

## Editorial

The *Yearbook of the Maimonides Centre for Advanced Studies 2019* is the fourth volume of articles stemming from research conducted by MCAS's fellows and affiliates. It also includes a section with an overview of the activities and events conducted at the centre during its fourth academic year and a report on its library.

The twelve articles contained in the present volume exhibit the extent to which MCAS scholarship advances the understanding of Judaism and scepticism, both individually and together, among different thinkers and within different areas of study. Whether a short note or a full-fledged analysis, each paper has something fresh to offer and something new to say, opening new directions of research and inviting the scholarly community to join the discussion.

Aryeh Botwinick's opening essay outlines a new and thought-provoking approach to Western thought and religion's perception of itself. Instead of a narrative of conflict, Botwinick's historiography raises the notion of God's unknowability as the mediating thread that renders monotheism and scepticism fundamentally intertwined.

Michela Torbidoni's study adds an important chapter to the as-yet understudied history of the persona and function of Socrates within the Jewish tradition. Focusing on the cases of Moses Mendelssohn and Simone Luzzatto, who operated at different times and in different contexts, she tantalisingly argues that the figure of Socrates can be considered as a vehicle for Jewish emancipation. The comparative discussion adds evidence to the thesis that modern Jewish Italian culture was part of the intellectual basis of the programme to reform the status of European Jews in the late eighteenth century.

Behnam Zolghadr tackles one of the cornerstones of Aristotelian logic—namely, the principle of non-contradiction—by presenting critiques of it as reported by the Muslim theologian Faḥr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1210). Zolghadr argues that these critiques, which can be traced back to the Mu'tazilite *mutakallimūn*, function as part of its consolidation of the theory of states (*aḥwāl*), which can consequently be regarded as a dialetheic theory. As such, Zolghadr devises the first steps in modelling it logically using tools of paraconsistent logic developed in the late twentieth century, more than a thousand years after the theory's inception.

Máté Veres enriches the understanding of ancient scepticism by exploring Clement of Alexandria's discussion of *epochē* (suspension of judgment) in his *Stromateis*. He examines and refines arguments that support the claim that Clement is presenting a variety of scepticism that predates the well-known version expounded by Sextus Empiricus and considers different explanations as to why a Christian theologian of Clement's standing would express interest in sceptical arguments, let alone recognise their potential legitimacy.

Ze'ev Strauss offers the first comprehensive scholarly work in English on Meister Eckhart's employment of Ibn Gabirol's *Fons vitae*. He shows the vast extent to which Eckhart draws on this work, explicitly and also implicitly, in order to account for his own Christian philosophy, primarily gravitating towards Ibn Gabirol's metaphysics of the One. Strauss shows that many of the provocative and unusual elements of Eckhart's Christian thought correspond to Eckhart's favourable view of *Fons vitae*.

Giada Coppola elucidates Obadiah Sforno's (?1475–1550) philosophical interpretation of the individual human soul in his *Light of the Nations*, with emphasis on his defence of its immortality. Coppola shows how exegetical interpretation and the text's philosophical background are intrinsically connected, identifies Sforno's sources common to the Hebrew and Latin traditions, and displays the interesting dynamics between Sforno's philosophical composition and his biblical commentaries.

José María Sánchez de León Serrano offers a new reading of the Flemish thinker Arnold Geulincx (1624–69) based on an audacious interpretation of his epistemological views. By tracing the central tenets of Geulincx's thought back to his method of self-inspection, Sánchez de León Serrano illuminates the unity and systematic character of this multifaceted philosopher—who at first glance seems to offer an incoherent blend of scepticism and metaphysics—and opens up new vistas in the study of this still widely overlooked thinker.

Avraham Rot's paper offers an original and challenging interpretation of Spinoza's philosophical project, arguing that if one shifts the focus of analysis from his theory of knowledge to his theory of affects, Spinoza emerges as a philosopher whose scepticism is significantly more radical than its Cartesian counterpart. Rot claims that for Spinoza, the doubt that matters is not doubt as a methodological device employed to attain certainty, but rather the doubt that human beings constantly experience insofar as they are finite, embodied, and uncertain of their future.

Timothy Franz offers a highly detailed, in-depth analysis of Solomon Maimon's seldom-studied *Weltseele* (1790), which he describes as a proto-dialectical metaphysics of the absolute. Beyond exploring the *Weltseele* on its own terms, Franz identifies it as a key stage in Maimon's philosophical development and argues that it functions as an attempt to overcome the self-conceived failure of Maimon's well-known *Essay on Transcendental Philosophy*. In turn, the ideas in the *Weltseele* were abandoned, although not before they exposed the need to construct a logic of the absolute, which was ultimately expressed in Maimon's *Logik* (1794).

