

Michael B. Cover / Lutz Doering (eds.)

Philo of Alexandria and Philosophical Discourse

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Philo of Alexandria on the Practical and Contemplative Life: Some Remarks

Mauro Bonazzi

What is the best life – a life that can offer us the most important thing, happiness? As is well known, this was the most cardinal question in antiquity. It was addressed from the very beginnings by several writers, and soon became one of the hottest points of disagreement in philosophical debates. Given its importance, it is therefore surprising that, until recently, not so many scholars have tried carefully to reconstruct these debates. The only systematic overview was published by Robert Joly several decades ago, in 1956.¹ It is a valuable study, which diligently collects all the relevant evidence. But it also suffers, as is easy to predict, from time and from several prejudices, especially in the last part of his book, about the late Hellenistic and Roman philosophers. Many scholars since then have greatly contributed to a better understanding of this period in general and especially as regards the issue under discussion in this paper.² Yet much still remains to be investigated and discussed, as I will try to show with regard to Philo of Alexandria. Contrary to what Joly argued, Philo's views on the best types of life are not the simple repetition of widespread clichés, but offer very valuable insights, which can be paralleled with the current debates of his own time. It is well known that Philo's Jewish background, however we want to consider it, complicates his relationship with the Greek philosophical tradition.³ To be sure, we cannot read Philo as though he were just a philosopher, in dialogue with the other Greek philosophers. And yet, the aim of this paper is to show that he not only shared with the Greek thinkers a common ground of discussions

¹ R. Joly, *Le thème philosophique des genres de vie dans l'Antiquité Classique* (Bruxelles: Palais des Académies, 1956).

² See the articles collected in T. Bénatouil/M. Bonazzi (ed.), *Theoria, Praxis and the Contemplative Life after Plato and Aristotle* (PhA 131; Leiden: Brill, 2012). As for Philo, see D. Winston, "Philo and the Contemplative Life", in A. Green (ed.), *Jewish Spirituality from the Bible through the Middle Ages* (World Spirituality: An Encyclopaedic History of the Religious Quest 13; New York: Crossroad, 1988) 198–230; and V. Laurand, "La contemplation selon Philon d'Alexandrie", in Bénatouil/Bonazzi, *Theoria, Praxis, and the Contemplative Life*, 121–38.

³ See the seminal article by D.T. Runia, "Was Philo a Middle Platonist? A Difficult Question Revisited", *SPhiloA* 5 (1993) 112–40.

and problems, but also contributed some interesting ideas, which help us better understand the intellectual and philosophical richness of this period.⁴

I. Philo and the “Mixed Life”?

Philon le juif est fort représentatif du syncrétisme hellénistique. Convaincu de l’énorme supériorité de la vie contemplative, il admet cependant la vie mixte: selon lui, la vie contemplative et la vie pratique doivent alterner dans la vie d’un homme. [...] La contemplation est d’essence divine et l’action est proprement humaine. La vie contemplative est tellement supérieure que ce serait folie de s’y consacrer dès la jeunesse; il faut faire un apprentissage dans la sphère inférieure de l’action. La contemplation est la récompense de la perfection apportée à la pratique.⁵

According to Joly, Philo is a typical representative of Hellenistic syncretism in an epoch dominated by the “triumph of the mixed life” (*Le thème philosophique*, 171). The ideal life is now regarded as consisting in an alternation of “action” (πρᾶξις) and “contemplation” (θεωρία), the latter of which is the most important one. According to Joly, this view reflects the Peripatetic model, which was the dominant model during the first centuries of the Imperial age.

In support of his reconstruction, Joly mentions several texts, and many others can be added. *Spec.* 2.64, for instance, seem to provide an indication of Philo’s leaning towards the alternation between the two lives (with the acknowledgement that the contemplative life is the most important):

These things show clearly that Moses does not allow any of those who use his sacred instruction to remain inactive at any season. But since we consist of body and soul, he assigned to the body its proper tasks and similarly to the soul what falls to its share, and his earnest desire was, that the two should be waiting to relieve each other. Thus while the body is working, the soul enjoys a respite, but when the body takes its rest, the soul resumes its work, and thus the best form of life, the theoretical and the practical, take their turn in replacing each other. The practical life has six as its number allotted for ministering to the body. The theoretical has seven for knowledge and perfection of the mind (*Spec.* 2.64, PLCL).

⁴ A possible objection to the plan of the present paper is that it does not take into proper account the specificity of Philo’s texts in the *corpus*, as David Runia made me kindly aware of. Insofar as Philo’s texts are dependent on an exegetical context, they should be studied for their specific goals and not as part of a unified system. Philo is indeed a sophisticated writer and does not seem to be primarily interested in developing a closed system, as I will also show at the end of the paper. And yet, some preliminary attempt of extracting some common features and ideas in his thought is equally important. This is the goal of the present paper.

⁵ Joly, *Le thème philosophique*, 173.

