

# Philo of Alexandria: Holiness as self-possession and self-transcendence

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Philo's writings can be seen as a crucial link between Hellenistic Judaism and early Christianity, particularly in his way of drawing on Greek philosophy in reading the scriptures. Pierre Hadot has pointed out how Graeco-Roman philosophy was seen at that time as a practical subject aiming at the care of self in its twofold movement of interiorisation and exteriorisation. This article explores how Philo draws on these aspects of philosophy to articulate his Jewish understanding of the journey towards perfection or holiness.

## Introduction

'The history of Christian philosophy begins not with a Christian, but with a Jew, Philo of Alexandria'. This statement made by Chadwick (1967:133), which has been quoted several times in a number of publications, draws attention to the importance of Philo in the development of early Christian reflection. Philo's philosophical endeavour takes the form of a reading of the Jewish scriptures, reflected upon through the lens of both contemporary Jewish thought and Greek philosophy. Philo was particularly interested in the Stoic and Platonic traditions insofar as they reflected on the 'good life'. His understanding of progress in the good life as well as his use of philosophy to explore these must be situated within a firm commitment to the God of his ancestors. David Winston (1988) concludes his study on Philo and the contemplative life in these words:

We may thus conclude that Philo was certainly a 'mystical theorist' (if not a practicing mystic) to his very core and that his philosophical writings cannot be adequately understood if this signal fact is in any way obscured. (p. 226)

Philo's philosophical reading of the scriptures must be seen, therefore, as a 'spiritual' reading, as a 'searching of the Scriptures' in order to become more attuned to God and to imitate God (Decock 2015a). Philo was convinced that certain Greek philosophical insights were very helpful to articulate these questions for his own Hellenistic Jewish context. This practical and religious scope of philosophy should not surprise us because such an understanding of philosophy was very common in Graeco-Roman times, as Pierre Hadot (1995) has so well shown. Furthermore, Philo was not hostile to Greek culture as many later rabbis were. Like many before him, Philo was critically open to the wisdom available in the surrounding cultures. The older Hebrew Wisdom teachers, for instance, had no qualms incorporating wisdom sayings from the surrounding cultures into their collections (see Pr. 22:17–23:11, based on the Egyptian maxims of Amenemophis). Philo himself was quite confident that whatever valuable insights he found in the writings of the Greek philosophers must have come from one and the same divine source, the Logos.<sup>1</sup> We may accept that Philo read the philosophers in a critical way and from a committed Jewish position.<sup>2</sup> This is confirmed by the fact that Philo and the church fathers who followed him viewed the encyclical subjects and philosophy as handmaids in interpretation of the scriptures and in their view of the educational process (Decock 2015b:11–21; Wolfson 1968:1, 17–27).<sup>3</sup>

1. In his *Life of Moses* (1:21), Philo presents Moses as someone instructed in the wisdom of the Egyptians and the Greeks: 'But in a short time he surpassed all their knowledge, anticipating all their lessons by the excellent natural endowments of his own genius; so that everything in his case appeared to be a recollecting rather than a learning, while he himself also, without any teacher, comprehended by his instinctive genius many difficult subjects' (*Mos.* 1:21). All translations from the works of Philo have been taken from BibleWorks 9 (BibleWorks 2011). As Ramelli (2012:5) points out: 'Philo was so deeply persuaded that the Mosaic Scripture and Platonism were inspired by the same Logos as to insist that Scripture actually expounded the famous Platonic doctrine of the Ideas, especially in Ex 33:18 (which he interprets in *Spec.* 1.41.45–48) and 25:40, as is clear from *QE* 2.83 and *Mos* 2.74–76'. See also Aristoboulos (according to Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* 1,72:4; V,97:7).

2. Winston (1988:199–201) stresses the ambivalence and tension in Philo's work between his Hellenic education and his Jewish heritage: My own view is that Philo's primary education was Hellenic, as a result of which he was transformed into an ardent Platonist, but that at some stage in his career he decided to make a grand effort to obtain as detailed a knowledge of his Jewish heritage as he could manage, and that subsequently he resolved to concentrate all his energies on the task of harmonising his ancestral faith with his philosophical world view (p. 199).

