



Ancient Philosophy

The Law of God and the Laws of the Cities in Philo of Alexandria

Francesca Calabi

University of Pavia and University of Ferrara

fcabali@csi.unimi.it

ABSTRACT: I evaluate the position of philosophy within Philo's theory of education as well as its relation to encyclical studies and to the highest forms of knowledge. According to Philo, true knowledge is knowledge of the law of God. Such is the role of philosophy. There exists a strong relation among the various fields of study reflecting the order that exists in all spheres of reality. Order and harmony are the same in an individual, in a state, and in the cosmos. Order and harmony reflects the law set down by God, who is both creator and foundation of such an order. The study of higher truth and the attempt to reach wisdom enlightens secular knowledge and behavior as well. The question is not merely one of maintaining political order; it is, rather, one of adhering to the order established by God. Such order is not open to discussion or alteration.

My aim is to study the position of philosophy within Philo's theory of education, its relation to encyclical studies and to the highest forms of knowledge. As true knowledge is the knowing of the law of God and all the studies should aim to transmit and explain it, philosophy gets its role within this view point. There is a strong relation among the various fields of study, as one and the same the order is in all the different spheres of reality. Order and harmony in an individual and in a state are the same as in the cosmos; they are the order and the harmony of the law set down by God, who is both creator and foundation of such order. So, one and the same the law is for an individual, for a state, for the cosmos.⁽¹⁾ Thus the study of higher truths and the attempt to reach wisdom enlightens also secular knowledge and behaviours.

There is no difference between unbalance within a city and within a soul; the first relies on the second and the transgression of the Law consists in abandoning the observance of divine word. It isn't only a question of knowing how to maintain a situation established by rulers or by individuals ethically engaged, but also of following an order and a law which come from God, which, as such, are not discussable and alterable. However, many peoples in the world don't relate to divine law. They follow their own rules which can be more or less good, but which, anyhow, don't conform with God's will. One is the design according

to which God created universe and established rules in the world,⁽²⁾ and even if the distance existing between divine law and human mind implies that men cannot aim to a complete knowledge of the cosmic harmony set by God, nor to a perfect imitation of it in the human sphere, subject to error and evil, however, men can try to follow divine law. The question is of knowing such law, and of teaching it.

In the following pages I will try to show:

- 1) that there are different paths to the attainment of truth and virtue, different forms of acquiring the knowledge of the Law, and that these forms are represented in different Biblical characters,
- 2) that these paths and forms are not hindered for men who can go through them, at least partially, often with the mediation of high characters,
- 3) that there is a strict relation among encyclical studies, philosophy, attainment of the higher truths, and that wisdom cannot be reached without all these steps,
- 4) that the search of truth implies felicity in itself.

1. *Different paths to the attainment of truth and virtue.* ***Relation with Biblical characters***

Examples of different paths towards virtue appear in relation with different Biblical characters. In particular, the Patriarchs received the Law, but while Abraham embodies the man who acquires virtue, Isaac received virtue directly by nature. They are the prototypes of the progressive man and of the perfect man and they constitute models for imitation, exactly as Moses who is not only the one who delivered the Law to men but also a man who teaches by his own way of acting.⁽³⁾ It is thus clarified that education is a combination of instruction, nature and practice and can take different paths, in particular listening and imitation. "To gaze continuously upon noble models imprints their likeness in souls which are not entirely hardened and stony. And therefore those who would imitate examples of good living so marvellous in their loveliness, are bidden not to despair of changing for the better"(*Praem.*114-115). The highest example of man who should be imitated is probably Moses who "set up himself and his own life as a well-wrought picture, a piece of work most beautiful and godlike, a model for those willing to copy it. Happy are they who imprint, or strive to imprint, that image in their souls" (*Mos.* I.158-59).

As A. Mendelson⁽⁴⁾ points out, "the most striking aspect of Moses' education was its "international" character. Instructors came from all over the civilized world; yet the actual disciplines studied are so reminiscent of those mentioned in Book VII of the *Republic* (522c ff.) that the Greek stamp of the studies is clear."