A passage from the *De decalogo* is even more eloquent, with this regard:

(§99) God used “his six days” for the completion of the cosmos all at once – since he had no need of extended time. But a human being, partaking in mortal nature and being in need of a thousand things necessary for life, ought not to shrink from procuring what is needed through the end of their life, resting on the holy seventh days. (§100) Is this not an outstandingly fine exhortation, admirably fit to convert us to every virtue, but especially to piety? “Always follow God”, he [Moses] says: “let the single six-day period in which he created the cosmos be sufficient as a paradigm of the period appointed for you to act; and let the seventh day, in which he is said to view what he made, be a paradigm of the need to do philosophy, when you too should contemplate things of nature, and also whatever of your own affairs is relevant to happiness (παράδειγμα καὶ τοῦ δεῖν φιλοσοφεῖν ἢ ἐβδόμη, καθ’ ἣν ἐπιθεῖν λέγεται ἡ εἰργασία, ὅπως καὶ αὐτὸς ἐπιθεωρῆς τὰ φύσεως καὶ τὰ ἴδια ὅσα συντείνει πρὸς εὐδαιμονίαν)”. (§101) So let us not ignore this example of the best ways of life, the practical and the theoretical, but always look at it and engrave clear images and representations of it in our own minds, making mortal nature as much as possible like what is immortal, both in saying and doing what is necessary (ἐξομοιοῦντες θνητὴν φύσιν ὡς ἔνεστιν ἀθανάτῳ κατὰ τὸ λέγειν καὶ πράττειν ἂν χρῆ)’ (*Decal.* 99–101; trans. Boys-Stones, 474; see also *Spec.* 1.57–58; *Praem.* 10–11; *Mut.* 70–76).

This last text adds some important qualifications to the first text quoted by Joly, insofar as it explains that the contemplative life is a life devoted to the Divine. This is the main reason for its superiority over the practical life.

All in all, it would be difficult to deny that Philo shares ideas that were widespread among his contemporaries. But this does not justify Joly’s conclusion of Philo’s complete lack of originality (not to mention his dismissive evaluation of the philosophy of the early Imperial age as a whole). On the contrary, upon a closer scrutiny it appears that Philo was not passively dependent on the other schools’ doctrines. If we look at the current debates, we can see that the situation was much more complex, so that it makes no sense to talk of a single model of “the mixed life”, which was uniformly adopted by all schools and thinkers.

Over the years, several scholars have rightly underlined Philo’s debt to the Stoics, who in their turn seem to favor the same model when it comes to the choice of the best life.⁶ In this specific case, however, divergences are more significant than

⁶ “Of the three kinds of life, the contemplative, the practical, and the rational, they declare that we ought to choose the last, for that a rational being is expressly produced by nature for contemplation and action (πρὸς θεωρίαν καὶ πράξιν).” SVF 3.687 = Diogenes Laertius 7.130; trans. Long; see also SVF 3.125; *Nat. d.* 2.17. The importance of the Stoic influence remains in any case important and provides some corrective to Philo’s Platonism (especially with regard to Philo’s social ethics); see the excellent paper by G. Reydam-Schils, “Unsociable Sociability: Philo on the Active and Contemplative Life”, in *Pouvoir et Puissances chez Philon d’Alexandrie* (Monothéismes et Philosophie; Turnhout: Brepols, 2015) 305–18.

affinities. For the Stoics, the two models are somehow interchangeable, but this is not Philo's position, as we have already remarked. In his case, as the last text clearly shows, the practical and the theoretical activities aim at different goals. For the same reason, Philo's position cannot be completely identified with the one adopted by some leading Platonists of the period either. With Platonists, Philo shared the emphasis on the divine and transcendent model, which grounds the contemplative life. But like Stoics, several Platonists (think for instance of Plutarch or Apuleius) appear to insist on the interchangeability of the two lives.⁷ In Apuleius, as in Plutarch, contemplation is the basis for moral and political action. This does not seem to be the case in the texts of Philo that we cited above. For this reason, Joly was pointing in the direction of the Peripatetic model (which he wrongly presented as the only available model). Contemplation and action are two distinct activities. But neither does this option aptly describe Philo's view, as the comparison with Peripatetic doxography attributed to Arius Didymus makes clear:

The good person will choose the way of life that involves virtue, whether he is at some time in a position of leadership, the time inducing him [to this], or if it is not necessary to be the courtier of some king or to engage in politics in some other way. If he is not involved in these, he will turn to the way of life of ordinary people or to that of a teacher. He will choose both to do and to contemplate noble things (πράττειν καὶ θεωρεῖν τὰ καλὰ). If he is prevented by the state of the times, he will follow one of them, giving more honor to the life of contemplation, but involving himself in political actions because of his sense of community. [...] There are three types of lives, the practical, the theoretical and that composed by both. The life of enjoyment is subhuman, and the life of contemplation is preferred to the others. The good person will engage in politics as