3. Trigg (2001:45) has collected some texts illustrating Origen's critical and selective use of Greek philosophy: 'Origen advised his students not to pay attention ... to any one person, but to pay attention only to God and to his prophets' (p. 45).

**Note:** The references to the works of Philo use the standard abbreviations (see Alexander *et al.* 1999:78).

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The first part of this article draws attention to the fact that Graeco-Roman philosophy can be understood to a large extent as spirituality. In the second part we discuss how, according to Hadot, in Graeco-Roman philosophy the true self emerges through a process of both interiorisation and universalisation. The third part shows how these two movements are also crucial in Philo's understanding of progress towards perfection or holiness.

## Ancient philosophy as spirituality

The work of Pierre Hadot (1995) helps us to appreciate that the understanding of philosophy has changed over the centuries and that what we now commonly understand as philosophy is not what was meant by Philo and the Graeco-Roman philosophers in general.<sup>4</sup> Hadot has shown how ancient philosophers read texts not merely in order to know what the text was saying but in order to practise in life what they read. Philosophy was all about transforming the self in order to reach the good life, freedom and happiness. Ancient philosophers were not merely 'grammarians' who focused only on 'texts and notions' about the good life but persons who aimed to realise in their lives and experience the 'realities' to which these texts and notions pointed. What was important is to learn to live 'a life according to Intellect' by means of spiritual training (Hadot 1995:29). It is significant that the subtitle of the English edition of a collection of Hadot's essays reads, *Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*. It is one thing to be able to articulate knowledge about the good life; it is another thing to exercise in order to experience it. The way to this experience is that of 'the spiritual exercises of purification, of the practice of the virtues, of putting ourselves in order' (Davidson 1995:28).<sup>5</sup> In the course of Western history, philosophy was stripped of this crucial aim and reduced to providing theology with 'conceptual – and hence purely theoretical – material' (Hadot 1995:107). One can see how in the Christian West the original aim of philosophy was taken over first by theology and later on more specifically by a branch of theology, spirituality.<sup>6</sup>

4. A similar view is expressed by Martha C. Nussbaum (1994) when she looks at Hellenistic philosophy as a therapy of desire. Philosophy is about how to live one's life.

5. On the contemporary need for a philosophical approach to spirituality, see the article by Grosch 2000:

The purpose of this paper is to provide the groundwork for a formal philosophical justification of the study of spirituality as a necessary co-requisite to the study of education. Consequently, much of the paper makes little direct reference to children's spirituality as such; instead it argues that spirituality per se is bound up with the education of self and personhood, irrespective of whether one is a child or an adult. Following MacIntyre's critique of morality, I contend that spiritual discourse and practice have become so fragmented as to be virtually meaningless; I maintain, therefore, that spirituality is an area ripe for, but largely neglected by philosophical inquiry. Drawing on the work of Hadot I argue for a reassessment of the importance of the spiritual exercises favoured by the four major philosophical schools of antiquity. (Abstract from author)

6. Since its inception, Christianity presented itself as a *philosophia*, insofar as it assimilated into itself the traditional practices of spiritual exercises. We see this occurring in Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Augustine, and monasticism. With the advent of medieval Scholasticism, however, we find a clear distinction drawn between *philosophia* and *theologia*. Theology became conscious of its autonomy *qua* supreme science, while philosophy was emptied of its spiritual exercises which, from now on, were relegated to Christian mysticism and ethics. Reduced to the rank of a "handmaid of theology," philosophy's role was henceforth to furnish theology with conceptual – and hence purely theoretical – material. When in the modern age, philosophy regained its autonomy, it still retained many features inherited from this medieval conception. In particular, it maintained its purely theoretical character, which even evolved in the direction of a more and more thorough systematisation. Not until Nietzsche, Bergson, and existentialism does philosophy consciously return to being a concrete attitude, a way of life and of seeing the world' (Hadot 1995:107–108).

