And you find it enjoyable? Should you not instead be downcast by the recollection that human beings are subjected to such unfortunate events? How does this rhyme with your theory?"³² The most evident explanation for this conflict lies in the early monism of his aesthetics. Influenced by Descartes's psychology, Mendelssohn states that the basic principle of aesthetics is that the "contemplation of perfection produces pleasure."³³ Then, through this reduction of pleasure to perfection, it seems incomprehensible that negative aesthetic objects can also produce pleasure. In the conclusion of the letters *On Sentiments*, Mendelssohn recognises that mixed sentiments contradict his theory "since they appear to attest to anything but knowledge of a perfection."³⁴ That is to say, since the discipline of aesthetics is devoted to perfection,³⁵ there is no aesthetic basis for an explication of imperfections.

Be that as it may, Mendelssohn's first solution to this problem is a differentiation between the imitative world of art and the real world; that is, between the stage and life. While misfortune in life would only produce agony and suffering, it can arouse pleasure on the stage.³⁶ This kind of rational distance from artistic representation appears again in the 1771 version of *Rhapsody*:

Another means of rendering the most terrifying events pleasant to gentle minds is the imitation by art, on the stage, on the canvas, and in marble,

32 Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 37; *JubA* 1:72.

33 Mendelssohn, *JubA* 1:127.

34 Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 71; *JubA* 1:108.

35 See Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, *Aesthetica/Ästhetik*, ed. and trans. Dagmar Mirbach (Hamburg: Meiner, 2007), 18, §14.

36 Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 71; *JubA* 1:111.

since an inner consciousness that we have an imitation and nothing genuine before our eyes moderates the strength of the objective disgust and, as it were, elevates the subjective side of the representation.³⁷

The “inner consciousness” that the object is not real, but a mere fiction—this rational distance from the artistic imitation—is the reason why the subject is able to elevate the subjective side of the representation; that is, to feel pleasure. However, although Mendelssohn seemed to have come up with a solution to the problem of mixed sentiments, his reading of Burke brought this problem back to life. As noted, Mendelssohn’s reception of Burke started thanks to Lessing, who asked him for a review of the *Enquiry*. In the review, Mendelssohn did not concern himself with establishing a critical analysis of the *Enquiry*; instead, he merely confined himself to summarising its content. As is commonly argued in studies on Mendelssohn, the challenges posed by Burke were one of the primary reasons why he reformulated his aesthetics, resulting in a subjectivist explanation of feelings.³⁸ In the first version of the *Rhapsody*, Mendelssohn acknowledges his inability to provide a satisfactory explanation of Burke’s observations:

In no way do I flatter myself with having provided the psychological basis for all the experiences noted by the Englishman. Our sentiments have such depths that poking my eye in their direction is all too fatuous [dahin mein Auge zu dringen, viel zu blöde ist]. I wish rather, by my effort here, to have encouraged a philosophical mind to undertake this worthwhile investigation. My friend still owes the world a translation that he prom-

37 Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 138; *JubA* 1:391.

38 See Fritz Bamberger, “Einleitung,” in *JubA* 1: xviii–xlvi. This view was challenged in Frederick C. Beiser, *Diotima’s Children: German Aesthetic Rationalism from Leibniz to Lessing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 196–243. Aaron Koller follows this interpretation in “Mendelssohn’s Response to Burke on the Sublime,” in *Moses Mendelssohn’s Metaphysics and Aesthetics*, ed. Reinier Munk (Dordrecht: Springer, 2011), 329–350. Against Beiser, see the critiques of Anne Pollok, “Beautiful Perception and Its Object: Mendelssohn’s Theory of Mixed Sentiments Reconsidered,” *Kant-Studien* 109, no. 2 (2018): 270–285, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1515/kant-2018-2007>; Pollok, “Gazing Upwards to the Stage: Mendelssohn’s Notion of Admiration and Its Consequences,” in *The Moral Psychology of Admiration*, ed. Alfred Archer and André Grahle (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 92, note 27. In my view, Mendelssohn’s subjectivist turn in his 1771 *Rhapsody* is indebted to Lessing’s letter of 2 February 1757 (*JubA* 11:105–108). However, as Pollok stresses in “Beautiful Perception and Its Object” (276), Mendelssohn seems to have arrived at Lessing’s subjectivist ideas before his 1757 letter; see his letter to Friedrich Gabriel Resewitz from 1756 (*JubA* 11:48).

ised to give of the English work along with emendations and notes. If only he would fulfil my wish!³⁹

The friend to whom Mendelssohn refers is Lessing, who had already promised a translation of the *Enquiry* as early as January 1758.⁴⁰ Given Abbé Dubos's influence in the letters *On Sentiments*, it is reasonable to infer that Burke's challenge mainly stemmed from his theory of mixed sentiments. The challenge lies not in the sublime object itself, but in the sentiment that it evokes; namely, the mixed sentiment of delight. Following Burke, the sublime is "capable of producing delight; not pleasure, but a sort of delightful horror, a sort of tranquillity tinged with terror."⁴¹ In this article, I will not dwell on the reasons why Burke's concept of delight posed such a great challenge for Mendelssohn's aesthetics. For the sake of brevity, my focus will be solely on Mendelssohn's solution. In the following section, I will contend that his translation of the concept of delight as *Frohsein* offers one of the key elements needed to understand the pleasure experienced in negative aesthetic objects. Through the concept of *Frohsein*, he introduces the notion of distance, which is the essential mediation to feel pleasure in sublime objects.

5 Mendelssohn's Translation of Burkean Delight as *Frohsein*

The translation of the term "delight" was one of the central challenges of Burke's book. It is important to note that Burke already considered this term problematic, as he was giving it a new meaning.⁴² When Lessing sent his exemplar of the *Enquiry* to Mendelssohn, he also emphasised the difficult translation of this term.⁴³ In the review, Mendelssohn translates the term "delight" as *Frohsein*. He calls attention to this detail by adding a footnote: "A German could be above this innovation, since our language has a word that expresses this sensation. We say: I am glad [ich bin froh] that it is over, etc. By this, we also express the pleasure that arises from the liberation from a displeasure."⁴⁴

Mendelssohn bases this translation on Christian Wolff and Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten. In his *Empirical Psychology*, Wolff defines the term *hilaritas*

39 Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 147; *JubA* 1:401.

40 See Lessing's letter to Mendelssohn from 21 January 1758 (*JubA* 11:174–175).

41 Burke, *Enquiry*, 136.

42 Burke, *Enquiry*, 88–89.

43 Lessing's letter to Mendelssohn from 2 April 1758 (*JubA* 11:185).

44 *JubA* 4:218.

as a joy that emerges from a past, non-present evil: “Gaudium ortum ex eo, quod malum sit praeteritum, vel metus mali evanuerit, dicitur *Hilaritas*.”⁴⁵ In the *Metaphysics*, Baumgarten gives a somewhat similar definition: “Gaudium ex malo non amplius imminente est *Hilaritas*.”⁴⁶ Wolff translated *hilaritas* as *Fröhlichkeit*. Against this translation, Mendelssohn, following Baumgarten’s *Metaphysics*, proposes the term *Frohsein*, suggesting that this term better describes the distance from evil [*malum*].

Regardless of Mendelssohn’s relationship to Wolff and Baumgarten, two things are clear from this translation. First, Mendelssohn interprets the Burkean concept of delight as an aesthetic response to the experience of evil. This is clear from the quoted passages from Wolff and Baumgarten. Second, this response is defined through a distance from the reality of evil, thus embodying a theodical kind of reasoning. Evil ceases to be an evil as soon as it is regarded from a distance; and through this distance, it can become a source of pleasure. “Being glad because an evil is over” is the classical German meaning of the term “delight.” It might be helpful to once again quote Mendelssohn on the Lisbon earthquake:

We disapprove of the evil that has occurred [...]. Once, however, the evil has occurred, [...] then we are powerfully attracted to the representation of it and long to acquire that representation. Lisbon’s demise in the earthquake attracted countless people to take in the sight of this terrible devastation with their own eyes.⁴⁷

In short, Mendelssohn’s aesthetic distance from the reality of evil acts as a mediation of pleasure, thus giving some response to the epochal question of why we can find pleasure in imperfection. In the next section, I will turn to Kant’s *Analytic of the Sublime*. In this “mere appendix” to the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant uses the concept of *Frohsein* in the same sense as Mendelssohn—namely, as a mediation and condition of feeling pleasure in the experience of negative aesthetic objects, which suggests that the Kantian theory of the sublime also acts as an aesthetic response to the existence of evil; that is, as an aesthetic theodicy.

45 Christian Wolff, *Gesammelte Werke. II Abteilung, Band 5. Psychologia empirica*, ed. Jean École (Hildesheim: Olms, 1968), 648, § 855, (my emphasis).

46 Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, *Metaphysics: A Critical Translation with Kant’s Elucidations, Selected Notes, and Related Materials*, ed. and trans. Courtney D. Fugate and John Hymers (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 246, § 682, (my emphasis).

47 Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 131–132; *JubA* 1:387.

6 Kant's Reading of the Concept of *Frohsein*

The existing scholarship on Kant's engagement with Mendelssohn's theory of the sublime is relatively sparse. In reconstructions of the Kantian sublime, Burke's *Enquiry* stands out,⁴⁸ while Mendelssohn is barely mentioned. The pause of the editing of Mendelssohn's works between 1938 and 1971 might be one reason for this gap. The importance of Mendelssohn for Kant's *Analytic of the Sublime* has recently been highlighted by Paul Guyer⁴⁹ and Robert Clewis.⁵⁰ However, while Guyer and Clewis discuss the major problems of this reception, they overlook Kant's reading of the technical term *Frohsein*. Given the importance of this translation for this article, I will focus on Kant's reading of it.

In the last section, I concluded that the term *Frohsein* expresses an aesthetic distance from the existence of evil, which allows the spectator to feel pleasure. In the *Analytic of the Sublime* in the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant employs this concept in the same sense:

Someone who is afraid can no more judge about the sublime in nature than someone who is in the grip of inclination and appetite can judge about the beautiful. The former flees from the sight of an object that instils alarm in him, and it is impossible to find satisfaction in a terror that is seriously intended. Hence the agreeableness in the cessation of something troublesome is *delight* [*Frohsein*]. But this delight on account of liberation from a danger is accompanied with the proviso that one never again be exposed to that danger.⁵¹

48 See, for instance, Robert Doran, *The Theory of the Sublime from Longinus to Kant* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

49 Paul Guyer, *A History of Modern Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 1:361–362; Guyer, *Reason and Experience in Kant and Mendelssohn* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

50 Robert R. Clewis, "The Majesty of Cognition: The Sublime in Baumgarten, Mendelssohn, and Kant," in *Baumgarten's Aesthetics: Historical and Philosophical Perspectives*, ed. J. Colin McQuillan (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021), 241–272; see also Clewis, *The Origins of Kant's Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023). It is worth noting that Clewis has also addressed the relationship between evil and ugliness in Kant's aesthetics and philosophy (*The Origins of Kant's Aesthetics*, 190, 192, 199–201), yet the connection of the problem of evil with the sublime receives minimal attention (174–175, note 82).

51 Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 144; *KU*, *AA* 5:261. The English version of this passage translates *Frohsein* as "joyfulness." However, since Mendelssohn used *Frohsein* to translate "delight," I have decided to modify the English translation.

It is important to point out that Christian Garve translated the term “delight” as *Beruhigung*.⁵² Since Kant uses the term *Frohsein* and not *Beruhigung*, it may seem that in this passage of the *Analytic of the Sublime*, he is basing his reflections on Mendelssohn. In fact, Baumgarten had already translated the concept of *hilaritas* as *Frohsein* in the *Psychology* of his *Metaphysics*, but he did not use it in the context of mixed sentiments. Since Kant uses this term in the *Analytic of the Sublime*, it is more likely that he has in mind Mendelssohn’s translation of Burke’s concept of delight rather than Baumgarten’s *Metaphysics*. It is highly probable that Kant was familiar with 1758 Mendelssohn’s review of Burke’s *Enquiry*. As has been recently argued, many of the examples that Kant uses to define the sublime in his 1764 *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* seem to come from Mendelssohn’s review of Burke’s *Enquiry*.⁵³ In any case, Mendelssohn later reuses the concept of *Frohsein* in the 1771 edition of *Rhapsody*, a text that Kant undoubtedly knew.⁵⁴ Therefore, it is reasonable to think that Kant’s aesthetic use of *Frohsein* in the *Analytic of the Sublime* is based on Mendelssohn’s philosophical writings.

Kant makes the above-quoted reflection in § 28 of the third *Critique*, which is titled “On Nature as Power.” This section pertains to the second part of the *Analytic of the Sublime* (“On the Dynamically Sublime in Nature”). As Kant explains in the introduction of the *Analytic*, this second part is devoted to investigating in what sense the pleasure of the sublime is based on freedom. I will now argue that this “revelation of freedom,”⁵⁵ which acts as the ground of the feeling of pleasure in the sublime, is mediated by an aesthetic distance from the object.

At the beginning of § 28, Kant makes a nominal distinction between the concepts of “power” [Macht] and “dominion” or “violence” [Gewalt].⁵⁶ For Kant, power is the “capacity that is superior to great obstacles.” A powerful object of nature, in turn, can have “dominion” “if it is also superior to the resistance of something that itself possesses power.” Therefore, natural objects that have power but no dominion over the subject are sublime. The key aspect in this nominal definition is distance from the object, for it is the ground for the cancellation of dominion. Kant argues for the cancellation of dominion through his considerations on the concept of “fear” [Furcht]. It is important to point out

52 Edmund Burke, *Philosophische Untersuchungen über den Ursprung unserer Begriffe vom Erhabenen und Schönen*, trans. Christian Garve (Riga, 1773), 45.

53 Lore Knapp, *Empirismus und Ästhetik. Zur deutschsprachigen Rezeption von Hume, Hutcheson, Home und Burke im 18. Jahrhundert* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2022), 341.

54 See the letter to Kant from Marcus Herz dated 7 June 1771 (*Br*, AA 10:121–124).

55 Robert R. Clewis, *The Kantian Sublime and the Revelation of Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

56 Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 143; *KU*, AA 5:260.

that Kant, following the Wolffian tradition, uses the concept of evil to describe fearful objects or nature: “That which we strive to resist is an evil [Übel], and, if we find our capacity to be no match for it, an object of fear.”⁵⁷ Accordingly, the object “must be represented as arousing fear”—that is, as an evil—to be judged as sublime. However, the object must not actually be fearful to be sublime. Some distance is needed: “We can, however, consider an object as *fearful* without being afraid *of* it, if, namely, we judge it in such a way that we merely *think* of the case in which we might wish to resist it and think that in that case all resistance would be completely futile.”⁵⁸

If actual resistance to the fearful object would be “completely futile,” then the sublime must be an object of nature that can kill the spectator. If the aesthetic distance did not exist, then the sublime would not be a source of pleasure, but a source of death and devastation; that is, a source of evil. Aesthetic distance from the natural object is as necessary for Kant as it is for Mendelssohn. As already quoted at the outset of this article, the aesthetic sight of these fearful natures “becomes all the more attractive the more fearful it is, as long as we find ourselves in safety, and we gladly call these objects sublime because they elevate the strength of our soul above its usual level.”⁵⁹ In other words, evil ceases to be an actual evil when regarded from a certain distance, and this distance mediates the pleasure derived from it.

Although physical distance from the object is an existential condition for feeling the sublime (otherwise, the spectator would be dead or perjured), the pleasure that characterises this feeling is grounded in the spectator’s moral dimension; namely, in its power to act according to freedom. In § 29 of the *Analytic of the Sublime*, Kant argues that the feeling of the sublime “has its foundation in human nature, and indeed in that which can be required of everyone and demanded of him along with healthy understanding, namely in the predisposition to the feeling for (practical) ideas, i.e., to that which is moral.”⁶⁰ For this reason, the sublime is not merely an object of nature, but freedom itself: “Sublimity is not contained in anything in nature, but only in our mind.”⁶¹ In this article, I will not go into the details of how the aesthetic power of judgement is able to produce the mixed sentiment of the sublime; for our purposes here, this is an external issue. Here, the central goal was only to argue that the sublime can be seen as an aesthetic response to the problem of evil, which,

57 Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 144; *KU*, AA 5:260.

58 Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 144; *KU*, AA 5:260, (emphasis in original).

59 Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 144; *KU*, AA 5:261.

60 Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 148; *KU*, AA 5:265.

61 Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 147; *KU*, AA 5:264.

I hope, has been successfully reasoned. Whether the mediation produced by aesthetic distance is enough to judge the consistency of Kant's *Analytic of the Sublime*, or, to put it another way, whether a theory of the sublime is possible,⁶² will not be discussed in this article. We can therefore go straight to the conclusion.

7 Conclusion: Two Sceptical Arguments on the Environmental Sublime

In this article, the concept of distance has been the keystone of the analogy between the aesthetics of the sublime and the problem of evil. According to this analogy, I have contended that Mendelssohn's and Kant's theories of the sublime transform the experience of evil into an aesthetic experience through the concept of distance. As I have argued, these theories use aesthetic distance to mitigate the ontological significance of evil in a manner akin to theodicy. In this regard, the classical German theory of the sublime can be regarded as an aesthetic theodicy in that it transforms the experience of evil into an aesthetic experience of pleasure.

To conclude this article, I will briefly examine how my historical analysis of Kant's and Mendelssohn's theories of the sublime might contribute to contemporary definitions of the sublime. Recently, the category of the sublime has been introduced into the field of environmental aesthetics.⁶³ Emily Brady, perhaps the scholar who has most emphasised this aspect, has taken the sublime's moral quality as a central aspect to be considered within this new aesthetic field. According to her, the modern concept of sublime "engenders a distinctive type of aesthetic-moral relationship, and one that can contribute to our moral attitudes toward natural environments."⁶⁴ Based on the results of the present article, I would like to present two sceptical arguments against Brady's environmental reading of the sublime. First, I would like to express scepticism about the argument that the sublime can improve human moral attitudes towards

62 Jane Forsey, "Is a Theory of the Sublime Possible?", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 65 (2007): 381–389, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-594X.2007.00271.x>.

63 Emily Brady, "The Environmental Sublime," in *The Sublime: From Antiquity to the Present*, ed. Timothy M. Costelloe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 171–182; Brady, *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy: Aesthetics, Ethics, and Nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Sandra Shapshay, "Contemporary Environmental Aesthetics and the Neglect of the Sublime," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 53 (2013): 181–198, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/aesthj/ayso67>.

64 Brady, *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy*, 183.

natural environments. Second, drawing on the historical relation between the sublime and evil, I would like to rename Brady's "environmental aesthetics of the sublime" an "environmental aesthetics of evil."

(1) In his review of Brady's book on the sublime, Robert Clewis expresses scepticism regarding the sublime's potential to enhance moral attitudes towards nature. In his view, Brady's argument lacks "more concrete claims about our actual duties toward nature, direct or indirect," and he rhetorically asks: "What ought admirers of nature do?"⁶⁵ Nevertheless, Brady does hint at this scepticism: the sublime *can* contribute to moral attitudes towards nature, but, she recognises, "there is no necessary connection" between them.⁶⁶ Although both authors are aware that there is no necessary connection between the moral dimension of the sublime and an improvement in our moral attitude towards nature, they have overlooked the fact that Kant was also sceptical about this connection. In the *Analytic of the Sublime*, Kant argues that "the satisfaction [in the sublime] concerns only the *vocation* of our capacity as it is revealed to us in such a case, just as the predisposition to it lies in our nature; while the development and exercise of it is left to us and remains our responsibility."⁶⁷

Kant seems to be aware that the "revelation of freedom" in the experience of the sublime only demonstrates the subject's moral vocation, but in no way guarantees that the realisation of this vocation will be achieved. Therefore, no matter how much the subject may take pleasure in sublime nature, it will not necessarily make them morally better. With this, Kant delineates a substantial distinction between aesthetics and ethics. Considering this distinction, it is possible to conclude that his concept of the sublime offers little basis for supporting the moral improvement that Brady seeks to develop in her environmental theory of the sublime.

(2) In light of the main argument presented in this article—namely, that the modern theory of the sublime can be understood as an aesthetic response to the existence of evil—I would like to raise the following question: If, as I propose, the sublime can be conceptualised as the aesthetic experience of evil, might we then reconceptualise Brady's "environmental aesthetics of the sublime" as an "environmental aesthetics of evil"? As noted above, Brady asserts that the experience of the sublime, by showcasing both our natural vulnerability and moral significance, may lead to an improvement of moral attitudes

65 Robert R. Clewis, "What's the Big Idea? On Emily Brady's Sublime," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 50, no. 2 (2016): 114, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5406/jaesteduc.50.2.0104>.

