

KNOWING GOD BY ANALOGY: THE FUNCTION OF THE MIND ANALOGY IN PHILO  
IN THE CONTEXT OF THE OF THE DEBATE AROUND STOIC THEOLOGY

**DRAFT**

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**INTRODUCTION**

Philo's thought is by and large theocentric: God is considered to be the supreme and most excellent being. He is the source of all reality<sup>1</sup> and the most perfect object of knowledge. God's centrality is not only conspicuous in Philo's metaphysics and epistemology but it also plays a fundamental role in his ethics since, in his view, appropriate knowledge of God secures a virtuous and happy life.<sup>2</sup> Thus theology is probably one of the most essential components of Philo's thought. In order to better appreciate Philo's theology it is necessary to situate it within his immediate philosophical environment. In this paper, I shall defend the view that Philo is part and parcel of late Hellenistic philosophical discussions on god. Not only is Philo ready to endorse the arguments proving God's existence devised—or at least largely developed—by the philosophers of the Hellenistic period, and mostly by the Stoics, but he furthermore uses some of their arguments in order to attack their theological tenets. What is more, Philo's debt to the Hellenistic theological debates may help us elucidate the origin of a key feature of his theology, that is, his description of God's nature as ungraspable (*akatalēptos*). Before I proceed, a brief overview of the state of affairs of theology at the end of the Hellenistic period as well as a few words on the theme of God's ungraspability in Philo are apposite.

**1. SETTING THE STAGE: THE HELLENISTIC THEOLOGICAL DEBATES.**

Hellenistic theology is marked by an intense debate between the three dominant schools of the period: the Stoics, the Epicureans and the Skeptics. For the first generation of Stoic philosophers, theology belongs the realm of physics and constitutes the last part of the philosophical curriculum (Plut. *SR* 1035B). Since the founders of the school maintain that the main attributes of the divine

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<sup>1</sup> With the exception of evils, *Agr.* 129 and *Plant.* 127–129.

<sup>2</sup> See for instance, *Migr.* 131, *Spec.* 1.345.

include excellence, immeasurable longevity, superiority, and goodness, only the world appeared to be entitled to these predicates. In the Hellenistic period, the Stoics appear virtually as the "heroes" of the arguments from design—that is arguments that infer from the observation of crafted objects or from the beauty and order of the world the existence of an intelligent creator. For Zeno, Cleanthes, and Chrysippus, proving the existence of gods often amounted to showing that the world is an ensouled being, endowed with the most perfect rationality; in other words, that it is the most excellent, intelligent, wise, and long-lasting living organism. Multiple arguments were aimed at demonstrating the world's highest rank in the scala of beings. Thus, the hierarchical ordering of nature, combined with the principle that the whole is more excellent than its parts, led the first Stoics to conclude that the nature of the world itself, which contains all that is, is by necessity of the most excellent and perfect kind (a proof later labelled *e gradibus entium*). In their views, god is a bodily active principle that endows shapeless matter with form and design, and which is responsible for the generation of the world from within; for its organization, design, and structure. God is the cohesive factor that makes of the universe a unity, in which all parts share a mutual affinity. For the early Stoic philosophers, god could indifferently be called 'Zeus,' 'Destiny,' or 'Providence.' He was thought to be responsible for the intelligent planning of the universe, functioning as the causal nexus determining the way things are and will be. God's providence thus secures the perennity of the world's cycles and is exerted as much on a cosmic scale as on the private life of each individual.

From the early Hellenistic period onwards, the Epicureans and the Sceptics challenged Stoic theology. Despite the scholarly debate concerning the physical reality of Epicurus' gods (that is, whether they are thought-constructs intended to emulate our ethical achievement or rather they possess real physical existence), the gods as conceived by Epicurus beyond doubt stand in marked contrast to those of the Stoa. Admittedly Epicurus seems to have agreed with the Stoics that the gods possess a bodily constitution, albeit one composed of atoms, but the main difference with the Stoics is that Epicurus' gods do not interfere with the cosmos, nor do they take care of human affairs. Accordingly, providence and divinization have no room in Epicurus's theological system. From the perspective of ethics, fear of the gods was considered one of the main obstacles to the attainment of happiness. Since happiness and blessedness are incompatible with troubles and worries, men should see in the gods an object of emulation and reverence and should strive to imitate their perfect indifference.