⁷ "The end of wisdom is for the wise man to acquire the status of a god, and the subsequent task of taking on the activity of the gods by imitating their life. And indeed he will be able to achieve this if he proves himself to be a perfectly just, pious and intelligent man. So he ought to follow god not only in theoretical contemplation, but also in doing deeds which are approved of by gods and humans: for the supreme god not only attends to all this by rational thought, but works through it all, beginning, middle and end, knows it intimately, and governs it by the universal reach and stability of his providential government" (Apuleius, *Dogm. Plat.* 2.23); "Consider first that God, as Plato says, offers himself to all as a pattern of every excellence, thus rendering human virtue, which is in some sort an assimilation to himself, accessible to all who can 'follow God' (κατὰ Πλάτωνα πάντων καλῶν ὁ θεὸς ἑαυτὸν ἐν μέσῳ παράδειγμα θέμενος τὴν ἀνθρωπίνην ἀρετὴν, ἑξομοίωσιν οὖσαν ἀμωσγέπως πρὸς αὐτόν, ἐνδίδωσιν τοῖς ἔπασθαι θεῷ δυναμένοις)" [cf. Philo, *Decal.* 100]; "Indeed, this was the origin of the change whereby universal nature, disordered before, became a 'cosmos': it came to resemble after a fashion and participate in the form and excellence of God. The same philosopher says further that nature kindled vision in us so that the soul, beholding the heavenly motions and wondering at the sight, should grow to accept and cherish all that moves in stateliness and order, and thus come to hate discordant and errant passions and to shun the aimless and haphazard as source of all vice and jarring error; for man is fitted to derive from God no greater blessing than to become settled in virtue through copying and aspiring to the beauty and goodness that are his (οὐ γὰρ ὅ τι μείζον ἀνθρώπος ἀπολαύειν θεοῦ πέφυκεν ἢ τὸ μιμήσει καὶ διώξει τῶν ἐν ἐκείνῳ καλῶν καὶ ἀγαθῶν εἰς ἀρετὴν καθίστασθαι)" (Plutarch, *Sera* 550D–550E; see *Dion* 10.1–3).

a primary aim, not just in special circumstances; for the practical life is the same as the political (Arius *apud* Stobaeus, *Flor.* 2.7, 13 [trans. Sharples]).

As this Peripatetic doxography shows, the Aristotelian model implies the alternation of the two lives and the superiority of contemplative life over practical life.⁸ To be sure, this is what we also find in Philo. Philo's view, however, is also characterized by a different remarkable feature. In his case, action precedes contemplation. As many other texts make it abundantly clear, this is not without consequence. Practical life is a preparation for contemplation: practical life is important, but contemplative life is "different and more excellent" (ἕτερον καὶ ἀμείνω βίον). Practical life, therefore, is "a sort of prelude" (προάγωνά τινα), a preparation.⁹ Philo's position can therefore be better and further described as a qualified defense of the contemplative life.¹⁰ "What life is better than a contemplative life, or more appropriate to a rational being?" (*Migr.* 47).¹¹ (Moral) action remains obviously important, but its importance consists especially in its being a necessary precondition for contemplation.¹²

⁸ Other testimonies that can be paralleled with this doxography are Antiochus *apud* Augustine, *Civ.* 19.3 and Cicero, *Fin.* 5.58 (on Antiochus) and some pseudo-Pythagorean authors such as Ps.-Archytas, *Ethic. ed.* 42.5–9 Thesleff and *Sapient.* 44.16–19 Thesleff, or Ps.-Perictione, *Sapient.* 146.3–5 Thesleff.

⁹ Philo, *Fug.* 33, 36–38 (PLCL): (§33) "Truth would therefore rightly find fault with those who without full consideration give up the business and financial side of a citizen's life, and say that they have conceived a contempt for fame and pleasure. For they do not despise these things, they are practicing an imposture. [...] (§36) Begin, then, by getting some exercise and practice in the business of life both private and public; and when by means of the sister virtues, household-management and statesmanship, you have become masters in each domain, enter now, as more than qualified to do so, on your migration to a different and more excellent way of life (ἕτερον καὶ ἀμείνω βίον). For the practical comes before the contemplative life; it is a sort of prelude (προάγωνά τινα); and it is well to have fought it out first. By taking this course you will avoid the imputation of shrinking from it through sheer laziness. (§37) It was on this principle that the Levites were charged to perform their active service until the age of fifty, but, when released from their practical ministry, to make everything an object of observation and contemplation; receiving as a prize for duty well done in the active life a quite different way of life whose delight is in knowledge and studies of principles alone. (§38) And apart from this, it is of vital importance that those who venture to make the claims of God their aim and study should first have fully met those of men; for it is sheer folly to suppose that you will reach the greater while you are incapable of mastering the lesser. Therefore first make yourself familiar with virtue as exercised in our dealings with men, to the end that you may be introduced to that also which has to do with our relation to God." See also *QG* 4.47.

¹⁰ Winston, "Philo and the Contemplative Life", 222.

¹¹ See also Philo, *Ebr.* 83 (PLCL): "And what among all the blessings which the virtues give can be more perfect than the sight of the Absolutely Existent? He who has the sight of this blessing has his fair fame acknowledged in the eyes of both parents, for he has gained the strength which is in God and the power which avails among men."

¹² See also Philo, *Fug.* 39–52 and D.T. Runia, "The Reward for Goodness: Philo, *De vita contemplativa* 90", *SPhiloA* 9 (1997) 3–18 [FS David Winston], at 12: "because the Therapeutae have the ethos or moral disposition of self-control in relation to bodily desires, this allows them to devote all their time and energy to contemplative activity"; and again, at 13: "the former [moral excellence] is the foundation for the latter [contemplation]."