## Ancient philosophy as a journey towards both interiorisation and self-transcendence

Michel Foucault was inspired by the work of Hadot on philosophy and the spiritual exercises and developed it in his own way in the direction of the 'care of self'. However, Hadot did not agree with Foucault's one-sided individualising of the care of self. He insisted that the development of the self or the process of interiorisation was seen as needing to go hand in hand with an exteriorisation in the sense of 'participating' in 'nature', entering into communion with 'universal reason'. In other words, the kind of care of self called for in ancient Greek philosophy was such that it would enable the persons to transcend their individual selves in order to live in harmony with nature and participate in universal reason (Davidson 1995:24–26; Hadot 1995:206–213). Hadot's own summary of his comments on Foucault clearly makes the point:

To summarise: what Foucault calls 'practices of the self' do indeed correspond, for the Platonist as well as for the Stoics, to a movement of conversion toward the self. One frees oneself from exteriority, from personal attachment to exterior objects, and from the pleasures they may provide. One observes oneself, to determine whether one has made progress in this exercise. One seeks to be one's own master, to possess oneself, and to find one's happiness in freedom and inner independence. I concur on all these points. I do think, however, that this movement of interiorisation is intrinsically linked to another movement, whereby one rises to a higher psychic level, at which one encounters another kind of exteriorisation, another relationship with 'the exterior'. This is a new way of being-in-the-world, which consists in becoming aware of oneself as part of nature, and a portion of universal reason. At this point, one no longer lives in the usual, conventional human world, but in the world of nature. As we have seen above, one is then practicing 'physics' as a spiritual exercise...

In this way, one identifies oneself with an 'Other': nature, or universal reason, as it is present within each individual. This implies a radical transformation of perspective, and contains a universalist, cosmic dimension, upon which, it seems to me, M. Foucault did not sufficiently insist. Interiorisation is a going beyond oneself; it is universalisation. (Hadot 1995:211)

The interaction of interiorisation and universalisation in philosophy becomes clearer when one considers the three major divisions of philosophy according to the Stoics: ethics, physics and logic. In this approach, *ethics* cannot be isolated from *physics* and *logic*. Although we can distinguish them when we discuss philosophy, when we live philosophy the one cannot perform without the others; in other words ethics, physics and logic are inseparable. *Physics* is important in as far as it introduces that cosmic and universalist dimension that challenges the individual to see him- or herself in that broader framework and hence to act and relate in harmony with nature and reason. *Physics* provides an *ethical and spiritual* framework that both calls for interiorisation and goes beyond the self towards participation in nature and reason.

## Philo's use of philosophy to articulate the way to holiness<sup>7</sup>

When we turn to Philo, we can see how he recognises these same three divisions of philosophy, but he evaluates them and reinterprets them according to his own Jewish sensitivity.<sup>8</sup> He downplays logic (which for the Stoics included rhetoric and dialectic) and he subordinates physics to ethics in the sense that the study of physics must bear fruit in an ethical life.<sup>9</sup> It must be noted that for Philo the study of physics remained very fundamental but it was based on a midrashic interpretation of the first chapters of Genesis (Nikiprowetzky 1965:150). It focuses on God as the creator of the universe. The appropriate outcome of the study of physics is therefore an ascent from the world of the senses to the intelligible world, an ascent from the created to the creator. Contemplating God at work in creation is a means to model one's life after that of God. In this way, physics is meant to bear fruit in an ethical life, understood as one aspect of the imitation of God.

We can recognise in Philo's approach to human progress elements of the dual movement of progress that Hadot has pointed out in Graeco-Roman philosophy: towards interiorisation in the sense of rationality and freedom and towards universalisation in the sense of a life in harmony with nature and in imitation of God.

### The movement of interiorisation

What this movement entails is briefly described by Hadot:

One frees oneself from exteriority, from personal attachment to exterior objects, and from the pleasures they may provide. One observes oneself, to determine whether one has made progress in this exercise. One seeks to be one's own master, to possess oneself, and to find one's happiness in freedom and inner independence. (Hadot 1995:211)

One of the key arguments developed by Hadot (see Hadot 1995:81–144) in order to illustrate the character of Graeco-Roman philosophy was to point to the programme of the 'spiritual exercises' (ἄσκησις)<sup>10</sup> developed by these

7. Philo often uses the word 'perfection' when exploring what we would call 'holiness'. The way to perfection, for Philo, can be considered as 'education' (see Decock 2015; Najman 2010). It was also common to look at philosophy using the image of healing (Maier 1994:723–724).