Abraham and Moses are a model for the others and teach them how to act. So imitation is one of the ways of acquiring virtue. Beside imitation, also other forms of education are described by Philo, first of all speech which can be a sophistic way of communication, but can also aim to truth. The acquisition of Abraham, anyhow, is connected with nature: "Abraham, then, filled with zeal for piety, the highest and greatest of virtues, was eager to follow God and to be obedient to His commands; understanding by commands not only those conveyed in speech and writing, but also those made manifest by nature with clearer signs [...] For anyone who contemplates the order in nature and the constitution enjoyed by the world-city [...] needs no speaker to teach him to practise a law-abiding and peaceful

life" (*Abr.* 60-61). We are here speaking of two different kinds of teaching, the one through the listening to the word, the other through signs. The distinction arises between listening and vision, as also the signs of nature become an object to be seen and grasped. Likewise, the imitation of which we spoke about the Patriarchs and Moses, models to others, is within the sphere of the vision. Now, vision can be of two kinds: the indirect vision of the shadow cast in the world by the Artificer in his works, and the clear vision of the First Cause Himself,⁽⁵⁾ vision which, anyhow, even if possible, is not for everybody.

As all the world is based upon the same order and upon the Law, however, men are not the only teachers in the world. Also nature can become a tool of education. An example of the teaching function of the nature and of the relation between cosmic and human order is given in the *De Vita Mosis* (1.113), where we find the punishments inflicted by Moses upon Pharaoh by means of nature,

"we have [...] to examine those which were administered by Moses himself, and to shew what were the parts of nature which went to their making. We find that air and heaven, the purest portions of the universe, took on the succession to earth and water in that admonition of Egypt which Moses was appointed to superintend" (transl. by F.H. Colson and G. H. Whittaker).

Such is the coherence among the human, cosmic, and divine orders that nature becomes a tool of admonition. It is moved by God, it isn't independent, but it changes its rhythm and its own rules: water becomes blood (*Mos.* 1.99), aquatic animals invade arid areas (*Mos.* 1.103), unusual phenomena interrupt natural cycles (*Mos.* 1.117-119). Whether God decides so, the order of the world is overthrown, and those same elements that God used for the formation of the universe become a tool for the ruin of the wicked men (*Mos.* I. 113).⁽⁶⁾ So, nature works hand in hand with God to restore an equilibrium among men and to teach justice and order (*Mos.* I.120). In the same way, speaking of Flaccus and of his sorrows, Philo shows the presence of the *pronoia*, the acting of punishments for Flaccus' wickedness, the violence of a death which has teaching value (*Flacc.* 124-126; 174; 189). At the background there is the notion of a universal harmony, of a cosmic balance based upon the Law. This one organizes the cosmos (*Opif.* 10;13), the relations between men and animals (*Opif.* 84), the human world (*Opif.* 69; 82) which is shaped and ordered by God according to a pattern created by him (*Opif.* 17-20).

2. In principle the forms of virtue are not hindered for men

The Law was given to Moses on Sinai, but operated even before then, in as much as the Patriarchs, *novmoi jevmyucoi*, were the living law, law endowed with reason.⁽⁷⁾ They demonstrate the coherence between human and natural rules and the possibility of following the written Law (*Abr.* 6).⁽⁸⁾ By their very way of life, according to the Law, even if it had not yet been revealed, the Patriarchs were a model guiding others, through persuasion, to a proper mode of personal conduct.⁽⁹⁾

Philo distinguishes among *novmo* "ejvmyuco", natural law which was transmitted by Moses, and particular laws of individual cities.⁽¹⁰⁾ Nations chose legislators and human laws; only Israel received its laws from God. Thus, Israel follows a steady and eternal order which is above human vicissitudes.⁽¹¹⁾ As the cosmos is from God, it is pervaded by order and harmony and all reality is organized following a structure which can be numerically read:⁽¹²⁾ proportion marks reality. There is, then, order within the cosmos and order within the human sphere which should accept the Law with its hierarchical setting.⁽¹³⁾ It is a hierarchy among men and, even before, a hierarchy of man over animals.⁽¹⁴⁾