66 Brady, *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy*, 200.

67 Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 145; *KU, AA* 5:262.

towards natural environments. However, what implications might arise from her argument if the sublime is considered as an aesthetic response to the existence of evil? Can the sublime serve to reconcile humanity with nature?

Brady's analysis indeed explores a range of examples and illustrations of the sublime, including negative emotions such as displeasure, fear, and anxiety, as well as depictions of natural disorders and vast, desolate landscapes. However, the notion of evil is notably absent from her discussion.⁶⁸ Considering the catastrophic consequences of the last pandemic and the evident effects of climate change, I consider that introducing the concept of evil into environmental aesthetics is a contemporary imperative. If, as Brady suggests, the sublime can influence our moral attitudes towards natural environments, it follows that nature's capacity to inspire awe, fear, and terror might enhance our moral respect. If the sublime has such positive effects, do we need more natural disasters? Brady's argument deserves re-evaluation: Is it right to think that we might improve our attitude towards natural environments through an encounter with the reality of evil, as illustrated by disasters such as the 1755 Lisbon earthquake?

In my view, this question warrants serious consideration. Indeed, it would be immoral to wish for the destruction of nature. Nonetheless, as Hölderlin's famous dictum states, "Wo aber Gefahr ist, wächst / Das Rettende auch." In light of these verses, Brady's views on the sublime take on a different dimension. It appears that if the sublime is to be integrated into environmental aesthetics, it must be acknowledged in its full complexity. This entails not only considering the moral dimension of the sublime, but also addressing the inherent negativity associated with it, including elements such as terror, destruction, and evil. The sublime must be understood in its ambivalence.⁶⁹ In this article, however, I have not attempted to resolve the ambivalence of the sublime, as that extends beyond the focus that has directed it. Instead, I have primarily explored how the experience of evil influenced the articulation of the sublime in the aesthetic

68 In Brady's analysis, the reality of evil tends to be reduced to the dimension of ugliness. See Brady, *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy*, 176.

69 It is important to note that this ambiguity appears to align the concept of the sublime with the notion of the Anthropocene. See Rob Nixon, "The Anthropocene: The Promise and Pitfalls of an Epochal Idea," in *Future Remains: A Cabinet of Curiosities for the Anthropocene*, ed. Gregg Mitman, Marco Armiero, and Robert S. Emmet (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 1–20. For the role of the sublime in the Anthropocene, see Byron Williston, "The Sublime Anthropocene," *Environmental Philosophy* 13 (2016): 155–174, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5840/envirophil201610338>, and Thomas Khurana, "Altera Natura. Das Anthropozän als ästhetisches Problem," *Dritte Natur. Technik, Kapital, Umwelt* 6 (2023): 171–184.

theories of Mendelssohn and Kant. Additionally, I have argued that both philosophers employed the concept of distance as a mediating factor to account for the pleasure derived from negative aesthetic objects. Through the analysis of the interplay between the sublime and the experience of evil, it has become evident that their theories can be summarised as a form of aesthetic theodicy; that is, a theory that downplays the ontological status of evil by reconfiguring it as a source of pleasure.

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“All Faces Are Equal”

The Sceptic in Kabbalistic Hagiography

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Abstract

Doubts about faith can be a potential threat to any institutionalised form of religion. To counter this threat, religious authorities often develop strategies that adopt their opponents' positions and incorporate them into their master narrative as distinctly negative examples. This traditionalist approach can manifest itself at a more abstract level by equating the concept of doubt with a personification of evil. In other cases, it can be more concrete, taking the form of a doubting fellow believer, sometimes portrayed as a sinner whose sinful behaviour needs to be overcome. This study examines how the figure of the sceptic was used in early modern kabbalistic hagiography. It focuses on a narrative in which Isaac Luria Ashkenazi (1534–1572)—the famous kabbalist and eponym of one of the most influential kabbalistic movements in Judaism—acts as a “physician of the soul” and cures a sinner of his doubts about the existence of God and divine agency in the world. In analysing two specific variants of this story, particular attention is paid to the literary motifs drawn from biblical, rabbinic, and kabbalistic sources and the way in which these motifs were chosen to create a powerful narrative of the transformation of the rather nihilistic anti-hero into a repentant believer. Against this background, it is argued that the motif of conversion is not only used to convey a moral message, but also serves to establish the authority of a newly emerging religious leadership.

Keywords

Doubt – hagiography – Kabbalah – Isaac Luria Ashkenazi – Amalek – early modern Judaism

1 Satanic Doubts, or Evil as the Root of Scepticism

In an episode of the acclaimed Netflix series *Shtisel*, the newly engaged Akiva—a young Hasidic free spirit with artistic aspirations—confides to his somewhat

old-fashioned father Shulem that he has doubts about whether married life is the right path for him.¹ Shulem tries to reassure his son, maintaining that second thoughts are nothing out of the ordinary during the liminal phase between engagement and wedding. He tries to comfort Akiva, with little success, by telling him: “But you know what they say: ‘Doubt’ in *gematria* is ‘Satan,’ or something like this.”² As the qualifier to his statement shows, Shulem himself seems to be not entirely sure that he is reproducing this truism correctly. And indeed, the numerical values of the Hebrew terms for “doubt” and “Satan” do not match.³ Yet the association of what may be called a cultural form of scepticism with evil most likely refers to a common tradition among members of the Hasidic movement. Its origins are attributed to the dazzling founder of one Hasidic court in particular: Nahman of Bratslav (1772–1810).⁴ In a contemporary compilation of his letters, *responsa*, discourses, and aphorisms, one can find the statement that “it is prohibited to doubt anything, because ‘doubt’ [*safeq*] in *gematria* [equals] ‘Amalek,’ and he [or it]⁵ weakens the mind⁶ and cools the heart. And our rabbi once said to someone, ‘Whatever you do is good as long as you do not do anything bad.’”⁷

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- 1 This research was conducted in the framework of a senior fellowship at the Maimonides Centre for Advanced Studies—Jewish Scepticism, which is funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG). I am grateful to Prof. Giuseppe Veltri and the entire MCAS team for this unique opportunity and for providing ideal working conditions, as well as to my co-fellows for creating a stimulating intellectual environment in which to reflect on questions of faith and doubt. I would also like to express my appreciation for the anonymous reviewers for their helpful suggestions.
 - 2 Netflix, *Shtisel*, season 1, episode 5, 31:14: אבל אתה יודע מה אומרים? [...] ספק בגמטריה שטן. או משהו כזה.
 - 3 “Satan” (שטן) amounts to 359, whereas “doubt” (ספק) amounts to 240.
 - 4 The study of Hasidism in general, and the study of Bratslav Hasidism in particular, has experienced an enormous increase in popularity over the last few years. It will suffice to mention here Arthur Green’s superb and still unmatched intellectual-spiritual biography of Nahman of Bratslav entitled *Tormented Master: The Life and Spiritual Quest of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1979). For more recent studies, see Zvi Mark, *Mysticism and Madness: The Religious Thought of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav* (London: Continuum; Jerusalem: Shalom Hartman Institute, 2009), as well as Mark, *The Scroll of Secrets: The Hidden Messianic Vision of R. Nachman of Breslav*, trans. Naftali Moses (Boston, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2010). For a comprehensive overview of the current state of research on Hasidism, see David Biale et al., eds., *Hasidism: A New History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018).
 - 5 The personal pronoun הוא can refer to either “doubt” or “Amalek.” In the present case, the alternative readings do not change the meaning of the sentence, since Amalek is presented as the embodiment of doubt.
 - 6 The use of the term *da’at* may also be read here as a *terminus technicus* for the *Sefirah* of *Da’at*, which constitutes an intermediate attribute located in the centre-line just below *Hokhmah* and *Binah* and above *Hesed* and *Din* (or *Gevurah*).
 - 7 Eliezer Shlomo Schick, ed., *Sefer Ašer ba-Nahal*, part 11 (Jerusalem, 1995), 174: ואסור להיות

This statement is by no means an exception.⁸ Quite the contrary: in the famous collection of Naḥman's teachings entitled *Liqqutei Mohara"n*, the notion of *teshuvah*—namely, a conscious act of turning away from sins committed in the past and attempting to make amends through repentance in the future—is described as a “war against Amalek.”⁹ What is more, the idea of having faith or trust in God [*emunah*] is presented as the appropriate antidote that “weakens Amalek—that is, [secular] knowledge and [scientific] inquiry.”¹⁰ In this regard, it is also pointed out that “truly, it is highly prohibited to be a scholar, God forbid, and to study books of [non-Jewish] wisdoms, God forbid.”¹¹

These few striking examples are an apt illustration of some of the elementary coping mechanisms of groups that advocate a traditionalist agenda. They shed light on the strategies aimed at protecting and preserving what they consider an integral part of their heritage. At the same time, they express how they relate to developments that are not in line with their notion of tradition. Due to their capacity to respond to “novel situations which take the form of refer-

מסופק בשום דבר, כי 'ספק' בגמטריה 'עמלק' והוא מלחיש את הדעת ומקרר את הלב. ורבינו ז"ל אמר פעם לאחד: ווי מען טוט איז גיט אביא מען טיט נישט קיין שלעכטס (איך שעושים זה טוב), העיקר שלא עושים רע. The term ספק amounts to 240 (60 + 80 + 100) and thus equals the numerical value of עמלק (i.e., 70 + 40 + 30 + 100).

- 8 For further Hasidic examples that associate “doubt” with “Amalek,” see Jonathan Garb, *Does God Doubt? R. Gershon Henoch Leiner's Thought in Its Contexts* (Leiden: Brill, 2024), 115–116, 127, 196–198, 200, and 212.
- 9 See Naḥman of Bratslav, *Liqqutei Mohara"n* (Jerusalem, 1936), part 2, § 79, fol. 37^{a-b}: מלחמת עמלק זה תשובה. Cf., however, Jonathan Garb, “Doubt and Certainty in Early Modern Kabbalah,” in *Yearbook of the Maimonides Centre for Advanced Studies 2017*, ed. Bill Rebigier (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), 239–246, esp. 240.
- 10 Naḥman of Bratslav, *Liqqutei Mohara"n*, § 19, fol. 22^a: בי ע"י [על ידי] אמונה החליש את עמלק. From the wider context, it is clear that Naḥman of Bratslav is particularly referring to philosophy here, as he describes Amalek in the very same paragraph as a “philosopher, scholar, and infidel” (עמלק היה פילוסוף ומחקר וכפר). In this context, it also seems noteworthy that with reference to Exod 17:12, the *Zohar* interprets Moses's “steadfast” hand that fights the Amalekites hyper-literally as “faith” [*emunah*] (see *Zohar* 2:66^a).
- 11 Naḥman of Bratslav, *Liqqutei Mohara"n*, § 19, fol. 22^a: ובאמת הוא איסור גדול מאד להיות ספרי החכמות ח"ו וללמוד ספרי החכמות ח"ו. It is possible that this attitude echoes the rabbinic position of Rabbi Akiva; namely, that “one who reads ‘uncanonical’ works (*sefarim ḥiṣoniyyim*)—identified in the Talmudic discussion (BT *Sanhedrin* 100^b) as works written by *minim* or schismatics—[...] is also liable to forfeit his share in the World to Come,” as Jeffrey H. Chajes discussed in the context of the eternal punishment of those who are not considered “Israel” (see Chajes, *Between Worlds: Dybbuks, Exorcists, and Early Modern Judaism* [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003], 127).

ence to old situations,”¹² traditions are themselves subject to a dynamic process of change. In this sense, they are both innovative and reactive, as they must be constantly adapted to those challenges dictated by entities that lie outside the boundaries of what is deemed controllable. The previously quoted statement that it is forbidden to harbour any form of doubt is a particularly blatant example that reveals how traditionalist groups make use of tactical arguments: it negates one of the central aspects of Jewish intellectual history in favour of encapsulating ideas and teachings that are perceived as a threat. Put differently, it rejects an attitude that encourages one to pose questions and to challenge general assumptions. In that sense, the traditionalist approach constitutes the very antithesis of what has recently been termed “subversive scepticism” or “sceptical strategies,” the latter being understood as “a set of literary or rhetorical means intended to induce doubts, questions, and intellectual uneasiness.”¹³

On a literary level, this type of deterrence and demonisation is achieved by the identification of doubt with the biblical people of Amalek, who fought the Israelites during their wanderings in the wilderness.¹⁴ In doing so, the authors draw from the classical imagery of Amalekites as the personification of evil, which developed into a particularly rich trope in kabbalistic writings.¹⁵ Furthermore, the association between doubt and scientific inquiry not only gives these statements a salient modern tone, but also communicates an unambiguous message to their readers: the study of non-Jewish literature is supposedly dangerous as it is a breeding ground for a sceptical attitude that may de-authorise

12 Here, I am following the observations of Eric Hobsbawm, “Introduction: Inventing Traditions,” in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 2. See also *ibid.*, 1, where Hobsbawm defines “invented tradition” as “a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tactically accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviours by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past.”

13 See Bill Rebigier, “Sceptical Strategies in Simone Luzzatto’s Presentation of the Kabbalists,” in Rebigier, *Yearbook of the Maimonides Centre of Advanced Studies 2017*, 53. Theoretically, it would have been conceivable for the authors of kabbalistic works to apply sceptical strategies such as relativisation or objectification. They did not, however, even bother to discuss the validity of their opponent’s attitude. Their strategy is therefore characterised by intentional ignorance rather than by a serious engagement with their opponents.

14 See Exod 17:8–16.

15 Thus, it can be found already in the earliest Provençal writings of Isaac the Blind (ca. 1160–1235). See, e.g., Haviva Pedaya, *Name and Sanctuary in the Teaching of R. Isaac the Blind: A Comparative Study in the Writings of the Earliest Kabbalists* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2001), 103–147, esp. 105–106 and 108. See also Elliot R. Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond: Law and Morality in Kabbalistic Mysticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 104–105 and 143–144n59.

the teachings of the Torah.¹⁶ Not only this, but doubt is also considered harmful as it triggers a rigidity on an emotional-psychological level.¹⁷ Read against the background of kabbalistic sources—and particularly those that conceive the Jewish people as one organism, which may have inspired the authors of these passages—doubt is ultimately equated with the eternal arch-enemy of “the members of Israel”;¹⁸ that is, the nation of Amalek, which is believed to reappear in different embodiments in each generation and which is regarded as the force that prevents the unity of Israel and consequently its redemption.¹⁹

The use of imaginary stereotypes need not be as drastic as in these cases. It can also manifest itself in a more identifiable, and thus arguably more relat-

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- 16 In light of the previously quoted passages, here I am following Jeremy Dauber, who suggests defining scepticism most broadly as “lack of belief” (see Dauber, *In the Demon's Bedroom: Yiddish Literature and the Early Modern* [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010], 11).
- 17 This idea can be found not only in Hasidic writings, but also in those of other modern traditionalist groups. Consider, for example, Avraham Yoffen (1887–1970), a prominent follower of Israel Salanter's Mussar movement and the founder of the Novardok Bais Yosef *yeshivah* in Borough Park, who writes while elaborating on the natural and spiritual type of the evil inclination that “Satan, who is known by the name ‘stone’ [*even*], [...] hardens a person's heart and nape, his nature being like that of a stone” (Yoffen, *Ha-Musar we-ha-Da'at* [Jerusalem, 1973], vol. 2: *Elul–Yom ha-Kippurim*, 56: “השטן אשר יכונה בשם ‘אבן’”). On doubt being affective, see, however, Avraham Rot, “Spinoza's Affective Scepticism,” in *Yearbook of the Maimonides Centre for Advanced Studies 2019*, ed. Yoav Meyrav (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), 145–172, esp. 147, 153, 165, and 166.
- 18 For the notion of Israel as one body, see, e.g., Isaiah Horowitz, *Šnei Luhot ha-Brit*, volume 2 (*Torah še-bi-Khtav, Zo'an Yosef*) (Jerusalem, 1963), fol. 25^b: “Know that each [member of the people of] Israel is called one soul [*nefeš aḥat*], and altogether they are called *adam*, as it is written ‘[For] you, [My flock, flock that I tend,] are *adam*’ (Ezek 34:31), and thus it is written ‘All the persons [*kol ha-nefeš*] belonging to Jacob [i.e., Israel],’ etc. (Gen 46:26), are called one soul. And just as the 248 limbs of the body make one *adam*, thus also each [member] of Israel constitutes one limb, and in the *Zohar*, they are called ‘member of the body’” [see, e.g., *Zohar* 1:245^a] [כלל נקראים בפש אחד וכולם בכלל נקראים] “דע כי כל ישראל הם נקראים פש אחד וכולם בכלל נקראים” [וכמו שרמ"ח אברי אדם כמ"ש אדם אתם וכן כתיב כל הנפש הבאה ליעקב וגו' קראם נפש אחת. וכמו שרמ"ח אברי אדם הם אדם אחד כן ישראל כל אחד מהם אבר אחד ונקראים בזה שייפא דגופא]. On the conception of an ontological difference between a non-Jewish organism and that of the nations, see Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond*, 120–121.
- 19 These interpretations are conventionally based on Exod 17:16 (“The LORD will be at war with Amalek throughout the ages”). The author of *Tiqqunei ha-Zohar*, for example, presents the destruction of Amalek as *conditio sine qua non* for redemption. See *Zohar* 1:25^{a-b} (*Tiqqunei ha-Zohar*) and cf. Isaiah Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar: An Anthology of Texts*, trans. David Goldstein (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1989), 3:1473. For more contemporary examples that equate the Nazis or Saddam Hussein with the forces of Amalek, see Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond*, 25–26n41.

able, way—for example, in the form of a conventional mortal who questions the probability of divine omnipotence or the consequentialist notion of divine punishment; or as a fictional character who violates religious commandments out of conviction. The appropriation of the figure of the sceptic and its integration into the master narrative as a decidedly negative example can thus be seen as a means of underpinning existing power structures and reinforcing a hegemonic claim to religious authority.

One such attenuated but still dramatic example can be found in the collections of hagiographical stories that tell us about the life and spiritual environment of Isaac Luria Ashkenazi (1534–1572). In one of these narratives, which was probably first recorded towards the end of the sixteenth century and circulated in various versions throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Luria is portrayed as a “physician of the soul” who cures a sinner of his doubts about the existence of God and divine agency in the world.²⁰ This study will examine how these fantastic accounts carefully construct the literary figure of the sceptic. In the analysis of two variants of the narrative, particular attention will be paid to the literary motifs drawn from biblical, rabbinic, and kabbalistic sources and the way in which these motifs were used to create the sceptical sinner who ultimately becomes a repentant believer. Against this background, it will be argued that the motif of conversion from antihero to saint not only serves the purpose of conveying a moral message; rather, and based on what the scholar of Yiddish literature Jeremy Dauber characterises as the first and second levels of “textual scepticism,” it will illustrate how stories of this kind seek to establish and consolidate the authority of an emerging religious leadership.²¹ Ultimately, and building on the opening discussion, it is this last point that will show to what extent early modern kabbalistic hagiography not only served as a model for creating legendary accounts around the movement’s founding figures, but can also be understood as a template for validating the model of Hasidic *ṣaddiq* or rebbe as a mediator between God and the community.

2 The Sinner from Constantinople

In his chronicle *Divrei Yosef*, completed in 1672, the seventeenth-century Egyptian historian Josef ben Isaac Sambari (ca. 1640–1703) reproduced a collection

20 For a superb study of Luria, see Lawrence Fine, *Physician of the Soul, Healer of the Cosmos: Isaac Luria and His Kabbalistic Fellowship* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).

21 Dauber, *In the Demon’s Bedroom*.

of fantastic stories known today as the “History” or “Biography” of Luria [*Toledot ha-Ar“i*].²² Among these legendary accounts, which stylise Luria as a miracle-worker with paranormal abilities, there is one that particularly stands out. It tells the story of a sinful man from Constantinople who travels to Safed to find Luria and see for himself if he really does have the supernatural abilities he is said to possess.²³ On his arrival in Safed, the sinner confronts Luria with his doubts, and Luria accepts the challenge, revealing every detail of the sinner’s past life through retrocognition.²⁴ Despite this rather lurid and merciless disclosure, Luria is portrayed as a responsible and discrete leader, as he reveals these secrets not publicly, in front of his fellowship, but behind closed doors.²⁵ This trait is further amplified by the excessive use of the anonymising phrases “such-and-such” and “so-and-so” used with reference to the exact nature of the sinner’s misdeeds, the persons involved, or the places where he committed his sinful acts. Apparently moved by the revelation of his deepest secrets, the sceptic falls to his knees and begs Luria’s forgiveness. To make amends for his wrongdoings, he expresses his willingness to accept any punishment, even death by execution. Luria, however, only prescribes “many penitentials (*tiqqunim*), including fasting, ritual immersion, and the wearing of sackcloth” and requires him “to study ten folios of *Sefer ha-Zohar* every day.”²⁶

22 Sambari’s *Divrei Yosef* was published in Sambari, *Sefer Divrei Yosef by Yosef Yiṣḥaq Sambari: Eleven Hundred Years of Jewish History under Muslim Rule* [Hebrew], ed. Shimon Shtober (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 1994). For a comprehensive discussion of the various manuscript sources and prints of *Toledot ha-Ar“i*, see Meir Benayahu, *The Toledoth ha-Ari and Luria’s “Manner of Life” (Hanhagot)* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 1967).