Remarkably, in the above-quoted text from *De decalogo* (a later work, representing Philo's mature thought on the subject), philosophy was said to consist in the contemplative activity only (*Decal.* 100). Insofar as the emphasis is on this idea of preparation, the consequence is therefore the progressive detachment and devaluation of the political life, which is often presented in a negative light, again unlike the Peripatetic tradition.¹³ This is a trend that will become more and more prominent in the following centuries.¹⁴ Contrary to what Joly argued, therefore, Philo's view turns out to be less banal than expected. The same conclusion will emerge also from a more careful examination of Philo's account of the contemplative life.

II. Philo on Contemplation

When we move to contemplation, Philo's relation with Platonism becomes more visible. This does not come as a surprise, given the common theological assumptions; and a predictable consequence is that Philo will also share some of the same problems Platonists were facing. An interesting confirmation of Plato's importance comes from an autobiographical passage from the third book of *De specialibus legibus*, where Philo emphatically defends his personal penchant for the contemplative life by quoting and alluding to the journey of the soul in the *Phaedrus*'s palinode.¹⁵

(§1) There was a time when I had leisure for philosophy and for the contemplation of the universe and its content (φιλοσοφία σχολάζων καὶ θεωρία τοῦ κόσμου καὶ τῶν ἐν αὐτῷ), when I made its spirit my own in all its beauty and loveliness and true blessedness, when my constant companions were divine themes and verities, wherein I rejoiced with a joy that never cloyed or sated. I had no base or abject thoughts nor groveled in search of reputation or of wealth or bodily comforts, but seemed always to be born aloft into the heights with a soul possessed by some God-sent inspiration, a fellow-traveler with the sun and the moon and the whole heaven and universe. (§2) Ah then I gazed down from the upper air, and straining the mind's eye beheld, as from some commanding peak, the multitudinous world-wide spectacles of earthly things, and blessed my lot in that I had escaped by main force from the plagues of mortal life. (§3) But, as

¹³ See for instance Philo, *Ios.* 28–34; *Mut.* 89–90; *Somn.* 2.47; with F. Calabi, *God's Acting, Man's Acting: Tradition and Philosophy in Philo of Alexandria* (SPhA 4; Leiden: Brill, 2008) 161–2.

¹⁴ See M. Bonazzi/F. Petrucci, "Definition und philosophische Systemstelle der platonischen Ethik", in H. Dörrie/M. Baltes/C. Pietsch (ed.), *Der Platonismus in der Antike. Band 8: Die philosophische Lehre des Platonismus: Die Ethik im antiken Platonismus der Kaiserzeit* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 2020) 2–21, 151–78.

¹⁵ See A. Méasson, *Philon d'Alexandrie et le mythe du Phèdre: images de Dieu et de l'homme* (PhD diss., University of Lyon, 1982); and eadem, *Du char ailé de Zeus à l'arche d'alliance: Images et mythes platoniciens chez Philon d'Alexandrie* (Collection des études augustinienes, série antiquité 116; Paris: Études augustinienes, 1986).

it proved, my steps were dogged by the deadliest of mischief, the hater of the good, envy, which suddenly set upon me and ceased not to pull me down with violence till it had plunged me in the ocean of civil cares, in which I am swept away, uneven to raise my head above the water. [...] (§5) And if unexpectedly I obtain a spell of fine weather, and a calm from civil turmoils, I get me wings and ride the waves and almost tread the lower air ... (*Spec.* 3.1–5, PLCL).

Again, also in this eloquent text, “philosophy” properly spoken amounts to contemplation. This is clearly the best and most desired activity,¹⁶ which also explains why Philo often speaks in praise of solitude and leisure.¹⁷ What remains to be reconstructed, however, is what the object of the contemplative activity is. In *Spec.* 3.1, Philo speaks of “the universe and its contents”. This led some scholars, most notably Émile Bréhier, to argue that Philo was referring to cosmological investigations (“la science du cosmos”), on the footsteps of the Hellenistic tradition.¹⁸ Indeed, Philo repeatedly associates contemplation and φύσις:

The Jews every seventh day occupy themselves with the philosophy of their fathers, dedicating that time to the acquiring of knowledge and the study of the truths of nature (ἐπιστήμη καὶ θεωρία τῶν περὶ φύσιν) (*Mos.* 2.216; see also *Her.* 213–214, 279; *Somn.* 2.186; *Contempl.* 90; *Mut.* 67–68).

But this is a misleading reading, as Valentin Nikiprowetzky has clearly shown. Philo’s interest in φύσις is not the same of the Hellenistic philosophers or the Peripatetics, as the case of Abraham opposing the Chaldeans clearly shows:

The Chaldeans were especially active in the elaboration of astrology and ascribed everything to the movements of the stars. They supposed that the course of the phenomena of the world is guided by influences contained in numbers and numerical proportions. Thus, they glorified visible existence, leaving out of consideration the intelligible and the invisible. [...] They concluded that the world itself was God. [...] In this creed Abraham had been reared, and for a long time remained a Chaldean. Then, opening the soul’s eye as though after a profound sleep, and beginning to see the pure beam instead of the deep darkness, he followed the ray and discerned what he had not beheld before, a charioteer and a pilot presiding over the world and directing in safety his own work. (*Abr.* 68–71; PLCL)¹⁹

¹⁶ Philo, *Somn.* 2.232.

¹⁷ Philo, *Abr.* 22–23; *Prob.* 63; *Spec.* 2.44; *Praem.* 17–19.