Although assessing the Skeptic Academic position concerning the gods turns out to be more problematic, it is clear that the Academic philosophers were deeply involved in challenging Hellenistic dogmatic theology. As part of their assault on the Stoic theory of cognition, they confronted the Stoic proofs of the existence of the gods and tried to highlight the inconsistency of their theological propositions.

As is always the case with Hellenistic philosophy, the broad outlines of the early Hellenistic debate presented above have been reconstructed by means of later sources, that is mainly thanks to the systematic expositions found in Sextus Empiricus (*M* 9.13–194 and *PH* 3. 2–12), Cicero's *ND* and Philodemus' *On Piety* and *On the Gods* III. It is important to note the numerous parallels and overlaps existing in the structure, sequence and content of the arguments exposed in these texts. This together with the testimony from the Aetean doxography<sup>3</sup> indicate that by the end of the Hellenistic period, theological speculations underwent a process of systematization and standardization. Thus, it can be safely assumed that by Philo's time, there was a standard way of dealing with theological issues, which not only included typical theological issues and points of views to be addressed but also a series of topical arguments proving god's existence. Although Philo does not offer any systematic treatment comparable to what is found in the aforementioned works, he nevertheless displays a good acquaintance with the classic philosophical proofs for the existence of god and endorses them at multiple occasions in his exegesis of the Torah. Thus, for example, arguments from design appear frequently under his pen.<sup>4</sup>

### GOD AS AKATALĒPTOS

The second preliminary remark concerns the important and striking feature of Philo's theology, that is, his qualification of God's nature, quality and substance (*ousia*) as *akataleptic*—ungraspable. To better understand his position, we need to acknowledge Philo's complex attitude toward knowledge of God. On the one hand, at the core of Philo's epistemology lies knowledge of God, but on the other Philo cannot accept the idea that the imperfect created being could attain complete knowledge of God, its creator. This paradoxical attitude can be explained on two related grounds. First, it is of crucial importance for Philo to emphasize the utmost superiority of the creator. Second, Philo adopts the 'like-knows-like principle,' which posits that knowledge

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<sup>3</sup> See Ps.Plutarch 1.7, 881D–882A and Stob. *Ecl.* I 1.29b; and Runia, "The Beginning of the End."

<sup>4</sup> As, for instance, in *Spec.* 1. 33–35; *Leg. All.* 3.95–103; *Prov.* 1.33, 1.42–45, 1.72, and 2. 63; *Praem.* 42.

supposes an affinity of nature between the knower and the known.<sup>5</sup> Thus, to preserve the utmost excellency of God over the other realms of reality, Philo needs to insist that for a human being, the nature of God remains ungraspable, that is, *akatalēptos*.<sup>6</sup> Philo's appeal to this term is significant in two related ways. For any person familiar with the terminology developed by the Hellenistic philosophical schools, as was Philo, *akatalēptos* bears the strong mark of the epistemological debate that, since the beginning of the Hellenistic period, had opposed the Sceptic Academics to the Stoics, concerning the possibility of knowledge. Without entering into the history of this debate, suffice it here to notice that at its core lay the question of the existence of a criterion of truth. Whereas the Stoic philosophers contended that cognitive impression (*phantasia kalateptikē*)—a true impression corresponding to the object from which it is issued and presenting to the human adult the ways things are<sup>7</sup>—provides us with a criterion of truth, the Academic Sceptics denied the existence of such a reliable and warranted impression, instead claiming that nothing can be known (this is the claim of *akatalēpsia*<sup>8</sup>). Although this does not mean that Philo was versed in the technicalities of this debate,<sup>9</sup> I believe that the choice of the term testifies to his somehow paradoxical attempt to articulate a theory of knowledge based on a being that cannot be fully grasped—even by Moses, the most wise man.<sup>10</sup> On the one hand, Philo found that the inherent incapacity of men to have a firm and complete grasp of the essence of God was aptly expressed by the Sceptic-flavored term *akatalepsia*, but on the other hand, he saw the threat of skepticism looming behind such a view. Indeed, when faced with the akataleptic claim concerning God's nature, one may readily conclude that none of God's features can in fact be apprehended, and one can be led, henceforth, to cast doubt on God's very existence. Thus Philo had to safeguard the transcendence of God from a claim of complete graspability, on the one hand, and to avoid the pitfalls of skepticism, on the other. Hence, Philo had to admit that some facts concerning God can—and should—be known. In his view what has to be primarily recognized is the fact that God exists. In other words Philo believes that whereas no one is in a position to give an essence-