23 For the entire story, please see appendix 7.1. I intend to publish a comprehensive discussion that will examine the story’s many variants elsewhere, including those (presumably earlier versions) in which the thirteenth-century Castilian kabbalist and alleged author of the *Zohar* Moses de León (ca. 1240–1305) acts as the main protagonist instead of Luria.

24 On retrocognition as reading the “face” of the other, see Elliot R. Wolfson, “Weeping, Death, and Spiritual Ascent in Sixteenth-Century Jewish Mysticism,” in *Death, Ecstasy, and Other Worldly Journeys*, ed. John J. Collins and Elliot R. Wolfson (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1995), 228–229, where he discusses the talmudic and Zoharic notions of the sins marked on the face of the sinner. On Luria’s healing in general, see chapter 5 of Fine, *Physician of the Soul*, 150–186, and see 96 and 160 for a reference to metoposcopy in de Vidas’s *Rešit Hokhmah*. For metoposcopy, see also Lawrence Fine, “The Art of Metoposcopy: A Study in Isaac Luria’s Charismatic Knowledge,” *AJS Review* 11 (1986): 79–101 (reprinted in Fine, ed., *Essential Papers on Kabbalah* [New York: New York University Press, 1995], 315–338).

25 This considerate conduct also points to the fact that Luria fulfils the prohibition of slander (*lashon ha-ra*). See, e.g., *b. Soṭah* 42^a.

26 An English translation of the full story can be found in the appendix. On the ritual reading of the *Zohar*, see Roni Weinstein, *Juvenile Sexuality, Kabbalah, and Catholic Reformation in Italy: Tiferet Bahurim by Pinhas Barukh Ben Pelatīyah Monselice* (Leiden: Brill, 2009),

The first half of the story alternates between the man’s journey to Safed and Luria, who, by means of *telesthesia* or “remote viewing,” informs his fellowship of the sinner’s whereabouts, his outward appearance, and his time of arrival. Thus, already before the first personal encounter between hero and antihero, the narrative attempts to convey the veracity of Luria’s extra-sensorial abilities. Furthermore, by embedding these supernatural elements into the thoroughly realistic setting of a travelogue, it attempts to increase the story’s plausibility. Both devices ultimately serve as a means of invalidating the readers’ potential distrust, which Dauber’s study of Yiddish literature and the early modern describes as “universal” and “particular” types of textual scepticism. According to him, the former constitutes doubts about “the *general* existence of a particular supernatural phenomenon”²⁷ (such as disbelief in the existence of psychic abilities *per se*). The latter, on the other hand, constitutes a sceptical attitude “about a specific claim within a generalized structure of belief.”²⁸ It is primarily the latter category that our example seeks to counteract. It aims at demonstrating the truthfulness of the claim “that the spirit of the Lord speaks through”²⁹ Luria, which is achieved by utilising the figure of the sceptic, who provides a projection surface for a potentially sceptical readership. To be sure, this reading by no means suggests that one is or should be able to decide “what is real and what is fictional within a text (or a life),” as the scholar of religion Jeffrey J. Kripal has emphasised in his study on the paranormal.³⁰ Quite the contrary: I would argue that strategies that are intended to counteract textual scepticism are essentially serving the purpose of neutralising the readership’s potential uncertainties and doubts and that they present the fantastical as an integral part of “a reality that is controlled by laws unknown to us,” to use the words of the literary critic Tzvetan Todorov.³¹ In this light, the transformation of the story’s negative role model into a positive one can serve to guide the audience in the course of their reading experience towards a recognition of Luria as a divinely inspired healer. In other words, the sinner’s conversion experience has the potential to reduce the reader’s putative reservations. It therefore represents a central factor in the consolidation of charismatic authority figures.

279, as well as Boaz Huss, *The Zohar: Reception and Impact*, trans. Yudit Nave (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2016), 221.

27 Dauber, *In the Demon’s Bedroom*, 11.

28 Dauber, 11.

29 See below, appendix 7.1.

30 See Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Authors of the Impossible: The Paranormal and the Sacred* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 34.

31 Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975), 25 (quoted in Kripal, *Authors of the Impossible*, 34).

3 There Is No Judgement and There Is No Judge

Fantastic stories, especially those written in the vernacular, were formerly primarily considered to be literature for an audience belonging to a less educated stratum of society. This assessment has been rightly challenged in more recent studies.³² In the case of kabbalistic hagiography in particular, it would be misleading to assume that the stories were intended only for the mainstream. This is evident from the context in which they are found in their early transmission phase—namely, as parts of technically demanding metaphysical works such as Naftali Bakharakh's *Emeq ha-Melekh*, published in Amsterdam in 1648, or as part of *Sefer ha-Kawwanot*, which was edited by Solomon ben Mordekhai Gabbai and published in Constantinople in 1720.³³ Furthermore, texts such as the story of the sinner from Constantinople were written in Hebrew, and it is not uncommon for them to contain a few—albeit highly effective—references to biblical characters, rabbinic aphorisms, and kabbalistic concepts, the deeper meaning of which can only be grasped through an intimate knowledge of the traditional sources. From this point of view, many of the kabbalistic-hagiographical narratives manage to walk the fine line of providing intellectually stimulating material for a heteronomous group of readers with very different levels of education and genre awareness. In our example, this means that at first glance, the story of the sceptical sinner tells a dramatic tale of doubt and conversion. On a meta-textual level, however, a very different narrative emerges, one that playfully teaches kabbalistic themes such as

32 See, e.g., Lucia Raspe, "On Men and Women Reading Yiddish: Between Manuscript and Print," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 26 (2019): 199–202; Dauber, *In the Demon's Bedroom*, 1–45. See also Eli Yassif, *The Legend of Safed: Life and Fantasy in the City of Kabbalah* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2019). For a general study of the fantastic, with a particular focus on its subversive dimension, see Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Methuen, 1981).

33 Furthermore, given the fact that some of these themes can be found (at least rudimentarily) in the writings of Ḥayyim Vital, I would argue that at an early stage of dissemination, one can certainly speak of an élite-to-élite transmission—one, however, that quickly evolved into an élite-to-non-élite transmission, while at the same time persisting in elitist circles. On some early hagiographical traces in Ḥayyim Vital, see, e.g., his *Ša'ar Ruah ha-Qodeš* (Jerusalem: Ahavat Šalom, 2017), 56. More detailed and flowery accounts of these themes can be found in the letters sent by the Moravian-born kabbalist Shlomo Shlommel Meinstral of Dresnitz (ca. 1547–1632?) from Safed to Eastern Europe at the beginning of the seventeenth century. Shlommel himself can be considered as belonging to the secondary élites. For a more detailed discussion of Shlommel's letters, see Patrick B. Koch, "Of Stinging Nettles and Stones: The Use of Hagiography in Early Modern Kabbalah and Pietism," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 109 (2019): 534–566.

the transmigration of souls, the importance of rectification [*tiqqun*], and the power of psychic techniques.

The most notable intertextual reference that illustrates the interplay of the two levels of meaning occurs relatively early in the story. While the sinner expresses his intention to embark on his “pilgrimage” to Safed in order to test Luria, he proclaims:

I will go to Safed, may it be rebuilt and re-established speedily in our own days, to meet the Rav and see whether he will be able to tell me about the transgressions that I have committed. [If so], I will do penance with his support and accept anything he will decree upon me. If not, then I will know that there is no judgement and no judge, but that the world follows its own principles.³⁴

The sinner’s sober, scientific approach is striking in this passage. His deliberation is presented as being unbiased and open-ended, and he intends to make his decision on the basis of empirical evidence. However, what makes the demonstration of evidence so radical is that the proof of God’s existence is ultimately measured solely by Luria’s success in convincing the sinner of his supernatural abilities. In other words, the sceptic’s acknowledgement of divine agency is reduced to a single factor, which is yet another effective means of establishing Luria’s status as an authority figure.

On an intertextual level, the story anticipates that if Luria were to fail, then the sinner would deduce that “there is no judgement and no judge.” The fact that this dictum is rendered in Aramaic is a clear indication that it comes from another source. And indeed, there are a number of instances in rabbinic literature where this statement can be found. In some cases, it is accompanied by its positive counterpart; namely, that “there is a judgement and a judge.”³⁵ At times, it is contextualised in declarations such as “in every place where there is no judgement, there is judgement,” a seemingly contradictory idea that was

34 MS Paris, Bibliothèque de l’Alliance Israélite 130, fols. 105^{a-b}, in Sambari, *Sefer Divre Yosef*, 340: אלך לצפת תוב”ב לפני הרב ואראה אם יגיד לי העבירות שעשיתי, אשוב בתשובה על ידו: ואקבל עלי כל מה שיגזור עלי, ואם לאו אדע דלית דין ולית דיין אלא עולם כמנהגו נוהג.

35 Such as in the name of Rabbi Akiva in *Gen. Rab.* 26:6 (Jehuda Theodor and Chanoch Albeck, eds., *Berešit Rabbah* [Jerusalem: Šalem Books, 1996], 1:252). There, it is part of a larger discussion of Gen 6:3 (“The Lord said, ‘My breath shall not abide [*yadon*] in man forever, since he too is flesh; let the days allowed him be one hundred and twenty years”). The Midrash interprets the term *yadon* as “to judge,” i.e., with reference to the interpretation that God would cause a flood or carry out his judgement in 120 years (see James L. Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible: A Guide to the Bible as It Was at the Start of the Common*

resolved by interpreting the first part as a reference to the lack of earthly judgement that consequently requires a subsequent divine judgement, as suggested by the second part of the phrase.³⁶ In the context of the previously quoted passage, however, it is most probable that these words were chosen with the ulterior motive of hinting at the adaptation of the saying found in *Targum Yerušalmi*. There, it reads: “There is neither judgement nor judge, nor another world; nor will good reward be given to the righteous, nor vengeance be taken of the wicked.”³⁷ More importantly, the *Targum* puts these words into the mouth of the biblical figure of Cain, who speaks them to his brother Abel just before murdering him. Luria’s foremost student, Ḥayyim Vital (1542–1620), was most certainly familiar with this tradition, as he writes in his *Liqqutei Torah* that “Cain denied the laws, saying ‘there is no judgement, and there is no judge.’”³⁸ Not only this, but the portrayal of Cain as the epitome of the lawbreaker also served as the basis for Vital’s political agenda, which was imposed on him by his teacher. Identifying the origin of his soul as stemming from Cain, Vital writes in his *Ša’ar ha-Gilgulim* [The Gate of Reincarnations] with reference to the Iberian Jews who were forcibly converted to Christianity:³⁹

My master [Luria] told me that I am obligated to facilitate merit for those transgressors more than other people. This is because all the transgressors in this generation [...] are mostly, or perhaps totally, from the [soul] root

Era [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998], 212–213). It is noteworthy that both *Berešit Rabbah* and *Targum Yerušalmi* are considered Palestinian traditions rather than Babylonian ones.

- 36 See *Midr. Deut. Rab.* 5:5 (Shaul Lieberman, ed., *Midraš Devarim Rabbah* [Jerusalem: Bamberger and Wahrman, 1940], 97): ובמקום שאין דין, ובמקום שאין דין, ומהו כן, אלא אמר רבי אליעזר, אם נעשה הדין למטה, ואם לא נעשה הדין למטה, אין הדין נעשה למעלה, ואם לא נעשה הדין למטה, נעשה הדין למטה.
- 37 *Targum Yerušalmi* on Gen 4:8: לית דין ולית דיין עלם אחרן ולית למיתן אגר טב לצדיקיא: אחרן ואין דין ואין דיין ואין עולם. Cf. also *Midraš Leqah Tov* on Gen 4:8: The date of *Targum Yerušalmi* is disputed. Menaḥem Recanati (1250–1310) repeatedly refers to it in his *Peruš al ha-Torah*, which may have been a source for subsequent generations of kabbalists. For a general summary of the midrashic materials on Cain’s sin, see Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews, Volume 1: Bible Times and Characters from the Creation to Jacob* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1909), 109–113.
- 38 Ḥayyim Vital, *Liqqutei Torah* (Vilna, 1879), fols. 61^{a-b}, and *ibid.* (Jerusalem, 1995), 145: קין שכפר בדינין ואמר לית דין ולית דיין [...] This passage is also quoted in Menaḥem Azaria of Fano, *Sefer Ma’amarei ha-Ram“a le-Rab einu Menaḥem Azariah mi-Fano, Tašlum le-Sefer Aserah Ma’amarot* (Jerusalem: Yismah Lev, 2018), 3:263. See also MS Oxford, Bodleian Library, Mich. 109, fol. 317^b.
- 39 On Vital’s soul-connection to Cain, see Fine, *Physician of the Soul*, 333–350, esp. 340–341. On the exalted status of Cain’s soul in Lurianic Kabbalah, see Shaul Magid, *From Metaphysics to Midrash: Myth, History, and the Interpretation of Scripture in Lurianic Kabbala* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008), 53–73.

of Cain. They mixed his good sparks with evil ones, resulting in a majority of evil sparks. Therefore, I am obligated to rectify them because they share the source of my Soul.⁴⁰

Against this background, it is safe to assume that the intertextual reference “there is no judgement and no judge” was used to identify the sinner of the story with the prototypical anti-heroic figure of Cain. In the wider context of Lurianic kabbalistic concepts, it also points to the cosmic project of correcting those soul sparks that originate from a single source and are the cause of a person’s (or rather a group of people’s) wrongful behaviour.

4 All Faces Are Equal

The sinner’s initially sceptical attitude is a recurring motif in other versions of the story. Its radicalism lies in the fact that it challenges not only the Jewish legal system as such, but also the entire construct of a consequentialist ethics based on the doctrine of punishment and reward. A highly interesting expression of this nihilistic attitude can be found in *Sefer Kawwanot ve-Ma’aseh Nissim*, which was printed in Constantinople in 1720.⁴¹ In addition to a seemingly abridged version of the story already contained in *Divrei Yoṣef*, it provides a much more dramatic account that portrays the anti-hero as a wealthy person.⁴² This detail is important since the sinner’s economic status would have made it easier for him to concentrate on Torah study. Following this logic, his sins weigh more heavily on him and he consequently faces a more severe punishment for his transgressions.⁴³ There is also a significant difference in the way in which

40 Ḥayyim Vital, *Ša’ar ha-Gilgul* (Jerusalem: Ahavat Šalom, 2017), 192: ומר לי מורי ז”ל כי אני מחוייב לזכות לחייביא יותר משאר בני הרשעים שבדור [...] רובם או קרוב לכלם הם משרש קין שנתערבו נצוצותיו הטובות ברע ורובו רע ולכן אני מחוייב לתקנם כי אדם לפי שכל הם מן השרש שלי; English translation in Magid, *From Metaphysics to Midrash*, 81. This section is part of the supplements referred to as introductions 38 and 39 of Shmu’el Vital’s version of *Ša’ar ha-Gilgulim* (Jerusalem, 1995), 172.

41 Solomon ben Mordekhai Gabbai, ed., *Sefer Kawwanot ve-Ma’aseh Nissim* (Constantinople, 1720). This work is a combination of *Sefer ha-Kawwanot* published by Moshe Trinkin in Venice in 1620 and the hagiographical materials that the compiler refers to as *Šivḥei ha-Ar“i* in the main body of the book (see fols. 2^a–13^a). Gershom Scholem suggests that Solomon ben Mordekhai Gabbai may have been the grandson of Solomon ben David Gabbai, the compiler of *Me’irat Einayim* (see Scholem, “Laqāṭot le-Bibliographiah šel ha-Kabbalah,” *Kiryat Sefer* 30 [1955]: 415). The book was reprinted in Safed in 1876.

42 See below, appendix 7.2.

43 This argument was also brought forward by the eighteenth-century Italian kabbalist

kabbalists, however, this apparently egalitarian aphorism had already been a subject of debate in the kabbalistic sources of the Middle Ages. The Zoharic corpus includes a highly interesting discussion about the consequences of denying God’s sublimity. Referring to the Israelites’ accusations against God and Moses for making them leave Egypt (Num 21:5),⁵⁰ the *Zohar* interprets the plural form of the verb *he’elitunu* as an indication that they (i.e., the Israelites) “treated all faces equally,” which is why “serpents came upon them, burning them like fire, and fire entered their mouths and they dropped dead.”⁵¹ Similarly to the passage from the Palestinian Talmud, the *Zohar*’s concern with those who doubt the existence of the divine powers and their effect on human behaviour and vice versa appears to reflect a wider debate on the relationship between repentance and reward that was negotiated in thirteenth-century Castile. In a recently published study on Moses de León’s “Order of Penitents,” a thirteen-step programme for pietistic living that is part of a larger unpublished “unnamed composition,” Jeremy Brown has shown that de León promotes a kabbalistic pietism with the idea of *teshuvah* at its centre.⁵² Strikingly, de León applies the very same rationale, as well as the same proof-texts, in order to promote his idea of a supererogatory ethics. Thus, he would claim that those persons who “deny the supernal world, saying: ‘there is neither judgment nor judge’”⁵³ would have no reward in the world to come.

It is instructive to see that de León integrates this sceptical attitude towards the existence and omnipresence of God as a means of promoting his doctrine of the *Sefirot*. He also uses it to polemicise against those who reject

usalem, 1984), “Gate of Repentance,” chapter 1, § 61 (1:700–701), Elijah de Vidas quoted a similar version of the story from *Midr. Ruth Rab.* 5:6.

50 Num 21:5: “And the people spoke against God and against Moses, ‘Why did you make us leave Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread and no water, and we have come to loathe this miserable food.’”

51 *Zohar* 3:183^b: למה העליתונו שוּו כל אפייא שוּוין בג”כ אודמן לגבייהו חוויין דמוקדן לון כאשא. Translation in Daniel Matt, trans., *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition, Volume 9* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016), 223. The Zoharic discussion refers to the following verse in Num 21:6: “The Lord sent fiery serpents against the people. They bit the people and many of the Israelites died.”

52 See Jeremy Phillip Brown, “Gazing into Their Hearts: On the Appearance of Kabbalistic Pietism in Thirteenth-Century Castile,” *European Journal of Jewish Studies* 14 (2020): 177–214. See also Avishai Bar-Asher, “Penance and Fasting in the Writings of Rabbi Moses de León and the Zoharic Polemic with Contemporary Christian Monasticism” [Hebrew], *Kabbalah* 25 (2011): 293–319, as well as Hillel Ben-Sasson, “Transgressions and Punishments: The Special Contribution of Rabbenu Yonah Gerondi’s *Šā’arei Tešuvah*” [Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 86 (2019): 106–163.

53 Brown, “Gazing into Their Hearts,” 190, quoting from MS Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek 47, fol. 343^a.

the idea that divine revelation constitutes the source of kabbalistic knowledge and its ancient origins.⁵⁴ Elsewhere, de León stresses the acceptance of divine punishment as an expression of *teshuvah*. Thus, in his discussion of the value of the thirteen *middot* for penitents, he refers to the twelfth attribute of being ashamed of one's misdeeds and regretting what one has done as a way of indicating "that there is judgement [and that there is a judge] and that there is a hereafter, a reward for the righteous, and punishment for the evildoers. And when one remembers all he has done with the tears in his eyes, all his days and years, and constantly remembers his sins and guilt."⁵⁵ If we compare this declaration with the story of the sinner from Constantinople, we can see that both are based on the idea of a causal link between (the absence of) *teshuvah* and the denial of divine jurisdiction.

These examples show that the urge to counteract sceptical attitudes towards a certain system of beliefs is not limited to hagiography. Quite the contrary, the employment of the literary figure of the sceptic surfaces as a common strategy in different genres, and at times in highly popular writings.⁵⁶ An audience with a high level of reader competency would certainly have been able to discern these multiple layers of intertextual subtlety, while the moral message would nevertheless have remained accessible to an audience that did not possess such specialised knowledge. Viewed in this light, hagiography thus also serves as a medium through which targumic, midrashic, and kabbalistic interpretations of biblical figures and their actions and flaws are translated into a more contemporary format. By modelling the protagonists after biblical figures such as Cain or Manasseh on the one hand, and by replacing God in his function as a "judge" with a divinely inspired human authority on the other, they establish a link to

54 Interestingly, de León describes the words of the ancient sages (i.e., kabbalistic lore) as "sweeter than honeycomb when they are examined according to the matters of Torah by way of truth" (MS Munich 47, fol. 343^b [translation in Brown, "Gazing into Their Hearts," 190]). This idea may be echoed in the story of the sinner from Constantinople, in which the forgiveness of sins is induced by putting sweets into the sinner's mouth rather than executing him with boiling liquid lead.