8. Philo writes about the Essenes:

and leaving the logical part of philosophy, as in no respect necessary for the acquisition of virtue, to the word-catchers, and the natural part, as being too sublime for human nature to master, to those who love to converse about high objects (except indeed so far as such a study takes in the contemplation of the existence of God and of the creation of the universe), they devote all their attention to the moral part of philosophy, using as instructors the laws of their country which it would have been impossible for the human mind to devise without divine inspiration. (*Prob.* 80)

9. See for instance *Mut.* 72–74:

for says he, On what account dost thou investigate the motions and periods of the stars? And why hast thou bounded up so high from the earth to the heavens? Is it merely that you may indulge your curiosity with respect to those matters? And what advantage could accrue to you from all this curiosity? What destruction of pleasure would it cause? What defeat of appetite? What dissolution of pain or fear? What eradication of the passions which disturb and agitate the soul? For as there is no advantage in trees unless they are productive of fruit, so in the same way there is no use in the study of natural philosophy unless it is likely to confer upon a man the acquisition of virtue, for that is its proper fruit. On which account some of the ancients have compared the discussion and consideration of philosophy to a field, and have likened the physical portion of it to the plants, the logical part to the hedges and fences, the moral part to the fruit. Compare Socrates in *Phaedr.* 229e (Courcelle 1974:17).

10. The verb ἀσκέω is used only once in the New Testament (NT), in Acts 24:16, with the sense of 'making effort, exercising, training, doing one's best'. In Xenophon it is

philosophers. It is striking that these exercises were taken over by Hellenistic Judaism and Philo; by Clement, Origen and the early Eastern monastic tradition; and eventually by the Western monastic tradition.<sup>11</sup> The aim of the exercises is to learn to live a life according to reason, not to be ruled by the passions and not to be restricted in one's horizon of understanding by the body, the senses or human language. These exercises are meant to transform the whole person and attune persons to right reason, to enable them to live in harmony with nature and to make them receptive to God.

Hadot points to two passages in the works of Philo that 'have the merit of giving us a fairly complete panorama of Stoico-Platonic inspired philosophical therapeutics' (1995:84). This last expression appropriately indicates that this approach to philosophy is aiming at the healing, transformation, perfection and, we may add, holiness of those who practise it.

The first text, *Who is the heir* (*Her.* 253), presents these exercises as wholesome food:

πάντα γὰρ τὰ τῆς ἀσκήσεως is wholesome food, whether it be research [ζήτησις], thorough investigation [σκέψις], reading [ἀνάγνωσις], listening [κρόασιάς], attention [προσοχή], self-mastery [ἐγκράτεια], indifference to indifferent things [ἐξαδιαφόρησις τῶν ἀδιαφόρων].

The second text, *Allegorical interpretation* (*Leg.* 3:18), focusses on the exercises as ways of dealing with the passions that attempt to enslave the soul:

Jacob, therefore, being an experienced man, that is to say, being mind [ὁ ἀσκητῆς οὖν Ἰακώβ νοῦς], when he sees passion low and powerless, abides it, thinking that he shall be able to subdue it by force: but when he beholds it high, and bearing its neck haughtily, and full of arrogance, then experienced mind [ὁ νοῦς ὁ ἀσκητῆς] flees first, and afterwards the other parts of his experience [τῆς ἀσκήσεως] do also flee, namely,

ἀναγνώσεις, reading,

μελέται, meditations,

θεραπείαι, therapies of the passions,

τῶν καλῶν μνήμαι, memory of good things,

ἐγκράτεια, self-mastery,

τῶν καθηκόντων ἐνέργειαι, the accomplishment of duties,

and so he crosses over the river of the objects affecting the outward senses, which wash over and threaten to submerge the soul by the impetuosity of the passions, and having crossed over he proceeds towards the high and lofty reason of perfect virtue. (*Leg.* 3:18)

'Exercise' was used already by the older Sophists as one of the three factors needed in the process of education: nature, learning and exercise. Philo also sees these three as the factors

(footnote 10 continues...)

used in the sense of training the body (Windisch 1964:494); in that sense it becomes a synonym for γυμνάζω (see the interesting text in 1 Tim 4:7: γύμναζε δὲ σεαυτὸν πρὸς εὐσεβείαν).