In fact, all the cosmos is organized following an order and every creature has a particular position and role. Accepting Law means accepting its own position in the world, and this acceptance implies peace and equilibrium. There is a hierarchy within the cosmos and a hierarchy within the cities, such as there is a hierarchy in the generations, a decay since Adam, the first man. He is the primogenitor and he is also the only man for whom the world was his home, his town, his homeland.⁽¹⁵⁾

While for Adam there was just one order, human cities are based upon particular laws . These are quite different from natural law⁽¹⁶⁾ which is constructed upon harmony and equilibrium deriving from God.⁽¹⁷⁾

If for Stoicism the source of the law is traceable in reason, however, in Philo it is in God. For Stoicism natural and rational order set together, a life according to *logos* is a life according to nature.⁽¹⁸⁾ For Philo, the source of good is not nature but God, and the knowledge of the nature doesn't necessarily lead to virtue. However, the source of human good and of natural order is unique and "any discipline which orders phenomena in the physical universe may lead to knowledge of God from design."⁽¹⁹⁾ It isn't a question of knowing the science of nature, but the cosmic law as inscribed in the *Torah*.⁽²⁰⁾ Since there is a hiatus between universal and particular laws of the cities, however, it is necessary to have an intermediate, a man who can connect the two spheres because of his superiority,⁽²¹⁾ determined by his excellence.⁽²²⁾ It isn't a question of hereditary right, nor of wealth, but of virtue.⁽²³⁾ The emblematic character is Moses, who embodies all the dignities of a superior being, endowed with natural and acquired qualities (*Mos.* 1. 21-22). Man extremely handsome (I.9) he received the education and the cares of a king (I.8). He has a wide and rich culture, knowing encyclical sciences which he learnt from the Greeks, the assyrian language, astrology which was taught him by the Chaldeans, Judaic tradition (I.32).⁽²⁴⁾

The image of an ordered society ruled by a superior individual who brings God's law to the men is, of course, a sort of ideal model. Moses is the example of every virtue, display of the word of God, leader of the people, shepherd of the sheeps which he leads away from transgression (*Sacrif.* 50), teacher who with his same aspect, his same being present points to a way of acting. Likewise, Joseph, while in the jail of Pharaoh times the worst criminals, teaches to everybody just by his moderation and gentleness.

3. The relation among the various steps of knowledge

For reaching the heights of knowledge and wisdom a study is necessary, the study of sciences and arts which constitute a step towards the most important subject , superior to all the other forms of knowledge and wisdom. Such sciences and arts form the *enkyklios paideia* and they are a sort of servants of the philosophy⁽²⁵⁾ and introduction to virtue.⁽²⁶⁾ In different passages Philo gives different enumerations of the encyclical sciences which, anyhow, have hierarchical relations. They are grammar, rhetoric, dialectic, arithmetic, music, astronomy. They constitute a basis on which the real philosophical culture is built. In particular, I would like to stress the importance of such sciences in the construction of a right education. *Cong.* 18, shows utility of dialectic towards the determination of truth: "Dialectic the sister and twin, as some have said, of Rhetoric, distinguishes true argument from false, and convicts the plausibilities of sophistry, and thus will heal that great plague of the soul, deceit". "Geometry will show in the soul that loves to learn the seeds of equality and proportion, and by the charm of its logical continuity will raise from those seeds a zeal for justice" (*Cong.* 16). "Music will charm away the unrhythmic by its rhythm, the inharmonious by its harmony, the unmelodious and tuneless by its melody, and thus reduce

discord to concord" (*Cong.* 16). and about astronomy: "For just as heaven, being the best and greatest of created things, may be rightly called the king of the world of our senses, so the knowledge of heaven which the star gazers and the Chaldeans especially pursue, may be called the queen of the sciences" (*Cong.* 50).