55 Moses de León, *Sefer Miškan ha-Edut*, ed. Avishai Bar-Asher (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2013), 73: כִּי יוֹרָה עַל זֶה בִּלְבוֹ שֵׁשׁ דִּין [וישׁ דִּיין] וִישׁ עֵלַם אַחֲרָיו וִישׁ שָׂכַר לְצַדִּיקִים וִישׁ עוֹנֵשׁ לְרַשָּׁעִים וְאֵם עַל כָּל מָה שֶׁעָשָׂה יִכְלוּ בְּדַמְעוֹת עֵינָיו וְיִמְיוֹ וְשִׁנּוֹתָיו וְיִשִּׁים חֲטָאתָיו וְאֲשַׁמּוּ תַּמִּיד לִנְגַד עֵינָיו.

56 Here, I am following Boaz Huss, who uses the term "canonical" to designate "an authoritative corpus of texts." See Huss, "Sefer ha-Zohar as a Canonical, Sacred and Holy Text: Changing Perspectives of the Book of Splendor between the Thirteenth and Eighteenth Centuries," *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 7 (1998): 257–307, esp. 258. See also Huss, *The Zohar*, esp. 67–111.

the everyday realities of an early modern readership. The dialogue between the individual and God in the rabbinic context switches to human interaction. In other words, judgement becomes a this-worldly affair, and the judge becomes flesh and blood.

The central role that these hagiographical narratives attribute to an individual as a medium between the divine and the community was not immediately accepted by the rabbinic authorities of the seventeenth century. Thus, even works that were heavily influenced by the literature of the Safedian Kabbalists, such as *Šnei Luḥot ha-Brit* by the famous Prague-born Rabbi Isaiah Horowitz (1565–1630), still supported the idea of divine omniscience, arguing that anyone who does not believe that the divine “knows, sees and protects at all times [...] denies the principle of God’s existence.”⁵⁷ However, Luria’s function as a divine mediator who sees and (in a later phase of history) protects the sinner at all times was to become particularly important for the formation and social organisation of later Jewish spiritual movements. It served as a blueprint for Sabbatean hagiographical texts such as *Zikkaron li-Vnei Yiśra’el* by Baruch ben Gershon of Arezzo, in which Nathan of Gaza (1643–1680), the prophet of the messianic figure Šabbatai Ševi (1626–1676), was modelled on Luria’s image of a divine mediator.⁵⁸ Moreover, it developed much more powerfully in the structural transformation of the Hasidic movement at the end of the eighteenth century, with the establishment of the *šaddiq* qua divine agent—a function that was to be inherited dynastically. For example, the founder of the Komarno Hasidic dynasty, Isaac Eizik Judah Yehiel Safrin (1806–1874), urged his readership to “make a *tzaddiq* and holy one as your rabbi, and through this, remove yourself from doubt, the husk of Amalek, whose *gematria* is equivalent to doubt and who arouses questions and heresy.”⁵⁹

57 Isaiah Horowitz, *Šnei Luḥot ha-Brit*, volume 2 (Amsterdam, 1648–1649), fol. 57^b: אִם מֵאֲמִין שֶׁהַשׁ”י יוֹדֵעַ וְרוֹאֵה וּמְשַׁגֵּחַ בְּכָל עֵת וְרֹגַע אִם לֹא מֵאֲמִין אִם אֵינוּ מֵאֲמִין נִמְצָא הוּא כּוֹפֵר בְּעִיקַר בְּמִצְיֹתוֹת הַשֵּׁם. This statement is part of his interpretation of the famous biblical verse “I am very mindful of the Lord’s presence” (Ps. 16:8). See also Yehiel Mikhel Avraham Epstein, *Sefer Qišur Šnei Luḥot ha-Brit* (Fürth, 1693), fol. 6^b [my counting] and *ibid.* (Jerusalem, 1960), 17.

58 See Efrat Lederfein-Gilboa, “Revisiting *Zikkaron li-Vne Yisrael*: A Multifaceted Sabbatian Monograph,” *El Prezente* 16/17 (2022/2023): 60–92, esp. 62, 76–81, and 88–89. On *Zikkaron li-Vnei Yiśra’el*, see also *Sabbatai Zevi: Testimonies to a Fallen Messiah*, ed. and trans. David J. Halperin (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2007), 21–101.

59 Isaac Eizik Judah Yehiel Safrin, *Nošer Ḥesed ha-Mevu’ar* (Jerusalem, 2016), 35; quoted and translated in Garb, *Does God Doubt?*, 198.

5 The Subversive Dimension of Kabbalistic Hagiography

So far, this article has emphasised how the figure of the sceptic in Lurianic hagiography serves to consolidate an ideology that includes, on the one hand, a strict adherence to the rules established by a specific community, and, on the other, a set of practical instruments for censuring those who have broken those rules. However, this programmatic orientation should also be read in the light of its specific historical context; namely, the early formative phase of what some scholars have defined as “Lurianism.”⁶⁰ From this perspective, the hagiographical mode also has a thoroughly subversive dimension, especially when read against the background of sixteenth-century Ottoman society as a whole. It seems no coincidence that the (wealthy) sinner is portrayed as a resident of the cultural, religious, and political epicentre of the Ottoman Empire. Moreover, he is also shown to be the one who takes on the hardship of travelling to a peripheral place like Safed. Luria, whom he visits, is at best a marginal figure, if not completely insignificant in the empire’s political and religious landscape. In other words, the reference to Luria’s fame, which reached as far as Constantinople, and the recognition of his prophetic authority and paranormal abilities can therefore also be read as an attempt to control one’s own historiography and to create a counter-narrative to the conditions of the Jews in Safed, who lived under relatively strictly administered and at times discriminatory Ottoman rule in the late sixteenth century.⁶¹ As Heidi A. Ford has convincingly argued in her study of Muslim miracle stories, the miraculous act as such is “a symbolic representation of divine power.” Furthermore, she states that it has the potential “to subvert the social reality in which it is grounded, because by its very nature it is, to borrow [Michel de] Certeau’s terminology, ‘the eruption of divine power.’ In other words, it claims as its source of power and authority that which is both external to and above social reality: God.”⁶²

60 See, e.g., Moshe Idel, “One from a Town, Two from a Clan—The Diffusion of Lurianic Kabbala and Sabbateanism: A Re-Examination,” *Jewish History* 7, no. 2 (1993): 84. See also the remarks in Gershom Scholem, *Sabbatai Ševi: The Mystical Messiah, 1626–1676* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 24.

61 See, e.g., Abraham David, *To Come to the Land: Immigration and Settlement in Sixteenth-Century Eretz-Israel* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1999), 48–53.

62 Heidi A. Ford, “Hierarchical Inversions, Divine Subversions: The Miracles of Rābi’a al ‘Adawiya,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 15, no. 2 (1999): 10. Ford refers here to Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, trans. Tom Conley (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 278. For mockery and scepticism in early Christian hagiography, see, e.g., Gerd Theissen, *The Miracle Stories of the Early Christian Tradition* (Edinburgh: T & T Clarke, 1983), 56.

Narratives centred around miracles can therefore not only call the social order into question; they can also reverse the existing power relations. These dynamics clearly emerge in a relatively detailed account of the miracles performed by El'azar Azikri (1533–1600), one of Luria's contemporaries in Safed and the author of the mystico-moral treatise *Sefer Haredim* (first printed in Venice in 1601).⁶³ In the narrative, Azikri travels to Constantinople to consult with the Sultan, imploring him to replace the current malevolent governor of the city of Safed with one who will be more sympathetic to the Jews.⁶⁴ On the way to Constantinople, the ship on which Azikri is travelling is caught in a heavy storm, and the prayers of those on board have no effect. At the captain's request, Azikri writes a divine name on a piece of paper and orders the captain to attach this hastily made amulet to the ship's mast. Immediately, the storm calms, and the ship sails towards Constantinople at incredible speed, making the entire journey from the Land of Israel to its destination on the northern shore of the Mediterranean in only a few hours. On arrival, Azikri looks for a place to stay. He contacts the local *šamaš*, who agrees to house him; however, he tells Azikri that he can only sleep on the roof of his house because he does not have enough room inside. So Azikri takes his books and goes onto the roof of the building, where he studies by candlelight and keeps his midnight vigil [*tiqqun ḥašot*]. That same night, the Sultan's daughter falls ill, and her condition worsens as the night wears on. While the doctors are fighting for her life, the Sultan goes out onto his balcony to relieve his grief and sees a great shining light coming from one of the roofs of the city.⁶⁵ Thinking it is a fire, he sends

63 Even though this story may have been composed at a much later point in time and no specifics are known about its provenance, it can still serve as an example that illustrates the mechanisms of subversion. To the best of my knowledge, it was first published in Pinḥas David Weberman, ed., *Sefer Ma'aseh Nissim* (Jerusalem: Defus ha-Teḥiah, 1966), 125–130. It is also included in the anonymous collection *Sefer Anaf Eš Avot* (Jerusalem: Yeshivat Qodesh Hilulim, 1972), 235–237. Both versions make reference to Ḥayyim Yosef David Azulai's famous *Šem ha-Gedolim*, stating in his name that “we have heard about his [i.e., Azikri's] holiness and the wondrous deeds that he performed in Constantinople” [ושמענו ומקדושתו ופלאות שנעשה לו קוסטאנטניא]. Even though this passage is in fact included in some of the later prints of Azulai's work (see, e.g., Azulai, *Šem ha-Gedolim* [Podgorze, 1905], fol. 15^a [29], no. 212), it seems to be a later addition as it is absent from the *editio princeps* (Azulai, *Šem ha-Gedolim* [Livorno, 1774], fol. 8^a, no. 38), as well as from the second edition (Azulai, *Šem ha-Gedolim* [Livorno, 1786], fol. 5^a, no. 40). I will only present those parts of this very rich history that seem most relevant to our context.

64 The story uses the name “Istanbul.”

65 The motif of the great shining light appears to be an allusion to the biblical theophany in the form of a pillar of cloud and fire that led the Israelites out of Egypt (see, e.g., Exod 13:21). This motif was also adopted in Lurianic hagiography, where it is stated, for example, that

his subjects to extinguish it. When they discover that the source (or receiver) of the light is not a fire, but Azikri, the Sultan understands that Azikri must be a holy man. He therefore brings him to the palace and asks him to heal his daughter. With the help of Azikri's prayer, the Sultan's daughter is completely cured. Deeply in his debt, the Sultan offers Azikri the governorship of Safed. Azikri refuses, but asks the Sultan to suspend the current governor and appoint a replacement.⁶⁶ He also demands that the new official consult him personally on all matters and decisions concerning the community. The Sultan agrees, giving him a letter to this effect, and on Azikri's return, the malicious governor is removed from office and the Jews of the city live in peace and quiet from that day forth.

Although this story does not use the figure of the sceptic, it does revolve around events that trigger a process of persuasion through the performance of miracles. As the story progresses, this leads to a reversal of the balance of power. Recognising Azikri's supernatural abilities, the Sultan allows him to dictate political decisions, not least those affecting the financial situation of his realm. In doing so, he acknowledges him as a medium through which divine power manifests itself on earth, thereby subordinating himself not to Azikri, but to God. At the same time, however, the Sultan grants *de facto* power to Azikri, as the story implies an effective reversal at the administrative level. The transfer of authority to Azikri, formerly a subject with a subordinate status, gives him enough power to neutralise his former oppressor. In Foucauldian terms, the story tells of a victory over the "administrative machine" of the "zealous bureaucracy [...] with its inevitable effects of power."⁶⁷

6 Conclusion

Much like the examples from the Bratslav corpus cited at the beginning of this article, the hagiographical texts analysed here represent a traditionalist agenda. From a Jewish perspective, the portrayal of Luria as a charismatic

a pillar of clouds or fire (depending on the version) was moving in front of Cordovero's corpse on the procession to his burial site in Safed. See Ya'aqov Moshe Hillel, ed., *Šivhei ha-Ar'i ha-Šalem ve-ha-Mevu'ar* (Jerusalem: Ahavat Šalom, 2014), 11.

66 The motif of the rejection of a monetary reward can be found in a Sufi hagiographical story about Sahl b. 'Abdallah al-Tustari: see Farid al-Din Attar, *Muslim Saints and Mystics: Episodes from the Tadhkirat al-Auliya'* ("Memorial of the Saints"), trans. A.J. Arberry (London: Penguin/Arkana, 1990), 37–38.

67 Michel Foucault, *Abnormal: Lectures at the Collège de France 1974–1975*, trans. Graham Burchell (London: Verso, 2003), 12.

leader with paranormal powers can be interpreted as a demonstration of intellectual and political superiority over his contemporaries, who were more open to the secular sciences and an intellectual exchange with Christian scholars.⁶⁸ It is precisely in this context that a counter-narrative quality of hagiographical literature emerges that has received little attention in Jewish studies. Similarly to Einat Davidi’s assessment of the Spanish allegorical drama of the so-called *autos sacramentales* as a typical Counter-Reformation play, kabbalistic hagiography constitutes a counter-strategy and a didactic (re-)indoctrination “whose purpose is to stand as a bulwark against reform.”⁶⁹ As noted above, traditionalist aspirations are themselves innovative, and they are thus subject to potential criticism from those currents they oppose. In order to conceal this fact, they establish a continuity between old and well-established traditions. In the Lurianic context, this continuity is achieved through the presentation of its main protagonist as someone who has “received divine wisdom in perfection,” like the second-century Tannaitic figure and alleged author of the *Zohar* R. Shimon bar Yoḥai. Luria himself is even considered to be a soul-spark of the former,⁷⁰ and his source of knowledge is presented as the result of divine inspiration, whose authority is difficult to dispute.⁷¹ Furthermore, his contemporary and

68 See Moshe Idel, “Italy in Safed, Safed in Italy: Toward an Interactive History of Sixteenth-Century Kabbalah,” in *Cultural Intermediaries: Jewish Intellectuals in Modern Italy*, ed. David B. Ruderman and Giuseppe Veltri (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 239–269, esp. 243–244 and 248–249. More recently, see also Jonathan Garb, *A History of Kabbalah: From the Early Modern Period to the Present Day* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 30–66, esp. 30–36 and 41–42. According to the little historical evidence that we possess—namely, the few documents that are today housed in the Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research Unit and the Ezra Gorodesky Collection at the National Library of Israel—Luria was apparently very prosperous and was involved in domestic and international trade, as well as in philanthropic activities. See, e.g., Abraham David, “Genizat Yerushalayim: The National Library of Israel in Jerusalem,” in *Books within Books: New Discoveries in Old Bindings*, ed. Andreas Lehnardt and Judith Olszowy-Schlanger (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 303–306.

69 Einat Davidi, “The Corpus of Hebrew and Jewish ‘Autos Sacramentales’: Self-Deception and Conversion,” *European Journal of Jewish Studies* 13 (2019): 185. See also *ibid.*, 189, where Davidi stresses that a “major part in the theatre was written and presented in the Western Sephardic Diaspora, a community of ex-conversos, [where it] served as a powerful tool for re-indoctrination, similar to the function of Spanish didactic theatre in service of the Counter-Reformation.”

70 Hillel, *Šivḥei ha-Ar“i*, 10–11.

71 In *Šivḥei ha-Ar“i*, Luria is presented as a figure who spent thirteen years in seclusion in Egypt, on an island close to Cairo, where he received the revelation from Elijah the prophet (see *ibid.*, 3–9, esp. 5). On the perception of Elijah’s revelation among kabbalists, see Fine, *Physician of the Soul*, 103 and 296. On Luria’s prophetic authority, as well as the centrality of the superiority of divinely revealed over intellectually acquired knowledge in mod-

rival Moses Cordovero (1522–1570) is portrayed in Lurianic hagiography as a follower of Lurianic teachings, proclaiming to his own disciples that they introduce a level of kabbalistic wisdom that was inaccessible to him.⁷² Most importantly, however, the author(s) of the story of the sinner from Constantinople anticipate(s) the reader's possible doubts and dispel(s) them by using the figure of the sceptic who is transformed into a zealous believer as a result of Luria's successful treatment.

"Stories and histories and other narrative or descriptive accounts help us to escape boredom and indifference—ours as well as that of other people," writes Paul Hernadi.⁷³ As the previous discussion has shown, hagiographical exempla do exactly this by evoking an emotional response and providing an impetus to improve one's personal observance. Equally important, however, is their purpose of defining communal power structures. Thus, one of the primary goals of the sinner who challenges Luria is to distinguish the charismatic leader from the ordinary person and to show that his (or, very rarely, her) abilities are exceptional and beyond emulation. In this sense, hagiography establishes a clear hierarchy between religious authority and those subordinated to it. The combination of edification and glorification conveys not only an ideal of how one should behave, but also to whom one should listen. Thus, although the term *shevah* literally means "praise," these stories serve to induce not only the veneration of a saint, but also participation through obedience and loyalty.

According to the targumic tradition, Cain proclaimed that "there is no judgement and there is no judge" right before he killed his brother. However, doubt about God's omnipotence is not the only parallel between Cain and the penitent from Constantinople who attempts to challenge Luria with these very words. In the biblical narrative, Cain was not killed for his wrongdoing, and in our context, the sinner is also spared death. Seen in this light, the real "punishment" is that Cain and the sinner have to go on living and learning to live with their guilt. The conversion of a sceptic into a believer is, therefore, as transformative as it is traumatic. Ultimately, it is the beginning of a life marked by a permanent state of being in debt to God.

ern Kabbalah, see, e.g., Jonathan Garb, *Modern Kabbalah as an Autonomous Domain of Research* [Hebrew] (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2016), 20, 26–27 (for an English summary, see iii–iv).

72 *Šivhei ha-Ar"i*, 11.

73 Paul Hernadi, "On the How, What, and Why of Narrative," *Critical Inquiry* 7 (1980): 203.

Appendices

1 *The Sinner from Constantinople*

And on the day this deed happened [i.e., Luria preventing a locust infestation in the Upper Galilee], there was a rich person from Constantinople, may God protect her, in Safed, may it be rebuilt and re-established, who came to celebrate Passover, and he had heard about that incident and was greatly astonished by the Rav's abilities. And they told him that this was just one of the many things that the Rav was able to do. Upon his return to Constantinople, he told people there about the Rav's deeds and how he was able to reveal to an individual the sins that he had committed since his adolescence. There was one man who had committed virtually every sinful act. He said to himself, "I will go to Safed, may it be rebuilt and re-established speedily in our own days, to meet the Rav and see whether he will be able to tell me about the transgressions that I have committed. [If so], I will do penance with his support and accept anything he will decree upon me. If not, then I will know that there is no judgment and no judge, but that the world follows its own principles." Thus, he left Constantinople. Having made it halfway, he took a break at a place next to a river, and he drank and lay down and took a glass of wine in his hands and said: "Wise R. Isaac, I drink this glass to your wellbeing and the wellbeing of your disciples." While [the sinner] was still there, the Rav said to his disciples: "Friends, you must know that a few days ago, an evil person from Constantinople set out to come to me in order to try me. Right now, he is in such-and-such place, and he is eating and drinking a glass of wine for your and my well-being. On such-and-such a day, he will arrive here, and his appearance and character is such-and-such. Thus, when he comes and asks for me, bring him before me, because he is a great soul, a spark of Aḥab, the king of Israel, and through me, it will be restored." Eventually, this man came and asked for the Rav, and the disciples brought him before him, and it happened that when he came before the Rav, he was terrified, because he was looking at the countenance of the *Šekhinah*. He approached him and said: "Are you the man who sees, and who tells people their sins?" He responded, "It is I, and the divine wisdom is the one that guides the individual in the cycles of uprightness and righteousness." [The sinner] then said to the Rav: "You should know that I am a very evil person and that if you tell me what I have done, then I will faithfully acknowledge that the spirit of the Lord speaks through you." Thus, the Rav told all his disciples to leave as he did not want to embarrass [the sinner] in front of the others, and they all left. Then, the Rav told him: "Your name is so-and-so son of so-and-so, and on such-and-such a day in such-and-such a place, you committed such-and-such a transgression; and on such-and-such a day you did such and

such.” And he continued to tell him everything he had done from the day of his birth to that very day; he even told him about a trivial conversation that he had had with his wife. And so it happened that when he heard him, he fell on the Rav’s feet and said: “It is as you said, I have intentionally sinned, I have sinned out of lust and emotion, and I have sinned unintentionally. Now, give me the *tiqqun* for my transgressions, and as the Lord lives, if you tell me that there will be no *tiqqun* for me without [my being executed by means of] decapitation or strangulation, I will accept it for the expiation of my sins.” Then the Rav gave him many *tiqqunim*, including fasts, ritual immersions, and the wearing of sack-cloth around his waist, and told him to study ten folios of *Sefer ha-Zohar* every day, even without any [deeper] understanding [of its contents]. And from this day on, he was a complete penitent (*ba’al tešuvah*) and he died in penance.⁷⁴

2 The Wealthy Sinner

There is yet another exemplum about a wealthy person who came before the Rav, asking him: “Are you the prophet who knows everything that a person does in secret?” He said: “It is I,” to which he [the wealthy man] responded: “If you tell me what I have done, I will accept *tešuvah*. If not, then ‘all faces are equal.’”