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, *QG* 1.23 and *Cher.* 19.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, *Somn.* 1. 63, 66–67, 230; *Mut.* 7–15; *Post.* 168; *Deo* 4; *Post.* 169; *Deus* 62; *Fug.* 161–165; *Leg. All.* 1.20; Calabi, *God's Acting, Man's Acting*, 39–56; Runia, "The Beginnings of the End," esp. 299–300.

<sup>7</sup> Diog. Laert. 7.46; Sext. *M* 7. 248.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Sext. *M* 7. 155 and Eus. *PE* 14.4.15.

<sup>9</sup> On Philo's relation to skepticism, see Lévy, "Le 'scepticisme' de Philon d'Alexandrie" and id. "La conversion du scepticisme chez Philon d'Alexandrie."

<sup>10</sup> *Mut.* 7–9.

specifying account of God, everyone should nonetheless recognize that he exists. This is the reason why, alongside the claim for the ungraspability of God, Philo repeatedly claims that every man has to acknowledge God's existence.

According to David Runia, Philo's qualification of God's nature as beyond the reach of human knowledge marks the "end of Hellenistic theology."<sup>11</sup> On his view, Philo's theology marks a departure from the "directness" and confidence characteristic of the theological approach of the Hellenistic period. Whereas the Hellenistic philosophers believed that it is possible to grasp God's nature and essence—once God's existence has been acknowledged—Philo departs from this epistemological optimism by maintaining the unknowability of God's true being. For Runia, even the Academics' doubts concerning God's existence and their attacks on any dogmatic claim, possess a greater degree of directness than what is found in Philo. Runia explains God's unknowability in light of a fundamental principle of Philo's thought, according to which God adapts his beneficence to the level and capacity of the recipient. In developing this new kind of negative theology, Runia contends, Philo stands "at the interface of Hellenistic and later Greek philosophy" and witnesses current developments in the history of philosophy, to which he is particularly receptive because of his immersion in Biblical thought.

The purpose of this presentation is not to gauge the philosophical identity of Philo's views on God,<sup>12</sup> nor to provide an exhausting list of the classic philosophical arguments proving God's existence that he uses. Rather, I will focus on one specific argument that Philo recruits from the battery of proofs for the existence of god, which I will label 'the human mind analogy.' In its most basic form, the argument aims at proving God's existence by using an analogical inference leading from human mind to God. My contention is that the mind analogy plays a fundamental role in Philo's epistemology. First, it offers a path for recognizing God's primacy and causality. Second,

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<sup>11</sup> Runia, "The Beginnings of the End."