Encyclical studies are a sort of premise to higher knowledge, they occupy an intermediate position between opinion and wisdom: "and indeed just as the school subjects (*ta enkyklia*) contribute to the acquirement of philosophy, so does philosophy to the getting of wisdom. For philosophy is the practice or study of wisdom, and wisdom is the knowledge of things divine and human and their causes. And therefore just as the culture of the schools (the *enkyklios mousike*) is the bond-servant of philosophy, so must philosophy be the servant of wisdom" (*Cong.* 79-80).

So philosophy is like a bridge between the disciplines and wisdom, a bridge towards the attainment of the knowledge of the truth and the acquisition of the right relationship with the Law. As A. Mendelson⁽²⁷⁾ maintains, "the process of abstraction begins when students of the encyclical appropriate parts of the sense-world (as in *Cong.* 144). As one's studies continue, the disciplines become more structured. Finally, questions of definition arise. At precisely that point, the encyclical disciplines reach their limits on the ascending epistemological scale, and philosophy enters." As Philo repeatedly says, disciplines are at an inferior degree in regard with philosophy, even if they constitute a useful way to reach superior knowledge related to philosophy and to virtues: "we give the name of knowledge to philosophy and the other virtues, and that of men of knowledge to those who possess these virtues" (*Cong.* 142). So, while encyclical disciplines are tied to conjecture and probability, philosophy aims to the truth which -we have seen- coincide with the Law set by God. If, on one side, it is advisable to study the encyclical prior to philosophy,⁽²⁸⁾ on the other side, an exclusive study of encyclical which wouldn't approach to the study of philosophy would be greatly wrong and would lead to improper beliefs about human greatness and dependence from God.⁽²⁹⁾

4. The search for truth implies felicity

"Nothing is better than to 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. We have the testimony of those who have not taken a mere sip of philosophy but have feasted more abundantly on its reasonings and conclusions. [...] Though the clear vision of God as He really is is denied us, we ought not to relinquish the quest. For the very seeking, even without finding, is felicity in itself."

NOTES

(1) See *Opif.* 1-3; 17-20; 28; 143; *Spec. Leg.* IV. 187-188; *QG.* 3. 42; Cf. R. Barraclough, 'Philo's Politics. Roman Rule and Hellenistic Judaism', *ANRW* II.21.1 (1984) 506-508; H. A. Wolfson, *Philo. Foundations of religious Philosophy in Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (Cambridge 1962) 2.189-193; V. Nikiprowetzky, *Le Commentaire de l'Écriture chez Philon d'Alexandrie. Son caractère et sa portée* (Leiden 1977) 118-123.

(2) On the uniqueness of cosmic and moral law see A. Myre, 'La loi dans l'ordre cosmique et politique selon Philon d'Alexandrie', *Science et Esprit* 24 (1972) 217-247.

(3) See *Mos.* I. 158-159.

(4) "Secular Education in Philo of Alexandria", *Monographs of the Hebrew Union College* 7, (Cincinnati 1982) 5.

(5) See *L.A.* III.99-102.

(6) See J. Mansfeld, 'Heraclitus, Empedocles, and others in a Middle Platonist cento in Philo of Alexandria', *Vigiliae Christianae* 39 (1985) 131-156.

(7) Cf. *Abr.* 5; *Mos.* 1.162. See Nikiprowetzky, *op. cit.* (n. 1) 124-126; C. Kraus Reggiani, 'Introduzione', in Filone Alessandrino, *De Opificio Mundi. De Abrahamo. De Josepho. Analisi critiche, testi tradotti e commentati* (Roma, 1979) 173-174.

(8) Cf. H. A. Wolfson, *op. cit.* (n.1) 182-185.

(9) See *Ios.* 269. The distinction between the man of kingly nature, endowed with *fronhshi*", and written laws is found also in Plato's *Statesman* 294a and *Gorgias* 484b. Aristotle said that "although some things can be covered by the laws, other things cannot, it is the latter that cause doubt and raise the question whether it is preferable for the best law to rule or the best man." *Pol.* 1287b 20-23, transl. by H. Rackham; see also 1284a 3-14; b 26-34.