¹⁸ É. Bréhier, *Les idées philosophiques et religieuses de Philon d’Alexandrie* (Paris: Picard, 1950 [1908]) 294.

¹⁹ Again, it is interesting to note Philo’s references to the *Phaedrus*’ palinode.

The goal of contemplation is not so much knowledge of the secrets of nature as the understanding of metaphysical and theological truths.²⁰ Real nature is a divine nature, not the spectacle of planets and stars; and it is something that only our mind, not our senses, can grasp (“I bid you come and contemplate the universe and its contents, a spectacle apprehended [καταλαμβάνειν] not by the eye of the body but by the unsleeping eyes of the mind”),²¹ because the end of the journey, the goal of the contemplation is divine reality, and not the universe:

It was fitting, after the coming into being of the world, to establish the contemplative life in order that through a vision of the world and the things in it praise of the Father might also be attained. For it is not possible without wisdom to praise the Creator of all things. But as for the three of life in the midst of the garden it is knowledge, not only of things on the earth, but also of the eldest and highest cause of all things. For if anyone is able to obtain a clear impression of this, he will be fortunate and blessed and truly immortal. [...] For just as Plato said, the Creator is the greatest and best of causes, while the world is the most beautiful of created things. (QG 1.6, Marcus PLCL)

The parallels with Plato and Platonism are here evident. Like Plato’s philosophy, Philo’s thought turns out to be the science of the first cause.²² “For Philo, as for Plato in the *Phaedo*, the *Republic*, and many other dialogues, philosophy is an escape from the material world, an ascent whose end is the vision of Being and the feeling of its presence (‘une ascension dont le terme est la vision de l’Être et le sentiment de sa présence’).”²³ The importance of all this – the importance of reaching “knowledge of Him who truly is (ἐπιστήμην τοῦ ὄντως ὄντος)”²⁴ – becomes clear at the end of the journey, with happiness waiting those who have been able to contemplate, as Philo has stated at the end of the above text and will repeat in many other passages:

He to whom it is given not only to obtain knowledge of all the other aspects of nature, but also to see the Father and Maker of the universe,²⁵ will advance to the very peak of felicity (εὐδαιμονία). For nothing is higher than God, and he that has extended the eye of his soul to reach him should pray that he remains and stands firm in him (*Abr.* 58, trans. Runia; see also *Spec.* 1.345; *Decal.* 100, cited above).

²⁰ V. Nikiprowetzky, *Le commentaire de l'Écriture chez Philon d'Alexandrie: Son caractère et sa portée. Observations philologiques* (ALGHJ 11; Leiden: Brill, 1977) 103.

²¹ Philo, *Spec.* 1.49 (PLCL); see also *Her.* 75–80; *Opif.* 54–61; *Conf.* 95–97.

²² Philo, *Plant.* 22; *Conf.* 97; *Virt.* 65.

²³ Nikiprowetzky, *Le commentaire de l'Écriture*, 99.

²⁴ Philo, *Decal.* 81 (PLCL): “He wished to lead the human race, wandering in pathless wilds, to the road from which none can stray, so that following nature they might win the best of goals, knowledge of Him that truly is (ἐπιστήμην τοῦ ὄντως ὄντος), Who is the primal and most perfect good, from Whom as from a fountain is showered the water of each particular good upon the world and them that dwell therein.”

²⁵ A clear reference to Plato (*Tim.* 28c).

It is the same conclusion we read in the treatise about the Therapeutae, those who have embraced a life of contemplation:

Let this account suffice for the Therapeutae, who have embraced the contemplation (θεωρίαν) of nature and what it contains, and have lived a life of the soul alone, citizens of heaven and the cosmos, truly commended to the father and maker of the universe by their excellence, which has procured for them his friendship and set it before them as the most fitting reward for their goodness, a gift superior to all prosperity and attaining to the very summit of felicity (εὐδαιμονία) (*Contempl.* 90, trans. Runia; see also the above quoted text from *Decal.* 100).

The emphatic position of the references to happiness need not escape us, as Runia rightly remarks.²⁶ Indeed, these texts seem to confirm that Philo was not so much, or at least not only, defending the model of the mixed life. All in all, like Aristotle in the tenth book of the *Nicomachean Ethics* and many later Platonists, Philo seems to support the model of contemplative life as the best kind of life. And like the supporters of this model, he has now to face a problem, which was also distinctive of Platonism. Unlike the Stoics or the Epicureans (and later Plotinus, a remarkable exception), who attribute a divine status and by consequence a perfect happiness, to the sage,²⁷ Philo, as the other Imperial Platonists, must also acknowledge that God is not comprehensible and knowable. Pierluigi Donini has used the label of “metaphysical skepticism” to describe this problem in the Platonist tradition.²⁸ Philosophically, this

²⁶ D.T. Runia, “Eudaimonism in Hellenistic-Jewish Literature”, in J.L. Kugel (ed.), *Shem in the Tents of Japhet: Essays on the Encounter of Judaism and Hellenism* (Leiden: Brill, 2002) 131–57, at 139.