Michah Gottlieb's contribution does much to clarify the debate surrounding Judaism and dogma as reflected in German-speaking Jewish authors in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, showing that it is not merely a theoretical question, but also has much to do with concrete considerations concerning Jewish society. He begins with a thorough analysis of Moses Mendelssohn's view of Judaism, explaining in what sense it should be understood as anti-dogmatic and also how it reflects Mendelssohn's aspiration for a self-conception of Judaism that is distinct from Christianity. Gottlieb then turns to discuss leading nineteenth-century German-speaking Jewish thinkers and shows how they transform the problem from an intrareligious one to

an interreligious one. Each response is informed by a concept of Judaism that is intimately connected to the problem of Jewish communal unity.

Anne Fiebig's article is the first to offer a systematic account of the concept of tolerance in the thought of Yeshayahu Leibowitz (1903–94), one of the most important—and certainly most controversial—Israeli philosophers, as it emerges from his religious scepticism. Analysing Leibowitz's epistemology, Fiebig presents Leibowitz as a model against religious dogmatism, which Leibowitz regards as corruptive to a genuinely faithful position.

Finally, through an analysis of an early seventeenth-century Jesuit report about religious minorities in China, Giuseppe Veltri introduces the novel notion of “strategic scepticism,” which is a form of abusing sceptical argumentation aimed at preserving and reinforcing political power. At the present time, strategic scepticism as an analytical category is becoming pressingly relevant.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank Bill Rebig, who edited the first three volumes of the Yearbook and who has done an excellent job of making it a cornerstone of the yearly scholarly activities at MCAS. Special thanks are also due to Katharine Handel for her superb copy- and language editing of all the papers in the present volume. We would also like to thank Maria Wazinski, the centre's academic coordinator, for compiling this year's list of activities and events; Silke Schaeper, the centre's librarian, for preparing the report on the library; Sarah Wobick-Segev for her perceptive comments; and Mikheil Kakabadze for his valuable assistance in the editorial process.

Hamburg, October 2019

Giuseppe Veltri (Chief Editor)  
Yoav Meyrav (Volume Editor)

## Postscript

As this volume was going to press, we were deeply saddened to learn of the untimely passing of our dear friend and colleague Dr. Roi Benbassat.

Dr. Benbassat, a scholar of Jewish existentialism and a gifted musician, belonged to the first generation of MCAS fellows. He earned his bachelor's degree in philosophy and music composition from Tel Aviv University, his master's degree in philosophy from the University Sorbonne-Panthéon Paris 1 (with a *mémoire* entitled “The Religiosity of Spinoza”), and his PhD in Philosophy from Tel Aviv University in 2011, with a dissertation entitled “The Relation between the Philosophical and the Religious: Reconsidering Kierkegaard's Confrontation with Philosophy.”

After a Minerva Postdoctoral Fellowship (Max Planck Institute) at the Institute of Comparative Ethics at Freie Universität Berlin, Benbassat arrived at MCAS as a post-doctoral fellow in 2015–16 with a research project entitled “Yeshayahu Leibowitz—Strict Orthodox Practice and Unbound Scepticism.” One of the fruits of his research

at MCAS was his paper entitled “Jewish Faith and Scepticism—The Example of Yeshayahu Leibowitz,” which was published in the 2017 edition of the *Yearbook of the Maimonides Centre for Advanced Studies*. Until recently, he was a research associate at the Goethe Universität in Frankfurt am Main with a research project entitled “Tolerance and Intolerance in the Dialogues between Conflicting Jewish Positions in the 20th Century.”

Benbassat had a wide array of research interests that was reflected in his publications, including the work of the Israeli thinker Yeshayahu Leibowitz, the relations between religious and moral-philosophical standpoints, religious existentialism, Jewish–Christian interreligious conflicts and dialogues, religion and scepticism, and religious positioning in the conflicts and dialogues within Judaism in Israel. He was also a talented singer and songwriter, releasing three albums: *Into Your Craft* (2017), *Footloose* (2018), and *Hard Nut* (2019).

Roi Benbassat was not only a talented scholar, but also a kind, gentle, and humble human being. He was also very funny. His radiant personality filled the Centre’s corridors from the day of his arrival. Those who became closer to him learned that underneath the ironic smile and quiet presence was a huge heart and a generous soul.

Roi was supposed to return to MCAS in 2021 with a research project entitled “Yeshayahu Leibowitz’s Concept of Faith—Between Intellectualism and Sentimentalism.” We were all eagerly awaiting his arrival. This volume is dedicated to his memory.