As regards judges, Aristotle spoke of *oi~Jon divkaion jevmyucon* (*Nic. Eth.* 1132a20): there is a distinction between codified laws and superior men who are above the laws. According to F. Parente, 'Il giudaismo alessandrino', in L. Firpo (ed.), *Storia delle Idee politiche economiche e sociali* 2 (Torino, 1985) 330, there is in Philo a Stoic accent in the idea of a universal and providential rule. See also J. Laporte, 'Introduction' in *De Josepho* (Paris 1964) 18 ff.

Novmoi jevmyucoi are also mentioned by other authors, as pointed out by E.R. Goodenough, 'The Political Philosophy of Hellenistic Kingship', *Yale Classical Studies* 1 (1928) 59. See also A. Delatte, *Essai sur la politique pythagoricienne* (Liège 1922) 114, who summarizes, for example, some statements attributed to Archytas: "laws are of two kinds, the animate [*jevmyuco*"] law, which is the king, and the inanimate, the written law". The image of the king as animated law is common also to other Pythagorean fragments ascribed to Diotogenes, Sthenidas of Locris, Ecphantus (quoted by Stobaeus, IV, 7. 61-62; 63; 64-66.). About Pythagorean fragments on kingship cf. E. Bréhier, *Les Idées philosophiques et religieuses de Philon d'Alexandrie* (Paris, 1925) 18 ff; E.R. Goodenough, *The Politics of Philo Judaeus. Practice and Theory* (Hildesheim 1967) 45 ff; G. F. Chesnut, 'The Ruler and the Logos in Neopythagorean, Middle Platonic, and Late Stoic Political Philosophy' *ANRW* II.16.2 (1978) 1310-1320; G. Giannantoni, 'Il pensiero politico greco dopo Alessandro Magno' in L. Firpo (ed.), *Storia delle idee politiche economiche e sociali* 1 (Torino 1982) 357-362.

(10) See *Agr.* 43; *Ios.* 31.

(11) See *Mos.* 1.87; 278; *Decal.* 2; 4; 9. See Wolfson, *op. cit.* (n.1) 180-181; Parente, *art. cit.* (n. 7) 336-337; 344-345.

(12) *Opif.* 100.

(13) See *Leg. All.* III.126; *Decal.* 155.

(14) See *Opif.* 84; 88; 148-149.

(15) See *Jos.* 29; *Opif.* 19; 143-144; *Mos.* II.151. Cf. Seneca, *Ep.* 90.42. See Nikiprowetzky, *op. cit.* (n.1) 143-144 n.64.

(16) See H. Koester, 'NOMOS FUSEWS: The Concept of Natural Law in Greek Thought' in *Religions in Antiquity: Essays in memory of E. R. Goodenough*, Studies in the History of Religions. Supplement to Numen 14 (1968) 521-541.

(17) Cf. *Ios.* 29.

(18) See M. Vegetti, *L'Etica degli antichi* (Bari 1989) 275-276.

(19) A. Mendelson, *op. cit.* (n. 4)p.78.

(20) See *Fug.* 213.

(21) Cf. Nikiprowetzky, *op. cit.* (n.1) 217-219 n.161.

(22) *Mos.* I. 154 ; 2.8 ff. See *Letter of Aristeas* 207-223.

(23) *Mos.* I.150. See *Letter of Aristeas* 288-290. See L. Troiani, 'Il libro di Aristeas ed il giudaismo ellenistico (Premesse per un'interpretazione)' in B. Virgilio (ed.), *Studi Ellenistici* 2 (Pisa 1987) 55-58.

(24) See *Mos.* I.29-87; II. 2-6; 66-67; 187; *Praem.* 53- 57.

(25) See *Cong.* 23; 79.

(26) See *Fug.* 183; *Agr.* 9.

(27) *op. cit.* (n. 4) 36.

(28) See *Ebr.* 48-49.

(29) Cf. *L.A.* III. 228-229