²⁷ See for instance Epicurus, *Ep. Men.* 10.135 (trans. Long/Sedley): “Practice these things [viz. Epicurus’s ethical teachings] and all that belongs with them, in relation to yourself by day, and by night in relation to your likeness, and you will never be disquieted, awake or in your dreams, but will live like a god among men. For quite unlike a mortal animal is a man who lives among immortal goods.” Cicero, *Leg.* 1.25 (= *SVF* 3.245, trans. Zetzel): “Virtue is the same in human and god, and it is found in no other species besides; and virtue is nothing than nature perfected and taken to its highest level.” Seneca *Ep.* 76.9–10 (= *SVF* 3.200a, trans. Long/Sedley): “What is best in man? Reason: with this he precedes the animals and follows the gods. Therefore perfect reason is man’s peculiar good, the rest he shares with animal and plants. [...] What is the peculiar characteristic of a man? Reason – which when right and perfect makes the full sum of human happiness. Therefore, if everything, when it has perfected its own good, is praiseworthy and has reached the end of its own nature, and man’s own good is reason, if he has perfected reason, he is praiseworthy and has attained the end of his nature. This perfect nature is called virtue and it is identical to rectitude.” Cf. also Seneca, *Ep.* 92.3: “The wise man’s mind should be such as befits god.” Plotinus, *Enn.* 1.2[19].6.1–3 and 6.9[9].9.59–60 (trans. Armstrong): “There is no sin in anything of this sort for a man, but only right action. Our concern, though, is not to be out of sin, but to be god”; “There one can see both him and oneself as it is right to see: the self-glorified, full of intelligible light – but rather itself pure light – weightless, floating, free, having become – but rather being – a god.”

²⁸ See P. Donini, “Lo scetticismo accademico, Aristotele e l’unità della tradizione platonica secondo Plutarco”, in G. Cambiano (ed.), *Storiografia e dossografia nella filosofia antica* (Torino: Tirrenia Stampatori,

is an interesting attempt to steer a middle course between dogmatism and radical skepticism, that both dominated the Hellenistic centuries, in a new context in which transcendence plays a major role. However, the acknowledgment that God and divine reality is beyond our epistemic reach does not go without consequence in the quest for happiness. For by admitting God's incomprehensibility Philo runs into a very delicate problem, which risks questioning the validity of the claim that the contemplative life is the best life. If happiness depends on knowledge and contemplation, but contemplation does not give us the knowledge we are striving for, the conclusion seems to be that the contemplative life is not the life we need in order to live a happy life. Even worse, given that Philo has already assumed that practical and political life are not the solution either, the problem of happiness – and of what a happy life consists in – seems to remain unanswered.²⁹

The extent of Philo's skepticism has been the object of much important research in the last decades. It is indeed difficult to assess how deep was his knowledge of skeptical arguments, as they were developed in the Hellenistic Academy and by the new Pyrrhonian supporters of a more radical version of it.³⁰ Even more complicated is to distinguish between this tradition and the implicit scepticism which can be extracted by Plato's metaphysics and the theological traditions. Be that as it may, what appears is that Philo's sceptical doubts appear to be much wider than usually expected, and they concern both the sensible and the intelligible, divine, realm. The ever-changing, fluid, nature of the sensible world sets clear limits to the scientific claim to obtain an exact knowledge of the universe.³¹ What remains are only conjectures: "The history of philosophy is full of discordance, because truth flees from the credulous mind which deals in conjecture. It is her nature to elude discovery and pursuit, and it is this which in my opinion produces these scientific quarrelings." (*Her.* 246–248, PLCL).

1986) 203–26; F. Ferrari, "Plutarco e lo scetticismo ellenistico", in A. Casanova (ed.), *Plutarco e l'età ellenistica* (Studi e testi 24; Florence: Università degli studi di Firenze, 2005) 369–84.

²⁹ Interestingly, this will be also a major difficulty for Thomas Aquinas, who was on his turn engaged in the attempt of reconciling Greek philosophy and the religious dogma of God's unknowability, see for instance R. Imbach and I. Fouche, *Thomas d'Aquin, Boèce de Dacie. Sur le bonheur: textes introduits, traduits et annotés par R.I. et I.F.* (Paris: J. Vrin, 2005).

³⁰ See C. Lévy, "Le 'scepticisme' de Philon d'Alexandrie: une influence de la Nouvelle Académie?", in A. Caquot/M. Hadas-Lebel/J. Riaud (ed.), *Hellenica et Judaica: Hommage à Valentin Nikiprowtzky* (Paris: Peeters, 1986) 29–41 on the Academy; C. Lévy, "Deux problèmes doxographiques chez Philon d'Alexandrie: Posidonius et Enésidème", in A. Brancacci (ed.), *Philosophy and Doxography in the Imperial Age* (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 2005) 79–102 on Aenesidemus, with further bibliography. The most important text for Philo's influence by scepticism is, as well known, *Ebr.* 166–205.

³¹ See for instance Philo, *Her.* 224, 246–248; *Somn.* 1.21–24; *Aet.* 1–2; See Nikiprowtzky, *Le commentaire de l'Écriture*, 186–7 and D.T. Runia, *Philo of Alexandria and the Timaeus of Plato* (PhA 44; Leiden: Brill, 1986) 122–30.