74 MS Paris 130, fols. 105^{a-b}, published in Sambari, *Sefer Divre Yosef*, 340–341: וביום אשר אירע ע"ה שם בצפת ת"ו עשיר אחד מקושטנדינה יע"א אשר בא לחוג את חג המצות ושמע מדבר ההוא ותמה מאד על ידיעת הרב. ויאמרו לו, ולא זו בלבד עשה הרב, ויספרו לו ויאמרו כמה וכמה. ובחזרתו לקושטנדינה סיפר שם המעשים של הרב ואיך הוא מגלה לאדם העונות אשר עשה מנעוריו. והיה שם אדם אחד שלא הניח עבירה שלא עשאה. ויאמר בלבו אלך לצפת תוב"ב לפני הרב ואראה אם יגיד לי העבירות שעשיתי, אשוב בתשובה על ידו ואקבל עלי כל מה שיגזור עלי, ואם לאו אדע דלית דין ולית דיין אלא עולם כמנהגו נוהג. אז יצא לו מקושטנדינה, וישב לו באמצע הדרך במקום אשר היה שם נהר ויאכל וישת, ויקח בידו כוס אחד של יין ויאמר: חכם ר' יצחק אני שותה כוס זה לחייד ולחיי החברים שלך. בעודו שם אמר הרב לחברים: חברים, דעו לכם שזה כמה ימים יצא אדם רשע מקושטנדינה, ובא אלי לנסות אותי והגו עתה במקום פלוני אוכל ושותה כוס של יין לחייכם ולחיי. וביום פלוני יבא הנה, כך וכך תוארו ודמותו. לכן כשיבוא וישאל עלי הביאוהו לפני, כי הוא נשמה גדולה, ניצוץ מאחאב מלך ישראל, ועל ידי יתוקן. לימים בא האיש ההוא וישאל על הרב, ויביאוהו החברים לפניו, ויהי בבואו לפני הרב נבהל כי ראה מהביט בפני השכינה, ויגש אליו ויאמר: האתה האיש הרואה המגיד לבני אדם עונותיו. ויאמר אני, וחכמת אלקים היא להנהיג האדם במעגלי יושר וצדק. אז אמר לרב: תדע לך שאני רשע גדול ואם תגיד לי מה שעשיתי אדע נאמנה כי רוח ה' דבר בך. אז אמר הרב לחברים שיצאו כולם שלא יתבייש לפניהם, ויצאו כולם. אז אמר לו הרב אתה נקרא פלוני בן פלוני וביום פלוני במקום פלוני עשית עבירה פלונית וביום פלוני כך וכך, עד הגיד לו כל מה שעשה מיום היותו עד היום ההוא, ואפילו שיחה קלה שהיה בינו לבין אשתו הגיד לו. והיה כשמעו ויפול לרגלי הרב, ויאמר כך דברת, וחטאתי עייתי ופשעתי. ועתה תן לי תקון לעונותי, וחי ה' אם תאמר לי שאין לי תקון בלתי הרג או חנק אקבל עלי לכפרת עונותי. אז נתן לו הרב תקונים הרבה, בתעניות טבילות ולבישת שק על מתניו, וללמוד בכל יום עשרה דפים מן הזוהר הלשון לבד בלתי שום הבנה. ומן היום ההוא והלאה היה בעל תשובה גמורה ומת בתשובתו. See also Benayahu, *Toledoth ha-Ari*, 173–174, and cf. Hillel, *Šivhei ha-Ar"i*, 50–51.

And the Rav came closer to him and told him all of the things he had done since the day he was born. Also, he told him that he had had sexual relations with his female servant, and he admitted everything, except for the [exposure related to] his female servant, which he denied. The Rav said: “If I made her appear to you right now, what would you say?” Promptly, the Rav put his hand on him and he pulled her out [of the wealthy man’s body]. When [the wealthy man] saw her and recognised her, he almost passed away. He fell down before the Rav’s feet and said: “I have sinned, and perverted that which was right” (Job 33:27). And the Rav, peace be upon him, restored his soul to him. The man was screaming in a bitter voice, crying and begging the Rav, saying, “If you could only remove this death from me,” to which he responded: “This is to let you know that what the sages of blessed memory said is true: ‘He who has intercourse with a non-Jewish woman will be attached to her like a dog until the world to come.’ Thus, she is bound to you and she will not leave unless you [perform] great [acts of] penance and *tiqqunim*.” The man responded: “I am here and even [ready to accept the] four modes of capital punishment.” So the Rav told him that his *tiqqun* would be by means of burning. Promptly, [the wealthy man] took coins out of his pocket to buy wood in order to burn himself. But the Rav told him: “Our law is not like the law of the nations, but lead is required according to the law.” And the man replied, “Whatever will be shall be, I am going to die [in any case].” The Rav then commanded them to buy lead, and so they did and they put it on the fire. And the Rav told him to recite the *šekhiv me-raʿ* confession, and thus he did. And he told him: “Lie down on the ground,” and he lay down. He told him: “Spread out your hands,” and he spread them out. “Close your eyes,” and he closed them. “Open your mouth,” and he opened it. And he threw down some sweets that he had with him while saying, “Thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin expiated” (Isa 6:7), “Thou shalt not die” (2 Sam 12:13). And he helped him to get up from the ground, prescribing him *tiqqunim*, and the general principle of the *tiqqun* was to read five folios of the *Zohar* every day, even without understanding it, and he reached out to his wife and children, and died in Safed in complete penance.⁷⁵

75 Gabbai, ed., *Sefer Kawwanot ve-Ma'aseh Nissim*, fol. 6^{a-b} (and *ibid.* [Safed, 1876]), fols. 8^b–9^b: שוב מעשה בא' עשיר שבא לפני הרב יאמר לו אתה הוא הנביא שידוע כל מה שיעשה האדם בחדרי חדרים א"ל אני השיב לו אם תגיד לי מה שעשיתי אקבל תשובה אם לאו כל אפיא שוין ויקרב אליו הרב והגיד לו כל מה שעשה מיום שנולד וג"כ אמר שבא על שפחתו ובכל הוודה לו חוץ מהשפחה שביחש לו א"ל הרב אם עתה אני מראה אותה לך מה תאמר מיד נתן הרב ידו עליו והוציאה וכשרא[ה] אותה והכיר' כמעט שפרח' נשמתו ונפל לפני רגלי הרב ויאמר חטאתי והישר העותי וחזר הרב והשיב נשמתו אליו והאיש צועק בקול מר בוכה ומתחנן להרב שיסירה מעליו ויאמר לו תדע שאחז"ל הבא על הגויה מתקשר עמה ככלב אפי' לעה"ב ולזה היא קשורה עמך ואינה יוצאה כי אם בתשובה גדולה ובתיקונים השיב האיש הנגי אפי' לד' מתות ב"ד אז א"ל

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הרב תיקונו בשריפ' [ה] מיד הוציא מעות לקנות עצים לשורפו א"ל הרב אין דיננו כאומו [ת] אלא צריך עופרת כדין אמר האיש יהיה כמו שיהיה הנני אמות אז צוה הרב שיקנו עופרת ויבואו ויתנו על האש ואמר לו שיאמר וידוי שכיב מרע וכן עשה א"ל השלך עצמך לארץ והשליך עצמו אל הארץ אמר לו פשט רגליך ופשט פשוט ידיך ופשט סגור עיניך וסגר פתח פתח והשליך בפיו מיני מתיקה שהיה לו מזומן וא"ל וסר עונך וחסאתך תכופר לא תמות והקימו מן הארץ וכתב לו תיקונים ובכלל התיקון היה שיקרא בכל יום ה' דפין מספר הזוהר אפי' [לו] בלא הבנה ושלא אחר אשתו ובניו ומת בצפת בתשובה שלימה.

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Cicero vs. Cotta (?)

Between Religion, Politics, and Scepticism

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Abstract

This contribution aims to examine Cicero's tricky attitude towards religion by contrasting it with the stance of Gaius Aurelius Cotta, the spokesman for the “sceptical” Academy in *De natura deorum*. Particular attention will be given to the historical context: Who was Cotta historically, and what sets him apart from the *homo novus* Cicero? What does it mean for Cotta to be a “sceptic”? Is he merely simulating *disserendi causa* (i.e., for the sake of discussion, as the Stoic Balbus suggests)? Or should we interpret his multiple *personae* (Cotta as a philosopher, a pontifex, and a man) in light of Sextus Empiricus's inquiry about God (περὶ θεοῦ)? Finally, can we assert that Cicero, while considering the Stoic view as more closely aligned with truth (cf. *ad veritatis similitudinem* [...] *propensior* [ND 3.40.95])—a view that fits perfectly with his political project—still employs sceptical “weapons” to refute those aspects of Stoic theology he cannot accept, as seen in *De divinatione* and *De fato*?

Keywords

Academic scepticism – ancient religion – Ancient Rome – Cicero – divination – scepticism – *simulatio* – Stoicism

1 Introduction and Objectives¹

Inside this augur-philosopher's distinguished head there is no system, but a self-conscious and accepted incoherence, with successive standpoints

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and spare attitudes depending on the audience or the confidant, yet all sincere, thanks to the uncertainty of each.

With these words, Georges Dumézil, in his famous *Archaic Roman Religion*,² describes Cicero's attitude towards the multiple aspects of the religious phenomenon. However, claiming that Cicero is "at ease in his self-contradictions, in which, perhaps, he experienced wealth and freedom, the two great and intellectual pleasures,"³ is, in my opinion, an oversimplification. Most importantly, it does not preclude us from attempting to shed some light—as far as possible—on Cicero's "kaleidoscopic" stance on religion. To this end, I have found it valuable to compare Cicero's position in *De natura deorum* (*ND*) with that ascribed in the same dialogue to Gaius Aurelius Cotta—the spokesman for the so-called sceptical Academy. While this is a widely investigated topic,⁴ the perspective I shall adopt in this contribution remains underexplored. Specifically, the focus of my analysis will be the complex relationship between the "sceptical"⁵ stances of Cicero and Cotta, considering their respective historical contexts, roles, and positions. I will address the following critical questions in detail:

an earlier draft of this paper, which I presented during one of MCAS's Internal Workshops. Finally, I would like to thank Michela Torbidoni, the editor of this volume, for her meticulous care during the editing process.

- 2 Georges Dumézil, *Archaic Roman Religion: With an Appendix on the Religion of the Etruscans*, trans. Philip Krapp (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 2:549.
- 3 Dumézil, *Archaic Roman Religion*, 2:550.
- 4 See, e.g., the recent volume by John P.F. Wynne, *Cicero on the Philosophy of Religion: On the Nature of the Gods and On Divination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), as well as Carlos Lévy, Cicero academicus. *Recherches sur les Académiques et sur la philosophie cicéronienne* (Rome: Collection de l'École française de Rome, 1992), 557–588, Joseph G. DeFilippo, "Cicero vs. Cotta in *De natura deorum*," *Ancient Philosophy* 20 (2000): 169–187, and Raphael Woolf, *Cicero: The Philosophy of a Roman Sceptic* (New York: Routledge, 2015). Further bibliographical references will be mentioned and discussed in the following pages.
- 5 The reason why I have consistently used quotation marks around the terms "sceptical" and "scepticism" when referring to the Academy or its members is that the Greek word σκεπτικός is applied in a distinctly anachronistic manner in this context. The term, in fact, only acquires a specific philosophical connotation—characterising a particular school of thought with well-defined attributes—with the later neopyrrhonian movement. This technical usage is not found in the works of Timon or Aenesidemus. For a discussion of the presence of σκεπτικός as a technical term in Philo of Alexandria's works, see Carlos Lévy, "La conversion du scepticisme chez Philon d'Alexandrie," in *Philo of Alexandria and Post-Aristotelian Philosophy*, ed. Francesca Alesse (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 103–120. As for the Latin term *scepticus*, it first appears only during the Renaissance, in Ambrogio Traversari's 1430 translation of Diogenes Laertius's *Life of Pyrrho*. For more on "scepticism" in the Roman world, see Carlos Lévy, "Itinéraires du scepticisme romain, d'Aulu-Gelle à saint Augustin," *Comptes rendus des séances de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* 23 (2020): 557–578.

- 1) Who was Gaius Aurelius Cotta, historically? What does it mean for him to be a “sceptic,” and how should his attitude towards the religious phenomenon be understood accordingly?
- 2) Conversely, what does it mean to be Cicero? Why can he not afford to fully endorse the view of the Academician Cotta? While Cicero agrees with Cotta’s epistemological perspective,⁶ he considers Balbus’s Stoic theology “more inclined towards a likeness of truth” [*ad veritatis similitudinem* [...] *propensior*];⁷ see also *De divinatione* (*Div.*) 1.5.9. Should we doubt Cicero’s “sincerity”? Furthermore, how can his preference for Stoic theology be reconciled with his vehement attack on divination in *Div.* 2?

2 A “Sceptical” Aristocrat: Gaius Aurelius Cotta

Who was Gaius Aurelius Cotta (124–174 BCE)? The brother of Aurelia Cotta (Julius Caesar’s mother), he was one of the most distinguished Roman aristo-

6 “To those again who are surprised at my choice of a system to which to give my allegiance, I think that a sufficient answer has been given in the four books of my *Academica*” [*Qui autem admirantur nos hanc potissimum disciplinam secutos, his quattuor Academicis libris satis responsum videtur*] (*ND* 1.5.11; translation from Marcus Tullius Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods. Academics*, trans. Harris Rackham [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1933], 13). Concerning the controversial issue of Cicero’s epistemology (and for further references), see particularly Lévy, *Cicero academicus*, 207–331 (esp. 276–300); Harald Thorsrud, “Cicero on His Academic Predecessors: The Fallibilism of Arcesilaus and Carneades,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 40 (2002): 1–18; Tobias Reinhardt “*Pithana* and *probabilia*,” in *Dialectic after Plato and Aristotle*, ed. Thomas Bénatouil and Katerina Ierodiakonou (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 218–253; Reinhardt, *Cicero’s Academic libri and Lucullus: A Commentary with Introduction and Translations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), cxlii–clvii, lxxx–cvii (for Reinhardt’s stance, see *infra*, 294, n. 96); and Stefano Maso, *Cicero’s Philosophy* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2022), 53–60.

7 *ND* 3.40.95; *On the Nature of the Gods*, 383, slightly modified. This contrasts with the view of Velleius (the Epicurean interlocutor), who prefers Cotta’s view because it seems “truer” [*verior* [...] *videretur*] (*ND* 3.40.95). Focusing on the adjective *propensior*, Wynne (*Cicero on the Philosophy of Religion*, 268–272) has suggested reading the closing lines of the dialogue (= *ND* 3.40.95) together with *ND* 1.5.10, in which Cicero urges his reader to always search for the weight of reason [*rationis momenta*] in debates, not authority [*auctoritatis*]. Consequently, according to him, the ending of the dialogue reinforces the hypothesis of Cicero’s being a “radical Academic skepticism” (*ibid.*, 35–46): by acting as he does, Cicero is striving to make his scepticism *truly such*, avoiding any trace of dogmatism and thus turning out to be more sceptical than Cotta himself. Endorsing the stance of the Academician *no matter what* would involve a dogmatic choice based on the principle of authority and not on the real weight of reason. While I consider Wynne’s exegesis quite interesting, I believe that Cicero’s stance has a different purpose.

crats and a pivotal figure in the Sullan establishment. His strong relationship with Sulla is evidenced by the fact that it was precisely at his behest that Cotta, exiled in 90 BCE—due to the *Lex Varia de maiestate*—could return to Rome in 82 BCE. He took office as consul with Lucius Octavius in 75 BCE. According to Sallust, Cotta was, “thanks to his greed for advancement, both a briber by nature and desirous of the goodwill of individuals” (Sallust, *Hist.* 2, fr. 38 Ramsey). As *ex factione media consul* (which, in Sallust’s words, means a “consul right from the core of the *nobilitas*”),⁸ he sponsored the *Lex Aurelia de tribunicia potestate*—which partly abolished Sulla’s provisions against the tribunate—for no other motive than fear (*Hist.* 3, fr. 15 Ramsey). In Sallust’s cynical view, Cotta was well aware that a partial restoration of power to the tribunes of the plebs (who could now once again continue their *cursus honorum*) would have been welcomed by young aristocrats,⁹ whose favour he would thus gain. Moreover, although it is undoubted that the *Lex Aurelia* met with opposition from some nobles (cf. Ascon. 67, 78 Clark), Cotta must have carried a majority of the Senate with him (otherwise, he would hardly have put forward a bill to the assembly without a *senatus consultum* behind him).¹⁰ We can therefore consider Cotta a “blue blood,” whose main aspiration was to continue benefiting from his privileged position, with no desire to “correct” the current situation and, above all (and unlike Cicero), without any broader political plan in mind.

In Cicero’s works, Cotta appears not only as the spokesman for the “sceptical” Academy in *De natura deorum*, but also as a secondary character, alongside his peer Publius Sulpicius Rufus, in *De oratore* (*De or.*), which, according to Giuseppe Norcio’s convincing remarks,¹¹ was begun between May and June 56 BCE. It was Cotta who informed Cicero of the contents of the discussion, later reported in the dialogue (*De or.* 3.4.16). From *De oratore*, we learn that Cotta was introduced to the ideas of the “sceptical” Academy through a speech by Lucius Licinius Crassus, who identified the philosophy of the “more recent Academy” [*recentior Academia*]¹²—namely, the school of Philo

8 See esp. Gerhard Perl, “Die Rede Cottas in Sallusts Historien,” *Philologus* 109 (1965): 75–82.

9 For whom the tribunate constituted a stepping-stone to positions of greater prestige.

10 See Erich S. Gruen, *The Last Generation of the Roman Republic*, 2nd ed., with new introduction (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 26–27.

11 Giuseppe Norcio, “Introduzione,” in Marcus Tullius Cicero, *Opere retoriche, Volume 1: De oratore, Brutus, Orator*, ed. Giuseppe Norcio (Turin: UTET, 1970), 15, and, more generally, 9–16.

12 *De or.* 3.17.64–19.73 ff., esp. 17.67–68. It is worth noticing that according to Crassus, both the Academicians and the Peripatetics fall under the name of the Academy, since “from Plato himself sprang Aristotle and Xenocrates, on one of whom was bestowed the name of the

of Larissa (*apud Philonem*, 3.28.110)¹³—as “the most fully akin to the orator” [*quae oratori coniuncta maxime*]:

Peripatetic School and on the other that of the Academy” [*ab ipso Platone Aristoteles et Xenocrates, quorum alter Peripateticorum, alter Academiae nomen obtinuit*] (*De or.* 3.17.62; trans. in Marcus Tullius Cicero, *On the Orator: Book 3. On Fate. Stoic Paradoxes. Divisions of Oratory*, trans. H. Rackham [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1942], 51). In fact, Plato’s early pupils “did not seriously disagree on any point of opinion from Aristotle, their fellow-pupil under Plato, although possibly they were not his equals in fullness and variety of style” [*nihil ab Aristotele, qui una audierat Platonem, magnopere dissenserunt, copia fortasse et varietate dicendi pares non fuerunt*] (*De or.* 3.18.67; *On the Orator*, 55). Unlike both Lucullus and Varro (the spokesmen for Antiochus of Ascalon and his *vetus Academia*) in the *Academici libri* (cf. *Luc.* 5.15 and *Varro* 8.33–9.35), however, Crassus rules out the Stoics as part of this Academic–Peripatetic system. According to Crassus, the Stoics stemmed from Antisthenes (“who in the Socratic discourse had been captivated chiefly by the ideal of endurance and hardness” [*qui patientiam et duritiam in Socratico sermone maxime adamarat*]), from whom the Cynics were also (and previously) derived (*De or.* 3.17.62; *On the Orator*, 51). When examining the complex relationship between Antiochus’s Old Academy and the Stoics, it is crucial to also consider the often-overlooked yet pointed critique of Stoic doctrines provided by Antiochus from a vetero-academic perspective, as presented in books 4 and 5 of Cicero’s *De finibus*. See, also for additional bibliography on this topic, Georgia Tsouni, *Antiochus and Peripatetic Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), esp. 69–74. Furthermore, Crassus also distances himself from the two spokespeople for Antiochus in the *Academici libri* because of his appraisal of the Epicurean school, to which he states “no wrong will be done [...] by us” [*nec ulla tamen ei philosophiae fiet iniuria a nobis*] (*De or.* 3.17.63; *On the Orator*, 51), for the Epicurean appeal “to abandon the platform and the courts and parliament” [*a rostris, a iudiciis, a curia*] (*De or.* 3.17.64; *On the Orator*, 53) could turn out to be “perhaps a wise invitation [cf. *fortasse sapienter*], particularly in the present state of public affairs” [*hac praesertim republica*] (*ibid.*).