11. While most modern scholars stress the unlikelihood of a direct relationship between Philo's description of the Therapeutai and later monasticism, all would agree, that like Philo, Christian ascetics drew on themes (like renunciation from the world) which were common among philosophical writers of the first few centuries of our era (Aune 1994:139).



leading to perfection and in his reading of the biblical texts he associates these three with the three patriarchs: Abraham (learning), Isaac (nature) and Jacob (exercise).<sup>12</sup>

But, there being three leaders and authors of this race, the two at each extremity of it had their names changed, namely Abraham and Jacob: but the one in the middle, Isaac, always retained the same appellation. Why was this? Because both that virtue which is derived from teaching and that which is attained to by practice [ἡ μὲν διδασκτικὴ ἀρετὴ καὶ ἀσκητικὴ], admit of improvement and advancement: for the man who receives instruction desires a knowledge of those matters of which he is ignorant and he who applies himself to practice desires the crowns of victory, and the prizes which are proposed to his industrious and contemplation-loving soul. (*Mut.* 88)

Jacob is the model of the 'ascetic' person, the person who struggles, wrestles, exercises, inspired by Genesis 32:24–32. Abraham, on the other hand, is the one who develops by receiving instruction. Both are examples of progress and improvement. Abraham in Genesis 16:2 is an example of ἀκρόασις [listening] and προσοχὴ [attention]. Philo comments: 'For it is necessary for him who is a learner to be docile to the injunctions of virtue' (*Congr.* 63). However, this docility requires that one be 'inspired with an exceedingly vehement love (ἔρωσις) for knowledge' (*Congr.* 64).<sup>13</sup> The commentary continues with some examples of lack of genuine attention and concludes with a contrast between the Sophists, who only excel in beautiful talk, and the philosophers, who strive to act and do the best. True attention in the sense of the life of the philosophers aims at the practice of virtues (*Congr.* 67).

At this point in the commentary Philo switches to the example of Jacob, who represents learning through practice as 'imitating the lives of those men in their actions which are in each particular irreproachable' (*Congr.* 69).

Another spiritual exercise is 'learning how to die'. As Hadot (1995:93–101) remarks, even in the Graeco-Roman philosophies the theme of death as liberation from the body cannot be seen as a form of Gnostic rejection of the body. He interprets this liberation in a more nuanced way:

We can perhaps get a better idea of this spiritual exercise if we understand it as an attempt to liberate ourselves from a partial, passionate point of view – linked to the senses and the body – so as to rise to the universal, normative viewpoint of thought, submitting ourselves to the demands of the Logos and the norm of the Good. Training for death is training to die to one's individuality and passions, in order to look at things from the perspective of universality and objectivity. (pp. 94–95)

12. Alexandre (1967:128, n. 3) refers to a number of other texts where these three means of access to virtue are linked to the three patriarchs: *Sacr.* 5–7; *Conf.* 79–81; *Mut.* 12 and 88; *Praem.* 24 and 51; *Abr.* 52–56.

13. The place of ἔρωσις in Philo deserves more careful attention. On love enabling us to see the truth, see Osborne (1994:220): 'we would not see those objects as worthy of our devotion if we did not see them under the influence of love. In love they present themselves under an aspect that draws us to them and enables us to see the truth and what is worthy of our devotion'. According to Plotinus, love as activity [ἐνέργεια] tending towards the good is born of the sense of a lack of the good, the memory of the beautiful and the good caused by the *logoi*, and desire for the good (*Treatise* 50:9, 45–48; Hadot 1990:142, 248–249). For Philo, memory is replaced by prophecy (Wolfson 1968:2, 9–11, 22); however, according to Winston (2001:196), 'Philo did not need the Platonic doctrine of recollection, since for him the human mind was an inseparable fragment of the Divine Logos, and all that it required in order to attain to the intelligible Forms was the initial stimulus of sense-perception which formed a kind of gateway into them' (*Somm.* 1:187–188).

Human progress for Philo requires a similar movement of transcendence of the bodily senses, of the passions and of our human language, in order to be attuned to who God is in truth. In one text he explains this by drawing attention to Genesis 12:1 and explains Abraham's calling to move away from his *country* as a transcendence of the body, from his *kindred* as transcendence of the outward senses and from his *father's house* as transcendence of uttered speech (*Migr.* 7).