<sup>12</sup> It goes without saying that if we want to locate Philo's treatment of God in relation to the three main schools of the Hellenistic period, he appears to be much closer to the Stoics than to the Epicureans' atheistic position. Philo could of course not accommodate the Epicurean central cosmological tenet according to which the world is not the product of an intelligent purposive creator but the result of the mechanical and fortuitous collision of atoms. As regards the Skeptics, Philo's theocentric philosophy rejects any doubt concerning God's existence. However, as we shall see, Philo's relationship to Skepticism on this topic is far more complex than that of a bold rejection. Of course, and without entering here into to complex issue of Philo's relationship to contemporaneous Platonic trends, his theology is more closely tied to the theological tenets emerging in Middle Platonist authors, such as in Eudorus for instance. On this topic see, inter alia, Whittaker, "Neopythagoreanism and the Transcendent Absolute;" Mansfeld, "Compatible Alternatives;" Dillon, *The Middle Platonists*, 155–166.

it is systematically used by Philo to combat a 'Stoicizing' conception of God. Third, it may provide some clues regarding the origin of the *acataleptic* claim concerning God's nature.

#### THE HUMAN MIND ANALOGY IN PHILOSOPHICAL SOURCES

We know thanks to Sextus Empiricus that the mind analogy was part of the battery of proofs used by the dogmatic philosophers, that is mainly by the Stoics:

[But there are] others who say that the mind (νοῦς), sharp and agile as it is, in focusing on its own nature came as well to an impression (ἐμφασίς) of the universe and assumed surpassingly intellect-like power, analogous to itself but divine in nature. (*M* 9.23, trans.: Bett)

The argument is simple. It posits that we can draw an analogy between two domains— ourselves and the world— in order to conclude to God's existence.

In fact this argument, as many of the proofs used by the Stoics, can be traced back to arguments formulated by Socrates in Xenophon.<sup>13</sup> In the fourth book of the *Memorabilia*, Socrates puts forward the view that we can perceive the activities and works of God in nature, despite his invisibility, in the same manner that we can perceive the ruling activity of our invisible soul (*Mem.* 4.3.13–14).<sup>14</sup> Socrates presents thus an easy method of inference, starting with the observation of one's invisible soul and concluding with the recognition of an invisible ruler of the cosmos.<sup>15</sup>

An interesting occurrence of the analogy appears also in the Pseudo-Aristotelian treatise *De Mundo*. This text is best known for his depiction of intermediary powers of the divinity and for representing a tradition that may have exerted influence upon Philo's notions of the powers of

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<sup>13</sup> Sedley, "Les origines des preuves stoïciennes de l'existence de dieu" and id. *Creationism and its Critiques in Antiquity*, 78–92 and 205–238.

<sup>14</sup> See Festugière, *La révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste; vol. 2 : Le Dieu cosmique*, 83–87. Festugière spots also the parallel argument in the *De mundo* 399a30–b22 as well as in Cic. *Tusc.* 1.67–70.

<sup>15</sup> Likewise, *Memorabilia* 1.4.9 presents Socrates putting forward several arguments in order to convince the impious Aristodemus that the gods exist and that they take care of human affairs. To Aristodemus' objection that he was never able to see them, Socrates' answer is straightforward: "But neither you see your own soul, which is the master of your body" (1.4.8–9). This point fails however to convince Aristodemus.

God.<sup>16</sup> In the course of his discussion of god, the author claims that the invisibility of god should not constitute an impediment to our belief in his existence.

For the soul whereby we live and dwell in houses and communities, though invisible, is yet seen in its operations; for by it the whole ordering of life has been discovered and organized and is held together—the ploughing and planting of the earth, the discovery of the arts, the use of law, the ordering of constitutions, the administration of home affairs and war outside our borders and peace. Thus, too, must we think of God, who in might is most powerful, in beauty most fair, in life immortal, in virtue supreme; for, though he is invisible to all mortal nature, yet is he seen in his very works. (*De Mundo* 399b12–22; trans.: E. S. Forster)

In both Xenophon and Pseudo-Aristotle, the rationale is plain. The mind analogy is used in order to fend off the complaint, whether implicit or explicit, that God's invisibility may stand in the way of our recognition of his existence. It posits that the existence of an invisible entity can be inferred by the observation of its activity. Thus, just as we are ready to confer existence to our soul by observing its causal efficacy, we necessarily have to accept the existence of God, once we notice the visible effects of its activity in the world. The analogical inference posits thus a similarity between the activity of the mind in man and that of God in the world and rests on the implicit premise that similar effects are produced by similar causes.