- 13 And not “the truest” [*verum ego non quaero nunc, quae sit philosophia verissima*] (*De or.* 3.17.64; *On the Orator*, 53). The philosophy Crassus is looking for is one more suitable for the kind of “man whom we are seeking and whom we wish to be the political leader of the nation, guiding the government and pre-eminent for wisdom and eloquence in the Senate, in the assembly of the people and in public causes” [*eo viro quem quaerimus et quem auctorem publici consilii et regendae civitatis ducem et sententiae atque eloquentiae principem in senatu, in populo, in causis publicis esse volumus*] (*De or.* 3.17.63; *On the Orator*, 51). In fact, says Crassus, “if [...] you chose to follow the famous Pericles of old, or even our friend Demosthenes, [...] and if you have grown to love that glorious and supreme ideal, that thing of beauty, the perfect orator, you are bound to accept either the modern dialectic of Carneades or the earlier method of Aristotle” [*Sin veterem illum Periclem aut hunc etiam, qui familiarior nobis propter scriptorum multitudinem est, Demosthenem sequi vultis et si illam praeclaram et eximiam speciem oratoris perfecti et pulchritudinem adamastis, aut vobis haec Carneades aut illa Aristotelia vis comprehendenda est*] (*De or.* 3.19.71; *On the Orator*, 57–59), whose *philosophoi politici* (cf. 3.28.109) are “i veri eredi dell’antica saggezza che sapeva tenere uniti pensiero, azione ed espressione verbale” (Emanuele Narducci, *Cicerone. La parole e la politica* [Rome: Laterza, 2010], 70).

I do not know how you succeeded with our friends, in my own case anyway you forced me to come over entirely to the side of the Academy. [...] Unquestionably I shall never come to a standstill or give up from exhaustion before I have a full grasp of the school's twofold method and its system of arguing both *pro* and *contra* about every proposition.¹⁴

Cotta's adherence to the ideas of the "sceptical" Academy also emerges when arguing *de natura deorum*, upon which he says he is "more ready to say what is not true than what is" [*quid non sit, citius, quam quid sit, dixerim*].¹⁵ This "sceptical" stance does not, however, tell the whole story concerning Cotta's attitude towards religion:

In an inquiry *de natura deorum*, the first question that we ask is, do the gods exist or do they not? "It is difficult to deny their existence." No doubt it would be if the question were to be asked in a public assembly [*in contione*], but in private conversation and in a company like the present it is perfectly easy. This being so, I, who am a high priest [*pontifex*], and who hold it to be a duty most solemnly to maintain the rights and doctrines of the established religion, should be glad to be convinced [*persuaded mihi*] of this fundamental tenet of the divine existence, not as an opinion merely [*non opinione solum*] but as an ascertained fact [*ad veritatem plane velim*].¹⁶

14 "Apud hos quid profeceris nescio, me quidem in Academiam totum compulisti. [...] Sed etiam si est aliquando spissius aut si ego sum tardior, profecto numquam conquiescam neque defatigabor ante, quam illorum ancipitis vias rationesque et pro omnibus et contra omnia disputandi percepero" (*De or.* 3.36.145; *On the Orator*, 115). Cf. also *ND* 2.67.168, where Balbus, at the end of his speech, reminding Cotta that he is "a leading citizen and a pontiff" [*et principem civem et pontificem*], urges him to devote to the defence of the Stoic stance "those powers of eloquence which your rhetorical exercises have bestowed upon you and which the Academy has fostered" [*eamque facultatem disserendi, quam tibi a rhetoricis exercitationibus acceptam amplificavit Academia, potius huc conferas*] (*Nature of the Gods*, 283–285).

15 *ND* 1.21.60; *Nature of the Gods*, 59.

16 "Quaeritur primum in ea quaestione, quae est de natura deorum, sintne dei necne sint. 'Difficile est negare.' Credo, si in contione quaeratur, sed in huius modi sermone et in consessu [familiari] facillimum. Itaque ego ipse pontifex, qui caerimonias religionesque publicas sanctissime tuendas arbitror, is hoc, quod primum est, esse deos persuaderi mihi non opinione solum, sed etiam ad veritatem plane velim" (*ND* 1.22.61; *Nature of the Gods*, 59–61). Cf. also Cicero's own character in *Div.* 2.12, 28.

The Stoic Balbus explains this sort of “splitting” occurring within Cotta’s character (cf. also *ND* 2.1.2) as an instance of *simulatio*, reminding the Academician how *mala* and *impia* is the habit of arguing *contra deos*, “whether it be done from conviction [*ex animo*] or in pretence [*simulate*].”¹⁷ However, are we really allowed to speak of *simulatio* with regard to Cotta’s behaviour? In *De natura deorum*, those charged with *simulatio* are primarily Velleius and the Epicurean school, who “really abolished the gods, but nominally retained them in order not to offend the people of Athens” [*ne in offensionem Atheniensium caderet, verbis reliquisse deos, re sustulisse*].¹⁸ As Cicero emphatically points out in the opening lines of the dialogue, “*pietas* however, like the rest of the virtues, cannot exist in mere outward show and pretence;¹⁹ and, with *pietas*, *sanctitas* and *religio* must likewise disappear. And when these are gone, life soon becomes a welter of disorder and confusion.”²⁰

For Cicero, *simulare* means to feign behaviour or thoughts that are not genuinely one’s own. A person who simulates is someone who, like Brutus, can cleverly conceal “great wisdom under the guise of stupidity” [*summam prudentiam simulatione stultitiae texerit*].²¹ However, according to Cicero, even a good

17 *ND* 2.67.168; *Nature of the Gods*, 285.

18 *ND* 1.30.85; *Nature of the Gods*, 83. Cf. also *ND* 1.44.123 and 3.1.3.

19 Cf. also *Luc.* 46.140: “For virtue which is driven to appropriate action by pleasure as if by some kind of remuneration it receives is not virtue, but a deceptive imitation and pretence of it” [*Nam quae voluptate quasi mercede aliqua ad officium impellitur, ea non est virtus, sed fallax imitatio simulatioque virtutis*] (Reinhardt, *Cicero’s Academici libri and Lucullus*, 73).

20 “In specie autem fictae simulationis sicut reliquae virtutes item pietas inesse non potest; cum qua simul sanctitatem et religionem tolli necesse est, quibus sublatis perturbatio vitae sequitur et magna confusio; atque haut scio, an pietate adversus deos sublata fides etiam et societas generis humani et una excellentissima virtus iustitia tollatur” (*ND* 1.2.3–4; *Nature of the Gods*, 7). On this crucial passage, see also Woolf, *Cicero*, 43–62.

21 *Brut.* 14.53. The concept of *simulatio* (and the corresponding verb) plays a key role in *De amicitia*, where “yet in friendship there is nothing false, nothing pretended; whatever there is is genuine and comes of its own accord” [*in amicitia autem nihil fictum est, nihil simulatum et, quidquid est, id est verum et voluntarium*] (*Amic.* 8.26; Marcus Tullius Cicero, *On Old Age. On Friendship. On Divination*, trans. William A. Falconer [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1923], 139). Indeed, one of the main requirements in friendship is to “let there be no feigning or hypocrisy; for it is more befitting a candid man to hate openly than to mask his real thoughts with a lying face” [*ne quid fictum sit neve simulatum; aperte enim vel odisse magis ingenui est quam fronte occultare sententiam*] (*Amic.* 18.65; *On Friendship*, 177). Cf. also *Amic.* 25.92 and 25.95. Regarding the distinction between *simulatio* and the related concept of *dissimulatio*, it is useful to first refer to a succinct definition provided by the fourteenth-century scholar Francesco da Buti, as quoted in the Italian dictionary edited by Nicolò Tommaseo and Bernardo Bellini: “Simulazione è fingere vero quello che non è vero, e dissimulazione è negar quello ch’è vero” [Simulation is pretending that something false is true, and dissimulation is denying what is true]. In the context of

orator engages in *simulatio*; in fact, “of all men an orator should not be irascible, but to feign to be so is not unbecoming.”²² Now, Epicurus and the Epicureans are guilty of *simulatio*, as they hide under false piety²³ (even fulfilling all the religious duties of their cities)²⁴ the denial *tout court* of the existence of the divine. For there to be *simulatio*, there must be an actual, firm, and clearly identifiable position, which in Cotta’s case, neither occurs nor, one might add, could occur. Furthermore, that Cotta is not merely simulating or pretending also emerges from his insistence on declaring to believe [*credere*] in the existence of the gods. We will return shortly to the importance of belief in Cotta’s speech.

book 1 of *De inventione*, the term *dissimulatio* and the verb *dissimulare* appear three times (20, 24, and 27), conveying the meaning of “to mask” or “to conceal.” For a discussion of the role of *dissimulatio* in Cicero’s *De inventione* and in rhetoric more broadly, see Giuseppe La Bua. “*Obscuritas e dissimulatio nella pro Tullio di Cicerone*,” *Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric* 23 (2005): 261–280.

- 22 “Irasci minime decet, simulare non dedecet” (*Tusc.* 4.25.55; Marcus Tullius Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, trans. John E. King [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1927], 389). On this issue, see also the different perspective of the orator Marcus Antonius, who, in *De or.* 2 (45.189–46.191), declares the impossibility of arousing indignation, hatred, or ill-will, “unless all those emotions, which the orator would inspire in the arbitrator, are visibly stamped or rather branded on the advocate himself” [*nisi omnes illi motus, quos orator adhibere volet iudici, in ipso oratore impressi esse atque iniusti videbuntur*], adding that “I never tried, by means of a speech, to arouse either indignation or compassion, either ill-will or hatred, in the minds of a tribunal, without being really stirred myself, as I worked upon their minds, by the very feelings to which I was seeking to prompt them” [*unquam apud iudices, aut dolorem, aut misericordiam aut invidiam aut odium dicendo excitare volui, quin ipse in commovendis iudicibus eis ipsis sensibus, ad quos illos adducere vellem, permoverer*] (*On the Orator*, 333–335). Concerning this aspect, it is highly probable that Cotta agreed with Marcus Antonius, for he generally favoured his conception of oratory; see esp. Norcio, “Introduzione,” 26–28.
- 23 Cf. *Dom.* 51.131, where Cicero accuses Publius Clodius Pulcher of erecting a statue of Freedom “by way not so much of making a hypocritical pretence of religion, as of laughing in your sleeve at your own” [*magis ad ludibrium impudentiae, quam ad simulationem religionis*] (Marcus Tullius Cicero, *Pro Archia. Post reditum in senatu. Post reditum ad quirites. De domo sua. De haruspicum responsis. Pro Plancio*, trans. Neville H. Watts [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1923], 289). On the polemic between Cicero and Clodius, see esp. Luciano Canfora, *Giulio Cesare. Il dittatore democratico* (Rome: Laterza, 2006), 93–98.
- 24 That the Epicureans continued to pray and participate in the city’s cults and ceremonies emerges from several sources, e.g., DL 10.10; Philod. *Piet.* coll. 28, ll. 790–810; 30, l. 865–831, l. 877; 36, ll. 1020–1043; 62, ll. 1785–1791; 64, l. 1848–1865, l. 1867 Obbink; Diog. Oen. fr. 19 Smith. On that topic and the meaning that the Epicureans ascribed to the worship of the gods, see esp. Enrico Piergiacomini, *Storia delle antiche teologie atomiste* (Rome: Sapienza Università Editrice, 2017), 266–285.

If it is not about *simulatio*, are we then supposed to consider the “double track” on which Cotta’s arguments proceed as evidence of an irreconcilable dichotomy between religion and philosophy?²⁵ Or, as suggested by Carlos Lévy in his *Cicero academicus*,²⁶ would we do better to read the “surprising” position Cotta holds in the light of Plato’s *Timaeus*, a dialogue which is “antidogmatique dans son principe même”?²⁷ And finally, although it is undeniable, as John Wynne recently emphasised, that “Cotta looks at the question from a specifically Roman perspective,”²⁸ can we truly consider his unique stance solely as the result of his Roman viewpoint?

To fully understand the “paradoxical” conduct deployed by Cotta (but also by Cicero himself in *Div. 2*), I think it might be very fruitful to look at the stance that Sextus ascribes to the Pyrrhonian sceptic in matters of theology in his *Pyrrhoniae hypotyposes* (= *PH*) 3.2 ff.²⁹ As is well known, Sextus presents the (Pyrrhonian) sceptic as someone who, while being committed to assiduous and continuous research through his “disenchantment”³⁰ regarding the advocates of the various sciences and disciplines, is still able to avoid the charge of ἀπραξία through recourse to a “non-dogmatic” criterion; namely, τὰ φαινόμενα (or, better, our φαντασία of τὰ φαινόμενα; cf. *PH* 1.16–17). By adhering to this criterion, he can “live in accordance with everyday observances [κατὰ τὴν βιωτικὴν τήρησιν], without holding opinions [ἀδοξάστως].”³¹ Within this framework, “by the handing down of customs and laws [ἔθῶν δὲ καὶ νόμων], we accept, from an everyday point of view, that piety (cf. εὐσεβεῖν) is good and impiety (cf. ἀσεβεῖν) bad.”³² Let us now consider, for example, the question of the existence of the

25 Adrianus J. Kleywegt, *Ciceros Arbeitsweise im zweiten und dritten Buch der Schrift De natura deorum* (Groningen: J.B. Wolters, 1961).

26 Lévy, *Cicero academicus*, esp. 567–588.

27 Lévy, 570.

28 Wynne, *Cicero on the Philosophy of Religion*, 178, and, more generally, 165–181.

29 See also John P.F. Wynne, “Learned and Wise: Cotta the Sceptic in Cicero’s *De natura deorum*,” *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 47 (2015): 245–273, esp. 255.

30 See Emidio Spinelli, “Una vita disincantata: *Bios e philosophia* nello scetticismo antico,” in *Il bios dei filosofi. Dialogo a più voci sul tipo di vita preferibile*, ed. Fulvia De Luise (Trento: Editrice Università degli Studi di Trento, 2009), 107–131.

31 *PH* 1.23; Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, ed. and trans. Julia Annas and Jonathan Barnes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 9. See Emidio Spinelli, *Questioni scettiche. Letture introduttive al pirronismo antico* (Roma: Lithos, 2005), esp. chap. 6.

32 ἔθῶν δὲ καὶ νόμων παραδόσει καθ’ ἣν τὸ μὲν εὐσεβεῖν παραλαμβάνομεν βιωτικῶς ὡς ἀγαθὸν τὸ δὲ ἀσεβεῖν ὡς φαῦλον (*PH* 1.24; *Outlines of Scepticism*, 9). Cf. *PH* 1.231 and 1.237, together with 3.2 and *Adversus mathematicos* (= *M*) 9.49: κατὰ μὲν τὰ πάτρια ἔθη καὶ τοὺς νόμους λέγων εἶναι θεοῦς [in line with his ancestral customs and laws, he [sc. the Pyrrhonian sceptic] says that there are gods]. See esp. Emidio Spinelli, “Le dieu est la cause la plus active”: Sextus

gods. As we read in *PH* 3.2, this assumption is one of the bases of the “théologie élémentaire de l’habitude”³³ upheld by the Pyrrhonian sceptic (rigorously ἀδοξάστως).³⁴ The trouble arises when the dogmatists “firmly” (διαβεβαιωτικῶς, cf. *PH* 3.12) state the existence of the gods, giving rise to a severe difference of opinion (διαφωνία, 3.3; *dissensio* in *ND* 1.1.2). In Cicero, likewise, the problem arises when Balbus asks for “a firm and definite concept” [*stabilem certamque sententiam*]³⁵ of the immortal gods (*de dis immortalibus*, *ND* 2.1.2). Cotta does not hesitate to declare his belief in the existence of the gods, yet with regard to this belief, “of which I am convinced on the authority of our forefathers” [*quod mihi persuasum est auctoritate maiorum*], he states, “You teach me no reason why it should be true” [*cur ita sit, nihil tu me doces*],³⁶ and also, “As yet therefore, Balbus, so far as it depends on you, I do not understand the divine existence; I believe in it, but the Stoics do not in the least explain it.”³⁷

Furthermore, for both Sextus Empiricus and Cotta, those who dogmatically affirm and attempt to demonstrate the gods’ existence and nature ultimately end up committing the sin of impiety. In Sextus, this emerges especially clearly in *PH* 3.9–12 (which has no parallel in *M* 9).³⁸ Here, by outlining what will go down in history as “Epicurus’s tetralemma,”³⁹ Sextus shows how those who positively affirm god’s existence are compelled to employ impious language (cf. ἀσεβούντων), declaring either that god is the cause of what is evil or that god is either malignant or weak. Similarly, in *ND* 3.8.20, Cotta reminds Balbus that while aiming “to show what the gods are like” [*cum ostendere velles quales di essent*], he “showed them to be non-existent” [*ostenderes nullos esse*].⁴⁰ In fact,

Empiricus contre la théologie dogmatique,” in *Scepticisme et religion. Constantes et évolutions, de la philosophie hellénistique à la philosophie médiévale*, ed. Anne-Isabelle Bouton-Touboulic and Carlos Lévy (Turnhout: Brepols, 2016), 89–102, together with Richard Bett, “God (*M* IX 13–194),” in *Sextus Empiricus and Ancient Physics*, ed. Keimpe Algra and Katerina Ierodiakonou (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 33–73, and Stéphane Marchand, “Religion et piété sceptique selon Sextus Empiricus,” in Bouton Touboulic and Lévy, *Scepticisme et religion*, 103–118.

33 Spinelli, “Le dieu est la cause la plus active,” 94.

34 The other features of this elementary theology of habit outlined in *PH* 3.2 are the reverence we owe to the gods [σέβομεν θεούς] and their providence [προνοεῖν αὐτούς]. Cf. also *M* 9.49.

35 Note the proximity between the adjective *stabile* in Balbus’s speech and Sextus Empiricus’s διαβεβαιωτικῶς in *PH* 3.12.

36 *ND* 3.3.7; *Nature of the Gods*, 293.

37 “Non igitur adhuc, quantum quidem in te est, Balbe, intellego deos esse; quos equidem credo esse, sed nil docent Stoici” (*ND* 3.7.15; *Nature of the Gods*, 301).

38 On *PH* 3.9–12, see esp. Spinelli, “Le dieu est la cause la plus active,” 100–101.

39 Cf. Lactantius, *Ira* 13.20–21 = 374 Usener; cf. also Lucr. 5.195 ff.

40 *ND* 3.8.20; *Nature of the Gods*, 305.

Balbus's argument (based on the "famous old syllogism by Zeno" [*illa vetus Zenonis [...] conclusio*])⁴¹ proves to be too much, forcing us to admit that the world (and accordingly, the god, with which, according to Zeno's argument, the world coincides) is not only rational and wise, but also literate, an orator, a mathematician, a musician, and a philosopher (*ND* 3.9.23). And it goes without saying that assertions like this are derogatory to the gods' dignity (cf. also *ND* 3.25.64).

Based on the above, and although much caution is advised, I would suggest considering the role of Cotta's *maiores* (and of the *opiniones quas a maioribus accepimus de dis immortalibus*, *ND* 3.2.5) to be comparable to that of τὰ πάτρια ἔθνη and οἱ νόμοι for the Pyrrhonian sceptic. It is indeed true, as one of the anonymous reviewers of this article has pointed out, that this comparison should not lead us to overlook the crucial element preventing a complete overlap between the two perspectives. I am referring to Cotta's attachment to the *maiores*, which stands in marked contrast to Pyrrhonian ἀδιαφορία [indifference].⁴² However, it is important to recognise that the ἀδιαφορία ascribed to Pyrrho—reflecting the objective indifference of things that he upheld—does not find a parallel in Sextus Empiricus, who instead advocates for μετριοπάθεια (cf. *PH* 1.25, 1.30; 3.235; *M* 11.161), a moderate emotional involvement and response. According to Sextus, traditional norms and national laws, "integrando con altri fattori, costituiscono un sistema complesso di valori dati, che precede e condiziona tutto il comportamento dello scettico,"⁴³ thereby excluding an attitude of total indifference towards external circumstances.