Abraham's 'leaving behind' must be taken as 'transcending' in the sense of not being constrained and limited by the body, by the external senses or by human language. These three are very valuable and may not be neglected; rather they need to be managed as a ruler manages his subjects:

But the command, 'Depart from them', is not like or equivalent to, Be separated from them according to your essence, since that would be the injunction of one who was pronouncing sentence of death. But it is the same as saying, Be alienated from them in your mind, allowing none of them to cling to you, standing above them all; they are your subjects, use them not as your rulers; since you are a king, learn to govern and not to be governed; *know yourself* all your life, as Moses teaches us in many passages where he says, 'Take heed to thyself'. [Exodus 34:12]. For thus you will perceive what you ought to be obedient to, and what you ought to be the master of (*Migr.* 7–8).<sup>14</sup>

In order to be able to govern oneself according to reason and to not be governed by the passions one needs to grow in Socratic self-knowledge:

For do not tell me long stories about the moon and the sun, and all the other things in heaven and in the world, which are at such a distance from us and which are so different in their natures, empty-minded creatures that you are, before you examine into and become acquainted with yourselves; for when you have learnt to understand yourselves, then perhaps one may believe you when you enter into explanations respecting other things. (*Migr.* 138)

The exercises aim not only at moral transformation but very importantly also at intellectual transformation. Abraham's journey from the region of the Chaldeans to the land of Haran is a model for intellectual progress. First of all, Abraham moves away from *opinion* to *sense perception*. Sense perception is valuable and necessary; this faculty needs to be appreciated like the encyclical arts but must be subordinated to the true knowledge:

Abandoning therefore your superfluous anxiety to investigate the things of heaven, dwell, as I said just now, within yourselves, forsaking the land of the Chaldaeans, that is, opinion, and migrating to Charran the region of the outward sense, which is the corporeal abode of the mind. (*Migr.* 187)<sup>15</sup>

14. The abandonment of each of these three is elaborated upon in the sections that follow: the body (*Migr.* 9), the external senses (pp. 10–11), speech (p. 12).

15. After that the mind, coming to a due consideration of itself, and studying philosophically the things affecting its own abode, that is the things of the body, the things of the outward sense, the things of reason, and knowing, as the line in the poet has it – That in those halls both good and ill are planned; [Homer, *Odyssey*, iv. 392] Then, opening the road for itself, and hoping by travelling along it to arrive at a notion of the father of the universe, so difficult to be understood by any guesses or conjectures, when it has come to understand itself accurately, it will very likely be able to comprehend the nature of God; no longer remaining in Charran, that is in the organs of outward sense, but returning to itself. For it is impossible, while it is still in a state of motion, in a manner appreciable by the outward sense rather than by the intellect, to arrive at a proper consideration of the living God (*Migr.* 195).

Although sense perception is important as the gateway to the intellectual world (*Somn.* 1:186–188), it should not be allowed to detain or distract us. The journey is meant to move us beyond the prison of the body, with as its guards the pleasures and desires of the body (*Migr.* 9), and beyond enslavement to sense perception (*Migr.* 10). This journey is understood as a reappropriation of oneself:

But if you choose to collect again those portions of yourself which you have lent away, and to invest yourself with the possession of yourself, without separating off any part of it, you will have a happy life, enjoying for ever and ever the fruit of good things which belong not to strangers but to yourself. (*Migr.* 11)

Besides the transcendence of the body and sense perception, there is also the need to transcend human language 'that you may not be deceived by the specious beauty of words and names, and so be separated from that real beauty which exists in the things themselves which are intended by these names' (*Migr.* 12).<sup>16</sup> The human words of the Torah are the gate to Logos, but only a gate.

### The movement of universalisation

Hadot describes the movement of universalisation as follows:

This is a new way of being-in-the-world, which consists in becoming aware of oneself as part of nature, and a portion of universal reason. ... In this way, one identifies oneself with an 'Other': nature, or universal reason, as it is present within each individual. (1995:211)

For Philo the aim of the whole education process leading towards human perfection is for the persons to live according to reason as manifested in nature and in the laws of Moses.<sup>17</sup> The 'Other' for Philo is the God of Moses. The ultimate perfection is to imitate God, to become like God, to live in love for God and not in self-love. Philo's comments on the commandment to celebrate the sabbath in *De Decalogo* 96–105 are very enlightening. God's activity during the 6 days of Genesis 1 is the model for one's 'active life', whereas God's rest and contemplation on the seventh day is the model for one's 'contemplative life':<sup>18</sup>