As with regard to God, the most important problem, it is simply impossible for a finite being and a finite mind to grasp its infinite perfection and power.³² Any attempt to know God is inevitably doomed to fail:

“God is not like a human being” (Num 23:19; cf. *Deus* 53), he is not even the sky, nor the cosmos. These last are forms of a particular kind which present themselves to our senses. But he is not apprehensible even by the mind (οὐδὲ τῷ νῷ καταληπτός), save in the fact that He is. For it is His existence which we apprehend, and of what lies outside that existence nothing. (*Deus* 62, PLCL)

This is a key theme in Philo’s meditation, and the conclusion is always the same.³³ It is not possible for human beings to see God as He really is, because God is “incomprehensible” (ἀκατάληπτος), “unnameable” (ἀκατονόμαστος), and “unspeakable” (ἄρρητος). “The problem is that full knowledge of who God is cannot be received by the powers of human intellect. It would be overwhelmed, as happens to those high-flyers who ascend to the heavens and find their eyesight darkened by the brightness of the celestial light.”³⁴ How to reach the goal of a happy life, then, if knowledge is prevented? As a matter of fact, Philo has a possible solution to the problem, which can help us to better understand his idea of the contemplative life.

Needless to say, the solution, or part of the solution, are Moses and Scripture.³⁵ Man is uncertain, a doubter by nature; one may, in the sceptic way, describe how opinions differ and dash. But sceptical ἐποχή (suspension of judgment) is not acceptable, because a decision is needed. Such a decision is made possible by God through his oracles as taken down by Moses. Indeed, Philo distinguishes between philosophical knowledge, which, as we have seen, has a limited reach, and a higher kind of knowledge, which God revealed to a privileged few, Moses most notably.³⁶ “Moses, through divine assistance attained the highest possible knowledge available

³² Philo also raises doubts about our capacity to know transcendent ideas; see D.T. Runia, “The Beginning of the End: Philo of Alexandria and Hellenistic Theology”, in D. Frede/A. Laks (ed.), *Traditions of Theology: Studies in Hellenistic Theology, its Background and Aftermath* (PhA 89; Leiden: Brill, 2001) 281–316, at 302.

³³ See for instance Philo, *Spec.* 1.32–50; 3.97–100; *Post.* 13, 168; *Praem.* 40; with Runia, “The Beginning of the End”, 299–305.

³⁴ Runia, “The Beginning of the End”, 301, mentioning *Spec.* 1.37, 43–44.

³⁵ See J. Mansfeld, “Philosophy in the Service of Scripture: Philo’s Exegetical Strategies”, in J. Dillon/A.A. Long (ed.), *The Question of ‘Eclecticism’: Studies in Later Greek Philosophy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988) 94–102.

³⁶ See for instance Philo, *Opif.* 8. Not even Moses, however, can reach an exhaustive knowledge in any field. In many areas of scientific inquiry absolute knowledge cannot be reached; so *Sacr.* 136; *Fug.* 161. This idea of a superior knowledge divinely revealed might suggest an opposition between a theological and a philosophical approach. But the same idea, and the identification between philosophy and theology (knowledge of God being the goal of the philosophical investigation) was widespread also among pagan philosophers; see for instance Mansfeld, “Philosophy in the Service of Scripture”, 84–9.

to men and he enclosed this knowledge in the Pentateuchal books, where it is then accessible to the initiate reader.”³⁷ This plays a decisive role also for the other human beings, who are not like Moses, but who can follow his lead by studying his texts. The teachings of Scripture are decisive for the clarification of the epistemic conflicts. As it turns out, given the importance of the relation between Moses and Scripture, the contemplative life has now a direct object of investigation, which is not anymore God and the divine reality directly, but God as He appears in these texts. Contemplation is resolved in exegesis. As Francesca Calabi rightly remarks, “*theorein* is exegesis; contemplative life is study”.³⁸ This search, however, it needs be added, cannot exhaust the problem of knowledge, because exegesis has its own limits in decoding the wisdom contained in these books and the infinite richness of the divine truth remains beyond a complete reach.³⁹ The exegetical activity is always provisional. But this unending quest is not, like in the case of skepticism, the search of those who are completely in the dark.⁴⁰ Exegesis, on the contrary, becomes the tool to explore this richness, which explains why the very seeking in itself, “even without finding, is felicity in itself”.⁴¹ Again, this is exemplarily demonstrated by the life of the Therapeutae:

They read the Holy Scriptures and apply themselves to their ancestral philosophy by means of allegory, since they believe that the words of the literal texts are symbols of a hidden nature, revealed through its underlying meanings. They have also writing of men of old, who were the founders of their sect and left behind many tutorials of the type of treatment employed in allegory, and taking these as a sort of archetype they imitate the method of this principle of interpretation. And so they not only apply themselves to contemplation, but also compose chants and hymns to God in all kinds of

³⁷ D.T. Runia, “Redrawing the Map of Platonism: Some Comments on the Philonic Evidence”, in A. Caquot/M. Hadas-Lebel/J. Riaud (ed.), *Hellenica et Judaica: Hommage à Valentin Nikiprowetzky* (Paris: Peeters, 1986) 85–104, at 99.

³⁸ Calabi, *God’s Acting, Man’s Acting*, 159.

³⁹ See, e.g., Philo, *Opif.* 72; *Cher.* 55; *Decal.* 18; with Nikiprowetzky, *Le commentaire de l’Écriture*, 190–1.