### THE ROLE OF THE HUMAN MIND ANALOGY IN PHILO

#### THE MIND ANALOGY AGAINST MATERIALIST THEOLOGY

Turning now to the role of this argument in Philo, we can observe that the mind analogy plays a crucial role in his interpretation of Abraham's journey. Surely, Abraham's journey is fundamental to Philo's epistemology for the patriarch represents "...the first person to held the unshakable and firm judgment (ὑπόληψιν) that there is one unique supreme cause, which takes care (προνοεῖ) of the world and of what is within its confine" (*Virt.* 216<sup>17</sup>).<sup>18</sup> According to the allegorical reading

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<sup>16</sup> Bos, "Philo of Alexandria: a Platonist in the Image and Likeness of Aristotle."

<sup>17</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, the translations of Philo are my own.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. *Praem.* 28–30.

endorsed by Philo, Abraham's successive departures symbolize the journey of a soul that gradually abandons its erroneous conception of God and seeks to reach the true God (*Abr.* 68). In fact, as we shall see, the journey of the patriarch constitutes the personification of a classic philosophical argument for proving God's existence.

More precisely, the human mind analogy appears in the context of Philo's interpretation of Abraham's departure from Chaldea. The Chaldeans are described by Philo as adepts of astronomy and genethliology, who endorse the idea of a mutual sympathy between the parts of the universe, and believe fate and necessity to be divine. Whereas, says Philo, their doctrine share some similarities with that of Moses by positing the existence of sympathy between the different parts of the world, they are severely condemned for their failure to attribute causality to non-material entities, and for their consequent assimilation of God with the world or with its physical soul:

These people have formed the idea that this world is the only existing thing, or that itself is God, or that God is contained in it, as the soul of the universe. (*Migr.* 179).<sup>19</sup>

Abraham's departure from Chaldea, which symbolizes sense-perception, represents for Philo a departure from the inquiries into the sky and the discovery of the self. For Philo, through the story of Abraham, Moses urges all those who endorse the Chaldean mentality to turn to knowledge of the self (*Migr.* 184–185). Indeed, the discovery of what in the self, rules, ensouls, is rational and immortal, leads to the clear knowledge of God and of his works (*Migr.* 185). As Philo puts it in Moses's mouth, addressing the Chaldeizing minds:

For you will infer (λογιέσθε) that, in the same manner that there is an mind (νοῦς) in you, so there is one in the universe, and as yours has asserted its sovereignty and leadership over things in you and has brought each of the parts into subjection to himself, in a like manner the [mind] of the universe, being invested with the commandment, guides the universe by its plenipotentiary law and justice, taking

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. *Abr.* 78.



care not only of those who are more worthy but also of those who are less obviously so. (*Migr.* 186)

The argument is straightforward and proceeds by positing a correspondence between the ruling function of the mind over the body and the ruling function of God over the world and rests on the principle that like effects have like causes. The recognition of one's own mind governing the self leads to the apprehension of a mind-like entity governing the world, namely God. Formally, the argument can be spelled out as follow:

- 1- The human being exhibits governance of the parts.
- 2- The human governance of the parts is produced by the human mind.
- 3- The world exhibits governance of the parts.
- 4- Like effects have like causes.
- 5- Therefore the world is governed by a like-mind entity.

For Philo, as we have seen, it is through this line of reasoning that Abraham and all those who endorse the Chaldean mentality will correct their mistaken physical conception of God and of causation. However, it will be immediately noticed that the argument fails to reach its conclusion. The analogy does more to prove God's existence than to refute any form of theological materialism. Indeed the premise of an immaterial soul does not hold the key to the argument's success. In fact, the analogy can lend support to the conclusion that god is physical if the premise of a non-bodily soul is not explicitly formulated, as is the case here. A fortiori the analogical inference from human mind to God can be easily used to support the idea that in the same manner that the human mind is contained in the body, God is contained in the world as its [physical] soul. This is probably the reason why the Stoics were eager to endorse the human mind analogy, as this conclusion is perfectly in line with their theological premises.