Is it not a most beautiful recommendation, and one most admirably adapted to the perfecting of, and leading man to, every virtue, and above all to piety? The commandment, in effect says: Always imitate God; let that one period of seven days in which God created the world, be to you a complete example of the way in which you are to obey the law, and an all-sufficient model for your actions. Moreover, the seventh day is also an example from which you may learn the propriety of studying philosophy; as on that day, it is said, God contemplated the

16. On the value and limitations of human language in Philo, see Niehoff 1995.

17. τὴν δὲ ἐπιστήμην καὶ φρόνησιν ὡς τελείαν καὶ δέσποιναν ἐκτετιμηκὰ (*Congr.* 154), beyond the stage of the encyclical subjects.

18. Jacob and the Essenes represent the active life, whereas Abraham and the Therapeutae represent the contemplative life. The contemplative life presupposes a stage of active life (*Fug.* 33–38). Satlow (2008), however, sees these two as different paths: 'Philo identifies philosophy and practice (*askesis*) as the two paths to human perfection' (p. 515).

works of nature, and all the separate circumstances which contribute towards happiness. (*Decal.* 100)<sup>19</sup>

Practising philosophy is particularly linked with the sabbath as a way of imitating God, who contemplated his works on the seventh day. Guided by the Torah, the created universe must be seen as a mirror in which the mind recognises an image of God's creative and caring involvement (*Decal.* 105). This study of 'physics' is meant to give guidance in the practice of the virtues; godliness, it should be noted, is the highest virtue.

Furthermore, this practice of philosophy on the sabbath is said to include particularly the exercise of self-examination:

[T]herefore, he commanded the beings also who were destined to live in this state, to imitate God in this particular also, as well as in all others, applying themselves to their works for six days, but desisting from them and philosophising on the seventh day, and devoting their leisure to the contemplation of the things of nature, and considering whether in the preceding six days they have done anything which has not been holy, bringing their conduct before the judgement-seat of the soul, and subjecting it to a scrutiny, and making themselves give an account of all the things which they have said or done; the laws sitting by as assessors and joint inquirers, in order to the correcting of such errors as have been committed through carelessness, and to the guarding against any similar offenses being hereafter repeated. (*Decal.* 98) (Italics mine.)

In other words, philosophising involves the practice of both physics and of ethics: contemplation of nature ('physics') in view of 'beholding God in this as in a mirror, acting, and creating the world, and managing the whole universe' (*Decal.* 105) and self-examination in view of moral growth ('ethics') towards a greater harmony with God and with nature. The goal of human life is seen as letting one's life become a reflection of the holiness of God as this was reflected in nature, of course guided in all of this by the writings of Moses.

Philo points out in various ways that human beings are intrinsically related to both the divine intellect and the universe:

Every man in regard of his intellect is connected with divine reason, being an impression of, or a fragment or a ray of that blessed nature; but in regard of the structure of his body he is connected with the universal world. (*Opif.* 146)

The laws that Moses proclaimed are intrinsically connected with the created universe and that is why Moses begins with an account of the creation of the universe:

And his exordium, as I have already said, is most admirable; embracing the creation of the world, under the idea that the law corresponds to the world and the world to the law, and that a man who is obedient to the law, being, by so doing, a citizen of

19. The text continues:

Let us not pass by such a model of the most excellent ways of life, the practical and the contemplative; but let us always keep our eyes fixed upon it, and stamp a visible image and representation of it on our own minds, making our mortal nature resemble, as far as possible, his immortal one, in respect of saying and doing what is proper (*Decal.* 101).

the world, arranges his actions with reference to the intention of nature, in harmony with which the whole universal world is regulated. (*Opif.* 3)

Being obedient to the law of God proclaimed by Moses is transcending one's isolation as an individual and entering into communion with nature. By following the laws of Moses one is actually following the law of nature.<sup>20</sup> The laws of Moses and the concrete example of the lives of the patriarchs as interpreted by Philo are drawing out what is already potentially given in people's 'reason':

a very short word, but a most perfect and admirable thing, a fragment of the soul of the universe, or, as it is more pious to say for those who study philosophy according to Moses, a very faithful copy of the divine image. (*Mut.* 223)

To the extent that people understand the universe as the manifestation of God and that they begin to see through the visible world the invisible realities of the unwritten laws and the qualities of God, they will sing hymns in praise of the world and its creator (*Her.* 110–111). The perfect life is to live in harmony with the laws of reason and of the universe, to live by the laws of Moses and to sing the praises of the universe and its creator. This last point, the practice of praise and thanksgiving to God the creator, deserves to be highlighted (compare *Leg.* 1:82).