⁴⁰ C. Lévy, “De l’épochè sceptique à l’épochè transcendante: Philon d’Alexandrie fondateur du fidéisme”, in A. I. Bouton-Touboul/C. Lévy (ed.), *Scepticisme et religion: Constantes et évolutions de la philosophie hellénistique à la philosophie médiévale*, (Monothéismes et Philosophie 21; Turnhout: Brepols 2016) 57–73, at 72.

⁴¹ Philo, *Spec.* 1.36, 39–40 (PLCL): “As for the divine essence, though in fact it is hard to track and hard to apprehend, it still calls for all the inquiry possible. For nothing is better than the search for the true God, even if the discovery of Him eludes human capacity, since the very wish to learn, if earnestly entertained, produces untold joys and pleasures. So then just as, though we do not know and cannot with certainty determine what each of the stars is in the purity of its essence, we eagerly persist in the search because our natural love of learning makes us delight in what seems probable, so too, though the clear vision of God as he really is denied us, we ought not relinquish the quest. For the very seeking, even without finding, is felicity in itself.”

meters and melodies, which they perform indite in rather solemn rhythms" (*Contempl.* 28–29; trans. Winston; see also *Contempl.* 75–78).⁴²

III. Provisional Conclusions

Over the years, some scholars, for instance Walther Völker, have denied that Philo's idea of happiness, and therefore contemplation, is of Greek origin: "Thus in the end *eudaimonia* flows together with immortality, and it is identical with standing steadfast, with joy, with peace, with repose. These are merely descriptions for the attitude of the pious person, who dedicates himself fully to God. This has nothing to do with the Greek conception of *eudaimonia*."⁴³ As a matter of fact, in spite of the undeniable importance of the scriptural tradition, Philo's views are not different from the Hellenistic and Platonist accounts.⁴⁴ They somehow reflect the same exigencies and goals; but they also stand out for the originality of some of the solutions. The importance of the exegetical practice was one of the most distinctive features of almost all the most important philosophical schools of the time. The common and shared assumption was that exegesis was so important because truth was hidden in the words of the past masters. Within this context, Philo could therefore exploit with great success the role of Moses as mediator of the divine truth, much more than Platonists and Peripatetics could do with Plato or Aristotle. There is also a second point which is worth noticing. Unlike the majority of contemporary philosophers, Philo never pretends to be able – or that it was even possible – to organize the results of the exegetical investigation into a perfect system.⁴⁵ This was the philosophers' ambition and their limit, if one considers their unending debates on what system was

⁴² See Runia, "Reward for Goodness", 16: "The Therapeutae are called 'citizens of heaven and the cosmos'. At dawn they greet the rising sun and pray for a day full of light (§89, cf. §27). But this is meant symbolically. What they actually contemplate – during the week in their monastic cells (§25), on the Shabbat in their general assembly (§30–33), and as fixed parts of their Pentecostal feast (§§75–79) – are the text and doctrines of the Jewish Scriptures, together with ancient expository writings which included allegorical interpretation (§29). Contemplation of this kind is a concrete expression of their piety and reinforces the goodness which gains them the friendship of God as reward and prize." On the Therapeutae, see F. Calabi, *God's Acting, Man's Acting*, 171–81 with further bibliography.

⁴³ W. Völker, *Fortschritt und Vollendung bei Philo von Alexandrien: eine Studie zur Geschichte der Frömmigkeit* (TUGAL 49; Leipzig: J. C. Hinrich, 1938) 344–5 (I use Runia's translation).

⁴⁴ Needless to say, this does not imply that Philo has to be understood as simply belonging to the world of Greek philosophical debates. For a proper understanding of his thought, as well as his relation to the Jewish tradition, needs to be taken into account; see, e.g., Runia, "Eudaimonism", 147–57, to whose remarks I fully subscribe.

⁴⁵ See Nikiprowetzky, *Le commentaire de l'Écriture*, 183–92, on this important point.

more perfect with all what follows for the problem of truth.⁴⁶ Philo, like his Therapeutae, found a more brilliant and viable solution by celebrating the power of researching more than finding. As he reveals when talking *in propria persona*, it was a life worth pursuing:

I feel no shame in describing my own experience, a thing I know from its having occurred numberless times. On occasion, after deciding to follow the standard procedure of writing on philosophical doctrines and knowing precisely the elements of my composition, I have found my understanding sterile and barren and have abandoned my project without results. [...] At other times I have come empty and have suddenly become full, the ideas descending like snow, so that under the impact of divine possession I had been filled with Corybantic frenzy and become ignorant of everything, place, people present, ideas, and enjoyment of light, sharp-sighted vision, exceedingly distinct clarity of objects, such as might occur through the eyes as the result of the clearest display. (*Migr.* 34–35)⁴⁷

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⁴⁶ See for instance Cicero, *Fin.* 3.74; Albinus, *Eis.* 149.13–14; Attic. Frag. 1 des Places with P. Donini, “Testi e commenti, manuali e insegnamento: la forma sistematica e i metodi della filosofia in età postellenistica”, in *ANRW* 2.36.7 (1994) 5027–100, esp. 5027–35.

⁴⁷ On this treatise, see M.R. Niehoff/R. Feldmeier (ed.), *Abrahams Aufbruch: Philon von Alexandria, De migratione Abrahami* (SAPER 30; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017) 12–13.

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