Finally, it should be noted that the comparison between Cotta's position and the Pyrrhonian stance does not preclude the hypothesis that by referring to the *maiores*, Cotta—or more accurately, Carneades, from whom Cicero/Cotta likely borrows most of his arguments, possibly through a work by Clitomachus⁴⁴—might also be considering Timaeus's reliance on the authority of certain "men of wisdom" [φρόνιμοι ἄνδρες (Plato, *Tim.* 29e)], as suggested by Lévy.⁴⁵ However, I contend that their respective roles remain fundamentally different. While in Plato's dialogue, the reference to the φρόνιμοι ἄνδρες is made in a "positive" context, in Cotta's speech, the appeal to the *maiores* is all he has left in the absence of any certainty. Now, let us turn our attention to Cicero.

41 *ND* 3.9.22–23; *Nature of the Gods*, 307. On Zeno's "old syllogism," see also *M* 9.108.

42 Cf. esp. Antig. ap. DL 9.63 = *Pyrrho* part. T10 Decleva Caizzi, and Eratosth. ap. DL 9.66 = *FGH* 241 F 23 = *Pyrrho* T14 Decleva Caizzi.

43 Emidio Spinelli, "L'esperienza scettica: Sesto Empirico fra metodologia scientifica e scelte etiche," *Quaestio* 4 (2004): 25–43, esp. 38.

44 Cf. *M* 9.182.

45 Lévy, *Cicero academicus*, esp. 573.

3 An Ambitious *homo novus*: Marcus Tullius Cicero

Cicero, a son of a knight from Arpinum, was a *homo novus*.⁴⁶ Like every “new-comer,” he was constantly threatened by both overt and covert hostility from the *nobiles*, and as a result, he was always careful to tread cautiously and to avoid *inimicitia* as much as possible.⁴⁷ Unlike Cotta, Cicero had a well-defined political project in mind, which required a proactive approach that Cotta entirely lacked. Cotta’s adherence to and respect for *συνήθεια/consuetudo* were neither constructive nor productive. He viewed the various roles he played, both civil and not—whether as a philosopher, a pontifex, or a private man (cf. *ND* 2.1.2)—as mere “professions” [Berufe], without the need for a consistent line of conduct to unify them.

Cicero, on the other hand, could not be content with such an apparent lack of coherence and “vocation.”⁴⁸ Except in rare and exceptional circumstances, he never ceased to understand his role in Rome as a true “calling” [Berufung], one he pursued with deep involvement and conviction and aimed primarily at the realisation of what he called the *concordia ordinum* (later widened to a *consensus omnium bonorum*; cf. *Har. resp.* 21.45 and *Sest.* 16.36)—a fruitful coalition between the two Roman orders of the Senate and *equites* (cf. esp. *Att.* 1.17.9).⁴⁹ One could almost say that Cicero’s calling was a calling to mediation,⁵⁰ and he consistently sought to mediate in every situation. For example, consider the effort he invested in trying to reconcile Caesar and Pompey (Gnaeus Pompeius

46 A *homo novus* is the first member of an equestrian family to achieve the consulate and secure the consequent ennoblement.

47 See Ronald Syme, *The Roman Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960), 12–13.

48 Nor could the Stoic Balbus be satisfied with this (*ND* 2.1.2).

49 The shift/evolution from *concordia* to *consensus* is directly tied to Cicero’s recall from exile (by the intercession of Pompey in September 57 BCE), which he considers as the result of *consensus*; see *P. red. ad Quir.* 8.18: “Hac auctoritate senatus, tanta consensione Italiae, tanto studio bonorum omnium.” See Jonathan Zarecki, *Cicero’s Ideal Statesman in Theory and Practice* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 48–61.

50 I say “almost” because the conclusion of the Civil War and the death of Tullia in February 45 BCE—preceded by his divorce from Terentia at the end of summer 46 BCE—certainly had a profound impact on Cicero. The defeat of the Pompeians at Thapsus in April 46 BCE, and later at Munda in March 45 BCE, definitively marked the collapse of his political aspirations. As his family’s situation grew increasingly complicated and worrisome, loneliness and discouragement weighed heavily upon him. These were extremely difficult years for Cicero, during which he struggled to find comfort and solace. He himself notes this in *Att.* 12.14.3: “I have done something which I imagine no one has ever done before, consoled myself in a literary composition” [*feci quod profecto ante me nemo, ut ipse me per litteras consolaretur*] (Marcus Tullius Cicero, *Letters to Atticus, Volume I*, ed. and trans. David R. Shackleton Bailey [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999], 281–283).

Magnus) until the very end (in late 50 BCE). Although he sided with Pompey (“The only bark for me will be the one that has Pompey at the helm” [*mihi σκάφος unum erit quod a Pompeio gubernabitur*]), Cicero was aware that a fight between them—essentially a battle for personal power [*de sua potentia*]—would pose a severe risk to the community [*civitas*] and that it was therefore necessary to move “heaven and earth against decision by war, the results of which are always unpredictable” (*Att.* 7.3.4–5): “I agree with Pompey. Pompey himself however I shall privately urge to concord.”⁵¹

Cicero’s commitment to mediation also emerged in the events immediately following Caesar’s assassination. At the senate meeting convened by Mark Antony (Marcus Antonius) in the temple of Tellus on 17 March 44 BCE, Cicero proposed a compromise (later approved as a *senatus consultum*) between the Caesaricides and the Caesarians, a compromise that was violated a few days later during Caesar’s funeral on 20 March, when Antonius, through his *laudatio funebris*, incited the Roman people to seek revenge, putting himself forward as the only one capable of enacting it, despite the ambiguity of Caesar’s testamentary instructions.⁵²

In the context of this Ciceronian vocation, which was still alive in the summer of 45 BCE (when *De natura deorum* was likely composed),⁵³ the Stoic perspective put forward by Balbus was decidedly more constructive to him than Cotta’s Neocademic viewpoint was.⁵⁴ The Stoic notions of συμπάθεια (“sympathy,” defined as *quasi consensus naturae*)⁵⁵ and πρόνοια,⁵⁶ along with the intrinsic rationality and balance of the world they implied, was ideally suited to Cicero’s political outlook. Nevertheless, he could not fully accept the Stoic theological perspective, which posed at least two significant challenges.

51 “‘Cn. Pompeio adsentior.’ ipsum tamen Pompeium separatim ad concordiam hortabor” (*Att.* 7.3.5; *Letters to Atticus*, 195). See Syme, *The Roman Revolution*, 137–138, and Roberto Cristofolini, Alessandro Galimberti, and Francesca Rohr Vio, *Dalla repubblica al principato. Politica e potere in Roma antica* (Rome: Carocci, 2014), 76–77.

52 See esp. Cristofolini, Galimberti, and Rohr Vio, *Dalla repubblica al principato*, 102–104, but also Syme, *The Roman Revolution*, 139.

53 See Cesare Marco Calcante, “Introduzione,” in Marcus Tullius Cicero, *La natura divina*, ed. Cesare Marco Calcante, 2nd ed. (Milan: BUR, 2000), 35–36.

54 See Maso, *Cicero’s Philosophy*, 36.

55 *ND* 3.11.28; “continuatio coniunctioque naturae” (*Div.* 2.69.142); “contagio naturae” (*Div.* 2.43.92 and *Fat.* 3.5; 4.7). Note the lexical connection with the “consensus omnium bonorum.” On the Stoic notion of συμπάθεια (i.e., the interrelation and influence of all things in the universe), see esp. Suzanne Bobzien, *Determinism and Freedom in Stoic Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 41, 169, 295–296, and Carlos Lévy, “De la critique de la sympathie à la volonté. Cicéron, *De fato* 9–11,” *Lexis* 25 (2007): 17–34, esp. 21–25.

56 Lit. “forethought,” “foresight,” here in the sense of “providence”; cf. esp. *ND* 2.29.73–61.153.

The first concerns the superstition and excessive fear of the gods connected to the Stoic conception of divination, within the firm conviction that *religio* and *superstitio* do not overlap (“the suppression of superstition does not mean the suppression of religion”).⁵⁷ While it is undeniably true that “the beauty of the universe and the celestial order”⁵⁸ compel us to acknowledge the existence of “some power possessing transcendent intelligence by whom these things are ruled,”⁵⁹ it is also true that

it is a duty to weed out every root of superstition. For superstition is ever at your heels to urge you on; it follows you at every turn. It is with you when you listen to a prophet, or an omen; when you offer sacrifices or watch the flight of birds; when you consult an astrologer or a soothsayer; when it thunders or lightens [...]. And since necessarily some of these signs are nearly always being given, it will never be possible to remain in a tranquil state of mind.⁶⁰

In addition, it is worth noting that while in book 2 of his *De legibus* (= *Leg.*), Cicero limited himself to denouncing the contemporary neglect of the art of augury (cf. 2.13.33),⁶¹ in *Div.* 2, he goes so far as to deny that this art has ever

57 “Nec vero [...] superstitione tollenda religio tollitur” (*Div.* 2.72.148; translation from *On Divination*, 537, slightly modified); *contra* Lucretius, in whose poem *religio* and *superstitio* do overlap. See Manuel Galzerano, “Reversing the Invention of *religio*: Lucretius’ First Eulogy of Epicurus (*DRN* 1.62–79) and the Sisyphus Fragment (D.-K. 88b25),” *Lexicon Philosophicum* 9 (2022): 53–68, and Chiara Rover, “Sfuggire agli dèi, sfuggire agli uomini. *Religio* e giustizia in Lucrezio,” *Archivio di Filosofia* 91, no. 1 (2024): 65–76.

58 “Pulchritudo mundi ordoque rerum caelestium” (*Div.* 2.72.148; *On Divination*, 537).

59 “Aliquod numen praestantissimae mentis quo haec regantur” (*ND* 2.2.4; *Nature of the Gods*, 125; cf. also *Har. resp.* 9.19).

60 “Superstitionis stirpes omnes eligendae. Instat enim et urget et, quo te cumque verteris, persequitur, sive tu vatem sive tu omen audieris, sive immolaris sive avem adspexeris, si Chaldaeam, si haruspicem videris, si fulserit, si tonuerit [...]; quorum necesse est plerumque aliquid eveniat, ut numquam liceat quietam mente consistere” (*Div.* 2.72.149; *On Divination*, 537–539). That Cicero is expressing his own mind here is suggested by the phrase *vere loquamur* he mentions a few lines earlier (*Div.* 2.72.148).

61 *Leg.* 2.13.33: “But there is no doubt that this art and science of the augurs has by now faded out of existence on account of the passage of time and men’s neglect” [*sed dubium non est, quin haec disciplina et ars augurum evanuerit iam et vetustate et neglegentia*] (Marcus Tullius Cicero, *On the Republic. On the Laws*, trans. Clinton W. Keyes [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1928], 413). On Cicero’s attitude towards divination in *De legibus*, see Valentina Arena, “Cicero, the *Augures*, and the Commonwealth in *De legibus*,” in *Cicero and Roman Religion: Eight Studies*, ed. Claudia Beltrao da Rosa and Federico Santangelo (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2020), 23–44.

genuinely made knowledge of the future possible. In *Div.* 2, Cicero essentially agrees with the thesis put forward by Marcus Claudius Marcellus in *Leg.* 2, which posits that auspices “were invented to be of practical use to the State.”⁶² Moreover, regarding Romulus, who founded the city of Rome by taking the auspices and probably genuinely believed in the existence of an augural science, Cicero does not hesitate to state that “the ancients had erroneous views on many subjects.”⁶³ Thus, divination’s overly superstitious nature was seen as being inherently linked to its demonstrated ineffectiveness, a fact that became especially evident during the civil war between Caesar and Pompey (which occurred between the writing of *De legibus* and *De divinatione*),⁶⁴ when “the result was nearly always contrary to the prophecy.”⁶⁵

Furthermore, it is perhaps worth remembering that the climate of confusion created by the civil wars facilitated the rise of figures such as Nigidius Figulus, Aulus Cecina of Volterra, and Tarquinius Priscus⁶⁶ (the first two were Cicero’s friends, while the latter two were of Etruscan origin).⁶⁷ As experts in the *Etrusca disciplina*, they introduced pseudo-scientific theories and instruments into Rome (such as Nigidius Figulus’s “brontoscopic calendar”⁶⁸ or Aulus

62 “Auspicia ista ad utilitatem esse rei publicae composita” (*Leg.* 2.13.32; *On the Laws* 411; cf. *Div.* 2.35.75).

63 “Errabat enim multis in rebus antiquitas” (*Div.* 2.33.70; *On Divination*, 451).

64 According to the prevailing opinion, a quick and provisional draft of the whole of *De divinatione* was written prior to Caesar’s assassination. After this event, and before writing *De fato* (which was almost certainly conceived and composed after the middle of May 44 BCE, cf. *infra*, 293, n. 91), Cicero revised the text, adding all the interpolations that presuppose Caesar’s death and entirely rewriting the proem to book 2. See René Durand, “La date du *De divinatione*,” in *Mélanges Boissier: Recueil de mémoires concernant la littérature et les antiquités romaines dédié à Gaston Boissier* (Paris: Fontemoing, 1903), 173–183, and, for a recent presentation and discussion of Durand’s remarks, see Sebastiano Timpanaro, “Introduzione,” in Marcus Tullius Cicero, *Della divinazione*, ed. Sebastiano Timpanaro, 2nd ed. (Milan: Garzanti, 1998), lxvi–lxxiv.

65 “Omnia fere contra ac dicta sint evenisse” (*Div.* 2.24.53; *On Divination*, 431). On the role played by the recent civil war between Caesar and Pompey in Cicero’s attack on divination, see also the remarks in Lévy, *Cicero academicus*, 584–587.

66 See Dumézil, *Archaic Roman Religion*, 2:550.

67 On Nigidius Figulus, Tarquinius Priscus, and Aulus Caecina of Volterra (and for all the relevant bibliographical references regarding them), see Dumézil, *Archaic Roman Religion*, 2:634–638, 660, 670, and Timpanaro, “Introduzione,” esp. xli–xlii.

68 Preserved in John Lydus’s *De ostentis* (27–38). Nigidius Figulus also promoted the practice of “private augurs,” writing a work titled *De augurio private* (see Aulus Gellius, *Noct. att.* 7.6.10). Specifically on Nigidius, see André Piganiol, “Sur le calendrier brontoscopique de Nigidius Figulus,” in *Studies in Roman Economic and History in Honour of Allen Chester Johnson*, ed. Paul R. Coleman-Norton (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1951), 79–87 (reprinted in André Piganiol, *Scripta varia*, 2: *Les origines de Rome et la République*, ed.

Caecina of Volterra's theory of thunderbolts)⁶⁹ that were aimed at detecting and interpreting the will of the gods, with the sole effect of exponentially increasing the *metus* towards the divine.

Divination, therefore, must be understood as an integral part of the harmonious balance that characterises human society, a balance believed to reflect the cosmic order evident in the contemplation of the heavens.⁷⁰ Conversely, it must be condemned when it claims to be an autonomous science capable of ensuring communication between man and the gods, which is achievable only through the State or philosophy.⁷¹ After all, if the existence of "some natural connexion" [*cognatio naturalis*] between objects that are apparently unrelated [*distantium rerum*] is undeniable, what natural connection, "or what 'symphony,' so to speak, or association" [*qua ex coniunctione naturae et quasi centu atque consensu*], or "what συμπάθεια [...] can there be between a cleft in a liver and a petty addition to my purse?" [*quam συμπάθειαν [...] convenire potest aut fissum iecoris cum lucello meo*].⁷²

The second challenge related (albeit somewhat indirectly) to Stoic theology concerns εἰμαρμένη [*fatum*], a key concept underpinning the Stoic defence of divination. The Stoic εἰμαρμένη, described as "an orderly succession of causes wherein cause is linked to cause and each cause of itself produces an effect" [*ordinem seriemque causarum, cum causae causa nexa rem ex se gignat*],⁷³ involved a strict determinism, according to which "nothing has happened

Raymond Bloch, André Chastagnol, R. Chevallier, and M. Renard [Brussels: Latomus, 1973], 48–55), Nigidius Figulus, *Astrologo e mago. Testimonianze e frammenti*, trans. Dora Liuzzi (Lecce: Milella, 1983), and Nuccio D'Anna, *Publio Nigidio Figulo. Un pitagorico a Roma nel I secolo a.C.* (Milano: Archè-Edizioni PiZeta, 2008).

69 Cf. John Lydus's *De ostentis* (47–52).

70 *Supra*, 293, n. 91.

71 In this regard, Lévy (Cicero academicus, 587) speaks of "ambiguïté du statut de la divination."

72 *Div.* 2.14.34; *On Divination*, 407–409. Cf. also *Div.* 2.69.142: "Is there some such natural connecting link (*continuatio coniunctioque naturae*), which, as I said before, the Greeks call συμπάθεια, that the finding of a treasure must be deduced from dreaming of an egg?" [*Etenim [...] quae est continuatio coniunctioque naturae, quam, ut dixi, vocant συμπάθεια, eius modi, ut thesaurus ex ovo intellegi debeat?*] and "what natural bond of union (*naturali cognatione*) is there between dreams, on the one hand, and treasures, legacies, public office, victory and many other things of the same kind, on the other" [*Thesaurus vero et hereditas et honos et victoria et multa generis eiusdem qua cum somniis naturali cognatione iunguntur?*] (*On Divination*, 529).

73 "That is an immortal truth having its source in all eternity" [*Ea est ex omni aeternitate fluens veritas sempiterna*] (*Div.* 1.55.125; *On Divination*, 361). According to this view, "all things 'are,' though, from the standpoint of 'time,' they are not present" [*sunt enim omnia, sed tempore absunt*] (*Div.* 1.51.128; *On Divination*, 363).

which was not bound to happen, and, likewise, nothing is going to happen which will not find in nature every efficient cause of its happening” [*nihil est factum, quod non futurum fuerit, eodemque modo nihil est futurum, cuius non causas id ipsum efficientes natura contineat*].⁷⁴ However, for Cicero, asserting that “all things come about through Fate” [*cum fato omnia fiunt*]⁷⁵ would mean depriving man of any autonomy and freedom.

Without delving into details, I would just like to point out that the argumentative strategies of the “sceptical” Academy are crucial to both issues mentioned. In his critique of both artificial and natural divination, Cicero extensively employs Carneadean arguments,⁷⁶ which allow him to reply to Quintus’s speech “in such a way as to affirm nothing and question everything. For if I should assume anything that I said to be certain I should myself be playing the diviner while saying that no such thing as divination exists!”⁷⁷

Following Carneades, for example, Cicero begins his discussion by questioning whether there is such a thing as divination and, more specifically, by showing the impossibility of identifying which things are within its scope (*Div.* 2.3.9–12). If, as Quintus claimed, “divination is the foreknowledge [*praesensio*] of such things as depend upon chance [*quae in fortuna positae sunt*],” then “how can anything be foreseen that has no cause and no distinguishing mark of its happening?”⁷⁸ And in any case, since the existence of chance is unavoidably

74 *Div.* 1.55.126; *On Divination*, 361. Precisely for this reason, as Quintus explains, “it may be known by observation what effect will in most instances follow any cause, even if it is not known in all; for it would be too much to say that it is known in every case. And it is probable that these causes of coming events are perceived by those who see them during frenzy or in sleep” [*observatione notari possit, quae res quamque causam plerumque consequatur, etiamsi non semper (nam id quidem affirmare difficile est), eademque causas veri simile est rerum futurarum cerni ab eis, qui aut per furorem eas aut in quiete videant*] (*Div.* 1.55.126; *On Divination*, 361).

75 *Div.* 1.56.127; *On Divination*, 361.

76 See especially Anna Maria Ioppolo, “La critique de Carnéade sur la divination,” in Bouton-Touboulic and Lévy, *Scepticisme et religion*, 41–56, Giuseppe Ciafardone, “Il *De divinatione* ciceroniano e la polemica di Carneade contro la divinazione,” *Annali della Facoltà di Studi Umanistici dell’Università degli Studi di Milano* 71, no. 2 (2018): 65–82, David N. Sedley, “Carneades’ Theological Arguments,” in *Plato’s Academy: Its Workings and Its History*, ed. Paul Kalligas, Chloe Balla, Effie Baziotopoulou-Valavani, and Vassilis Karasmanis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 220–245, and Luciana Repici, *Pre-dire il futuro. I filosofi antichi e la divinazione* (Pisa: Edizioni della Normale, 2022), 269–297.

77 “Ita nihil ut adfirmem, quaeram omnia, dubitans plerumque et mihi ipse diffidens. Si enim aliquid certi haberem quod dicerem, ego ipse divinarem, qui esse divinationem nego” (*Div.* 2.3.8; *On Divination*, 379).