Holiness or human perfection, for Philo, is imitation of God's perfection. Humans must understand that 'attaining a likeness to God who made them' is 'the proper end of their existence' (*Opif.* 144). This movement towards perfection is the fruit of total dependence on God, the source of all life. One text that inspires this insight is Jeremiah 2:13 (*Fug.* 197–199).<sup>21</sup> The perfect person is one who is receptive to God as the source of life; foolish persons are turned in on themselves. We find here the opposition between love of God and self-love (*Fug.* 81). This corresponds to the opposition between the love of virtue and the enslavement to vice.

Human perfection and holiness are ultimately not a state of individual self-possession but rather a state of complete receptivity before God, the source of true life. That is why Philo considers *φιλαντία*<sup>22</sup> as the worst of evils, as he explains:

[F]or some fancy that they are just conceiving, and others that they are actually pregnant, which is a very different thing; for those who think that they are already pregnant attribute their pregnancy and the birth of their offspring to themselves, and

20. See Najman 2010:261:

In other words, if read in accordance with Philo's instruction, the lives of the patriarchs and the laws of Moses turn out to be equivalent. Now, since the lives of the patriarchs embody the law of nature, it follows that the enacted laws of Moses also embody the law of nature. But this implies that the status of the laws of Moses, as copies of the laws of nature, would have remained unclear if not for the fact that the laws of Moses are situated within the context of the lives of the patriarchs and their descendants. Thus, the laws of Moses cannot be reduced to a code. They are expressions of the 'actual words and deeds' of sages.

Najman refers specifically to a passage in *Abr.* 5; see also *Decal.* 1:1, where Philo speaks of his accounts of the lives of Moses and the wise men before him as manifestations of the unwritten laws. With his comments on the Decalogue he begins his discussion of the written laws.

21. The images of the spring, the rain and the dew evoke the divine presence encompassing human beings: *Migr.* 30; *Fug.* 166 (see Alexandre 1967:238–239).

22. See Alexandre 1967:247.

pride themselves upon it; but those who look upon themselves as now conceiving, admit that they have of themselves nothing which they can call peculiarly their own, but they receive the seed and the prospects of posterity which are showered upon them from without, and they admire him who bestows it, and repel the greatest of evils, namely self-love, by that perfect good, piety. (*Congr.* 130)

Human perfection is a life according to right reason and harmony with nature, all of which is the fruit of grateful receptivity to God. It is crowned by praise and thanksgiving.

## Conclusion

The two-fold aim of Graeco-Roman philosophy as articulated by Hadot proves to be a useful grid to explore Philo's philosophical reading of the scriptures and his understanding of human perfection. Whereas the spiritual exercises may give the impression that Philo saw human perfection as a mere self-realisation project, they are really the work required from human persons to open up what is deepest (or highest) in them, human reason as a sharing in the divine intelligence. The process towards true self-possession is the work of letting go of the 'absolute claims' of the body, of sense perception and human language, in order to make them serve as means of receptivity to the divine mind and of harmony with nature. It is an 'exodus' from foolish self-love to a wise love of God, from words about God to the experience of the reality of God.

Philo sees all that human 'work' as a small contribution encompassed by the great work of God, who is the beginning and end of everything truly valuable:

The beginning of a plant is the seed, and the end is the fruit, each of them being the work, not of husbandry, but of nature. Again, of knowledge the beginning is nature, as has been shown, but the end can never reach mankind, for no man is perfect in any branch of study whatever; but it is a plain truth, that all excellence and perfection belong to one Being alone; we therefore are borne on, for the future, on the confines of beginning and end, learning, teaching, tilling the ground, working up everything else, as if we were really effecting something, that the creature also may seem to be doing something. (*Her.* 121)

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