78 *Div.* 2.5.14; *On Divination*, 386; *Div.* 2.6.17; *On Divination*, 389. According to Cicero/Carne-

ruled out by the Stoic conception of fate,⁷⁹ “What room is there for divination?”⁸⁰ Most importantly, in drawing upon Carneades, Cicero knew that he could count on the support (and legitimacy) of some eminent Stoics, who, in different ways, had also questioned the validity of the *μαντική τέχνη*. I am referring to Diogenes of Babylon (also known as Diogenes of Seleucia, 230–150/140 BCE), Boethus of Sidon (second century BCE),⁸¹ and Panaetius (180–109 BCE); namely, to the very same philosophers who, as Philo of Alexandria reported, abandoned “the conflagrations and regenerations [*τὰς ἐκπυρώσεις καὶ παλιγγενεσίας*] and deserted to the more religious doctrine [*πρὸς ὀσιώτερον δόγμα*] that the whole world was indestructible [*τὸ τῆς ἀφθαρσίας τοῦ κόσμου παντὸς*].”⁸² As for Diogenes of Babylon, a native of the same region in which

ades, “we do not apply the words ‘chance’ [*fors*], ‘luck’ [*fortuna*], ‘accident’ [*casus*], or ‘casualty’ [*eventus*] except to an event which has so occurred or happened that it either might not have occurred at all, or might have occurred in any other way” [*Quid est enim aliud fors, quid fortuna, quid casus, quid eventus, nisi cum sic aliquid cecidit, sic evenit, ut vel non cadere atque evenire, ut vel aliter cadere atque evenire potuerit?*] (*Div.* 2.6.15; *On Divination*, 387).

79 *Supra*, 288–289.

80 *Div.* 2.7.19; *On Divination*, 391.

81 Not to be confused with the homonymous Peripatetic philosopher from the first century BCE.

82 *Aet.* 76 [= T 131 Alesse]–77; Philo of Alexandria, *Every Good Man Is Free. On the Contemplative Life. On the Eternity of the World. Against Flaccus. Apology for the Jews. On Providence*, trans. F.H. Colson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1941), 239. Cf. also Stobaeus, *Ecl.* 1.20.5–7 = T 133 Alesse, from which we learn that Panaetius judged [*νομίζει*] the thesis of the world’s eternity [*ἡ ἀιδιότης τοῦ κόσμου*] to be more persuasive [*πιθανωτέρα*]; *Tusc.* 1.32.79 = T 120 Alesse; *Aet.* 78, where we read that οἱ περὶ τὸν Βοηθὸν stated [*φασί*] that if the world were *γενηγός* and *φθαρτός*, something would have sprung *ἐκ τοῦ μὴ ὄντος*, which was utterly absurd to the Stoics [*ὅπερ καὶ τοῖς Στωϊκοῖς ἀτοπώτατον εἶναι δοκεῖ*]; for the exegesis of this passage, see Carlos Lévy, “Lucrece et les Stoïciens,” in *Présence de Lucrece, Actes du Colloque de Tours, 3–5 décembre 1998*, ed. Rémy Pignault (Tours: Centre de Recherche A. Piganiol, 1999), 89. Just in passing, I would like to draw attention, as suggested in Andrea Falcon, *Aristotelismo* (Turin: Einaudi, 2017), 23–25, to the possible influence of the Peripatetic Critolaus of Phaselis on the rejection of the Stoic dogma of world-conflagration by Diogenes, Boethus, and Panaetius. In those years, Critolaus (a member of the Athenian embassy to Rome in 156/155 BCE along with Diogenes of Babylon and Carneades; see, e.g., *De or.* 2.38.160) was, in fact, a strenuous advocate of the Aristotelian thesis of the eternity of the world (see, e.g., *Aet.* 55 = 13 Wehrli, and *Aet.* 70 = 12 Wehrli; on Critolaus’s physics, see esp. David E. Hahm, “Critolaus and Late Hellenistic Peripatetic Philosophy,” in *Pyrrhonists, Patricians, Platonizers: Hellenistic Philosophy in the Period 155–186 B.C., Tenth Symposium Hellenisticum*, ed. Anna Maria Ioppolo and David N. Sedley [Naples: Bibliopolis, 2007], 81 ff.). It would then be interesting to wonder whether Critolaus (and, more generally, the Peripatetic philosophers, especially Dicaearchus, followed by Cratippus in the first century BCE) could also have played some role in the attitude towards divination deployed

the *monstra Chaldeorum* (*Div.* 2.42.87) developed, we know that he limited the power of prophecy of the Chaldeans' art (namely, astrology) "to the extent of being able to tell the disposition of any child and the calling for which he is best fitted" (*Div.* 2.43.90), denying its capability to forecast a man's future.⁸³ Boethius of Sidon, Diogenes's pupil, is remembered by Cicero for his attempt to explain "the phenomena of sea and sky" without recourse to the "supernatural," thus boiling divination down to science, while simultaneously depriving divination of any religious feature.⁸⁴ Finally, Panaetius. Venturing well beyond Diogenes, he "was the only one of the Stoics to reject the *astrologorum praedicta*."⁸⁵ He denied "that divination [μαντική] has any real existence" (ἀνυπόστατον, "unsubstantial," "without sure foundation"),⁸⁶ considering it more convenient to restrain himself from assent [*seque ab adsensu sustineat*] on the truth of "the responses of entrail-diviners, auspices, oracles, dreams, and prophecies."⁸⁷ Consequently,

since the Stoics—much against their will I grant you—permitted this famous Stoic to doubt on one point will they not grant to us Academicians the right to do the same on all other points, especially since that

by the three Stoic philosophers or whether their stances might depend on Carneades's attack on the μαντική τέχνη. On Dicaearchus's and Cratippus's position on (natural) divination, whose main source is *De divinatione* (1.3.5; 1.32.70–71; 2.52.107–109), see esp. (also for further bibliographical references) the recent study by Francesco Verde, *Peripatetic Philosophy in Context: Knowledge, Time, and Soul from Theophrastus to Cratippus* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2022), esp. 160–168.

83 On Cicero's assessment of this "concession" to astrology by Diogenes of Babylon, see *Div.* 2.43.90–91, together with Repici, *Predire il futuro*, 324–325.

84 On Boethius's stance regarding divination, see Timpanaro, "Introduzione," xxxiv, lxiii–lxvi.

85 *Div.* 2.42.88 = part. T 140 Alesse; *On Divination*, 471. There has been much debate over the question as to whether the criticism of astrology in *Div.* 2.42.87–47.99 can be traced back to Carneades—see Anna Maria Ioppolo, "L'astrologia nello Stoicismo antico," in *La scienza ellenistica. Atti delle giornate di studio* (Pavia, 14–16 aprile 1982), ed. Gabriele Gianantoni and Mario Vegetti (Naples: Bibliopolis, 1984), 83–84—or whether it depends on Panaetius: see Francesca Alesse, *Panezio di Rodi e la tradizione stoica* (Naples: Bibliopolis, 1994), 239–254, and Panaetius, *Testimonianze*, ed. Francesca Alesse (Naples: Bibliopolis, 1997), 270–272. I would like to point out that many of the arguments recorded by Cicero also appear in Sextus Empiricus's *Adversus astrologos* [= *M* 5]; see esp. Sextus Empiricus, *Contro gli astrologi*, ed. Emidio Spinelli (Naples: Bibliopolis, 2000), and Repici, *Predire il futuro*, 332–339.

86 DL 7.149 = T 139 Alesse; Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers, Volume 11: Books 6–10*, trans. R.D. Hicks (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1925), 253.

87 *Luc.* 33.107 = T 136 Alesse; Marcus Tullius Cicero, *On Academic Scepticism*, trans. Charles Brittain (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2006), 122.

about which Panaetius is not clear is clearer than the light of day to the other members of the Stoic school?⁸⁸

Similarly, in *De fato* (= *Fat.*), Cicero resorts to Carneadean arguments in order to preserve freedom of action (by separating physical from logical determinism) without relapsing into the ridiculous Epicurean atomic swerve (cf. “sine hac commenticia declinatione defendere,” *Fat.* 10.22–11.23):

In fact, by explaining [*scil.* Carneades] that it is possible for a certain voluntary movement of the soul to occur, it would have been better to defend this rather than introduce the deviation, for which they cannot even find the cause; having defended this point, they could have easily resisted Chrysippus. Indeed, even if they conceded that no motion occurs without a cause, they would not allow that everything that happens does so due to preceding causes; for our will, there are no external and preceding causes.⁸⁹

According to Carneades, in fact, “if all things come about through antecedent causes” [*si omnia antecedentibus causis fiunt*], then “all things are brought

88 “Quod illi in aliqua re invitissimis Stoicis Stoico facere licuit, nos ut in reliquis rebus faciamus a Stoicis non concedetur? praesertim cum id, de quo Panaetio non liquet, reliquis eiusdem disciplinae solis luce videatur clarius” (*Div.* 1.3.6 = T 137 Alesse; *On Divination*, 231). Cf. also *Div.* 1.7.12 = T 138 Alesse.

89 “Nam cum doceret esse posse quendam animi motum voluntarium, id fuit defendi melius quam introducere declinationem, cuius praesertim causam reperire non possunt; quo defenso facile Chrysippo possent resistere. Cum enim concessissent motum nullum esse sine causa, non concederent omnia quae fierent fieri causis antecedentibus; voluntatis enim nostrae non esse causas externas et antecedentis” (*Fat.* 11.23, my translation, based on the manuscript reading [*doceret*]). I explain and justify my decision to retain the singular *doceret* (rather than emending it to the plural *docere<n>t*, as most scholars do) and to attribute it to Carneades in Chiara Rover, “Carneade e il moto volontario dell’animo. Osservazioni su Cic. *Fat.* 11, 23,” *Historia philosophica* 23 (2025), forthcoming. For a discussion of this passage, see also Carlo Natali, “Carneades’ Argument in Cicero’s *De fato* 23^b–25,” *Lexis* 25 (2007): 69–82. Regarding Carneades’s position, see *Fat.* 10.22–12.28; 14.31–15.34; 16.38 (for bibliographical references, consult Stefano Maso’s commentary on these three paragraphs in Marcus Tullius Cicero, *Il fatto*, ed. Stefano Maso [Rome: Carocci, 2014]). On the Stoic conception of the antecedent cause, see Anna Maria Ioppolo, “Le cause antecedenti in Cic. *De fato* 40,” in *Matter and Metaphysics, Fourth Symposium Hellenisticum*, ed. Jonathan Barnes and Mario Mignucci (Naples: Bibliopolis, 1988), 397–424 (reprinted in Ioppolo, *Dibattiti filosofici ellenistici: Dottrina delle cause, Stoicismo, Accademia scettica*, ed. Bruno Centrone, Diana Quarantotto, Emidio Spinelli, and Riccardo Chiaradonna [Sankt Augustin: Academia Verlag, 2013], 69–84).

about by necessity” [*omnia necessitas efficit*], and if that is true, then nothing is in our power [*nihil est in nostra potestate*]. However, “there is something in our power” [*est autem aliquid in nostra potestate*], therefore, “it is not the case that whatever comes about does so through fate” [*non igitur fato fiunt quaecumque fiunt*].⁹⁰ Only then could Cicero awaken in his readers (and fellow citizens) a sense of moral responsibility and the duty of civic engagement.⁹¹

4 Some Conclusions: Two Different Ways of Being a “Sceptic”

Although many questions are doomed to remain unanswered, it is now time to try and draw some conclusions. For Cicero and Cotta, Academic “scepticism” takes on two profoundly different meanings. For Cotta, Academic “scepticism” essentially becomes a way of life, allowing his multiple *personae* to coexist by approving [*adprobatio*] all of them without any dogmatic commitment [*adsensus/συγκατάθεσις*].⁹² In this regard, it would be interesting to question and investigate the relationship between Cotta’s philosophical reflections⁹³ (which lead him to suspend judgment about *truth*) and Carneades’s

90 *Fat.* 14.31. On this Carneadean criticism—developed according to the *modus tollendo tollens*—against both the so-called “Lazy Argument” (*ignava ratio/ἄργος λόγος*; see *Fat.* 12.28–13.29) and Chrysippus’s refutation of it (see *Fat.* 13.30), see esp. Anna Maria Ioppolo, “La critica di Carneade al concetto stoico di causa in Cic. *De fato* 31–37,” *Lexis* 25 (2007): 103–119 (reprinted in Ioppolo, *Dibatti filosofici ellenistici*, 85–98).

91 Conceived in April/May 44 BCE, *De fato* was composed in a short time (twenty days at most) at the beginning of June 44, as soon as Cicero was back in Tusculum (see Maso in Cicero, *Il fato*, 91–94). This was a crucial time in Cicero’s life and career: after many unhappy and inglorious years under Caesar’s dictatorship, there were renewed hopes for an ordered government. However, his absence from Rome and the Senate during the summer of 44 BCE came at a price, and in the autumn, it was too late (see esp. Syme, *The Roman Revolution*, 138–139).

92 On the distinction between *adsensus* and *adprobatio*, see *Luc.* 32.104 (together with Richard Bett, “Carneades’ Distinction between Assent and Approval,” *The Monist* 73 [1990]: 3–20). Thanks to this distinction, Carneades gave the “sceptic” the possibility of affirming or denying something, without the need to *adsentire* [*adsensus/συγκατάθεσις*] to the cataleptic impression (as required by the Stoics), but simply by granting his *adprobatio* to the persuasive impression; see Anna Maria Ioppolo, *Opinione e scienza. Il dibattito tra Stoici e Accademici nel III e nel II secolo a.C.* (Naples: Bibliopolis, 1986), 193–198, and Ioppolo, “L’assenso nella filosofia di Clitomaco: Un problema di linguaggio?,” in Ioppolo and Sedley, *Pyrrhonists, Patricians, Platonizers*, 225–267.

93 *Contra* DeFilippo, “Cicero vs. Cotta,” according to whom Cotta strives to keep religion out of the realm of philosophical evaluation altogether. A valuable critical discussion of DeFilippo’s conclusions is offered in Wynne, *Cicero on the Philosophy of Religion*, 166–167.

πιθανότης [persuasiveness].⁹⁴ However, that would exceed the specific purpose of the present study, and I shall postpone it for further publications. For now, what needs to be borne in mind is that Cotta, whose rank and family prestige were enough to secure his privileged position, wealth, and prosperity, was far removed from Cicero's aspiration for *consensus omnium bonorum*, primarily aimed at opposing any force of dissolution (*Sest.* 45.97 ff.). Cotta remained a noble, and like every noble, he continued to claim predominance for his class.⁹⁵ Moreover, it should not be forgotten that he was strongly attached to Sulla, the fiercest enemy of the *homus novus* Gaius Marius. Moreover, Cotta died in 74 BCE, long before Caesar's dictatorship and the deep confusion preceding and following his assassination.

For Cicero, on the other hand, Academic "scepticism" (*à la Carneades*)⁹⁶ cannot be the "rule," and the philosopher, so to speak, must surrender to the politician (cf. *Div.* 2.2.7) and *adapt to him*. However, "scepticism" is still a valuable

94 On Carneades's πιθανότης, see esp. Richard Bett, "Carneades' Pithanon: A Reappraisal of Its Role and Status," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 7 (1989): 59–94, Suzanne Obdrzalek, "Living in Doubt: Carneades' Pithanon Reconsidered," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 31 (2006): 243–280, and the recent studies by Reinhardt, "Pithana and probabilia," and Cicero's *Academici Libri* and Lucullus, esp. lxiii–cvii.

95 See esp. Leonhard A. Burckhardt, "The Political Elite of the Roman Republic: Comments on Recent Discussion of the Concepts 'Nobilitas and Homo Novus,'" *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 39 (1990): 77–99.

96 It would therefore be appropriate to ask *which* Carneades we are talking about. Reinhardt, in his recent study devoted to the *Academica* (Cicero's *Academici Libri* and Lucullus, esp. cxlii–clvii, xli–xliv), contends that the Carneades, whose epistemology Cicero follows, is the Clitomachean one and that Cicero is consequently a "radical" sceptic. Reinhardt primarily draws attention to *Inv.* 2.3.9–10: "Therefore without affirming anything positively, I shall proceed with an inquiring mind and make each statement with a degree of hesitation, lest in gaining the small point of having written an apparently useful book, I fall short of the chief goal, not to be rash and hasty in giving my approval to any item. This principle I shall of course pursue both now and in all my life as zealously as possible" [*Quare nos quidem sine ulla affirmatione simul quaerentes dubitanter unum quidque dicemus, ne, dum parvulum hoc consequamur, ut satis haec commode perscripsisse videamur, illud amitamus quod maximum est ut ne cui rei temere atque arroganter assenserimus. Verum hoc quidem nos et in hoc tempore et in omni vita studiose, quoad facultas feret, consequemur*] (Marcus Tullius Cicero, *On Invention. The Best Kind of Orator. Topics*, trans. Harry M. Hubbell [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1949], 175); cf. also *Luc.* 20.66; *Fin.* 1.2.6; *ND* 1.1–5.12; *Div.* 2.3.8 and 2.12.28. I find Reinhardt's hypothesis fairly intriguing, but at the same time quite problematic. On the one hand, it is undeniable that Cicero himself declares that he is drawing upon Clitomachus, as we read in *Luc.* 31.98: "To make sure that no one suspects that I'm making up what I'm going to say, I will use citations from Clitomachus—since he worked with Carneades right up to his old age, and he was a clever man, as you'd expect from a Carthaginian, as well as a serious and diligent scholar" [*nec vero quicquam*

weapon for stemming and mitigating the “hardlines” of Stoic theology; namely, those aspects of the Stoic doctrine that would eventually undermine Cicero’s political plan just as much as Cotta’s (passive) approach towards religion. I am referring to the Stoic defence of divination well beyond its political and social purposes on the one hand and to the “paralysing” conception of fate promoted by the Stoics, together with their reduction of all causes to antecedent causes, on the other. It is precisely for this reason that, as Cicero himself declared, *De natura deorum*, *De divinatione*, and *De fato* were conceived as a trilogy and that they therefore need to be assessed together (*Div.* 2.1.3; cf. also *ND* 3.8.19).

In light of this, I believe that Cicero’s position towards religion, rather than disclosing his “titubanza [...] nell’affrontare di petto l’argomento,” as suggested by Emanuele Narducci,⁹⁷ should be read while taking into account his political purposes and frame. After all, as emerges from his portraits (at least from those dating back to his own time), Cicero represented himself—and wanted his contemporaries to see him—as a politician, *not* a philosopher.⁹⁸ His life was one with his political project. Ultimately, this cost him dearly, and he succumbed to talent and ambition, for, as Ronald Syme remarked, “there was no Ciceronian party. The Roman politician had to be the leader of a faction. Cicero fell short of that eminence both when a consul and when a consular, or senior statesman.”⁹⁹ He “lacked the full equipment”; namely, family connexions and *clientela*.

ita dicam ut quisquam id fingi suspicetur; a Clitomacho sumam, qui usque ad senectutem cum Carneade fuit, homo et acutus ut Poenus et valde studiosus ac diligens; et quattuor eius libri sunt de sustinendis adsensionibus, haec autem quae iam dicam [quae] sunt sumpta de primo (*On Academic Scepticism*, 57–58). On the other hand, passages such as *Luc.* 2.6–3.8 strongly testify to a “sceptical” (mitigated) stance that could hardly be juxtaposed with that of Clitomachus. We might say that in Cicero, Carneades’s *πιθανὴ φαντασία* carries some kind of “virtuous” *δόξα*, endowed with *positive* value not only within the practical sphere, but also within the epistemological one. That would also explain why, in the *Academica*, Cicero appears to employ *probabile* and *veri simile* as interchangeable and synonymous translations for τὸ πιθανόν (cf. esp. *Luc.* 31.100–33.105; 41.127–128, together with Lévy, *Cicero academicus*, 283–290, and John Glucker, “*Probabile, veri simile* and related terms,” in *Cicero the Philosopher: Twelve Papers*, ed. Jonathan G.F. Powell [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995], 125–135). In this sense, Cicero’s stance would be more consistent with the “scepticism” of Metrodorus of Stratonicea or Philo of Larissa (see at least Simone Vezzoli, “L’esistenza di un criterio di verità nella filosofia di Filone di Larissa,” *Annali della Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia dell’Università degli Studi di Milano* 64 [2011]: 247–263).

97 Narducci, *Cicerone*, 435–436.

98 See Paul Zanker, “I ritratti di Marco Tullio Cicerone: Visione, autorappresentazione, interpretazione,” in *Cicerone Prospettiva 2000. Atti del I Symposium Ciceronianum Arpinas. Arpino, 5 maggio 2000*, ed. Emanuele Narducci (Florence: Le Monnier, 2001), 16–58.

99 Syme, *The Roman Revolution*, 13–16.

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