It seems thus surprising that in our passage, Philo does not explicitly refer to the immateriality of the mind. Of course, one way to address this issue is to assume that he takes immateriality to be such a conspicuous feature of the soul that it hardly needs to be mentioned. However, in the parallel passage in *On Abraham* in which the mind analogy is reiterated, Philo is careful to mention the premise of the immateriality, or rather of the invisibility, of the soul.

it is impossible that there is in yourself a mind (νοῦς) appointed as a ruler, which the whole community of the body obeys and to which each of the senses follows, and that the world, the most beautiful, the greatest and the most perfect work, of which everything else is a part, is deprived of a king who holds it together (τοῦ συνέχοντος) and rules over it with justice. (*Abr.* 74)

Philo immediately adds that we should not be surprised by the fact that the king is invisible, for our own mind is also invisible (*Abr.* 74). Philo takes it that it is by scrutinizing oneself that one comes to learn that the world is not the first god but the work of the first God and that the father of all, being himself without a shape (ἀειδής ὄν) makes visible the nature of all things (*Abr.* 75).

Likewise, the mind analogy appears in a passage of the *De Decalogo*, in which Philo attacks a materialist doctrine that considers causal interaction to be physical only. This time it is not the Chaldeans but the major part of mankind which is condemned for deifying the four elements, the planets, and the world and for their failure to recognize the “truly existent” (*Decal.* 59). The heart of this mistake lies in the incapacity to conceive a cause beyond the perceptual realm.<sup>20</sup> These impious people are all the more to be blamed since, as Philo adds, “the clearest proof lies ready at hand”:

For while it is with the soul that they live and deliberate and carry out all the affairs of human life, they have never been able to see the soul with the eyes of the body—even if they were striving with all possible ambition [to see it]—and even if it was somehow possible to see that most august of all sacred images (τὸ ἄγαλμα<sup>21</sup>) from which it would have been likely to get by inference a notion (ἔννοια) of the uncreated and eternal [being], who, holding the rein of the whole universe, guides it in safety, being himself invisible. (*Decal.* 60)

Here again, the invisibility of the soul is explicitly formulated.<sup>22</sup> Had these people only observed their own *invisible* souls, Philo assumes, they would have been able to gain, by analogy, the notion

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<sup>20</sup> See also *Virt.* 212–213.

<sup>21</sup> For a similar description of the mind as a “sacred image,” see *Mut.* 21.

<sup>22</sup> See also the similar mind analogy directed against deification of the stars in *Spec.* 1.13–20.

of an *invisible* ruling God and avoid the error of deifying the cosmos or its parts. Note that in the last two texts, Philo refers to the invisibility rather than to the immateriality of the soul. Still the point remains uncomplicated: it is our capacity to attribute causal efficacy to an entity that cannot be perceived by the senses—that is, to an immaterial entity—that lead us to infer God's immaterial existence. As such these arguments corresponds to the analogies spelled out in Xenophon and in the *De Mundo*.

Going back to *Migr.*, despite the absence of any precise allusion to the immateriality of the mind, a rich argument is offered in support of the transcendence of God over the created realm. Philo explains that having learned to observe himself and to dwell into himself (this is symbolized by Abraham's sojourn in Haran), Abraham becomes able to gradually depart from his own abode, that is, from all the impressions (*phantasiai*) provided by sense-perception, and by a "conversation of the mind with itself," starts acknowledging and contemplating the intelligible realm.<sup>23</sup> This new departure from sensible reality (Haran) provides new instruction on God.

For you do not think that whereas your mind, having stripped itself off of body, sense-perception and speech, is able, apart from these, to contemplate the beings, in their nakedness, and that the mind of the universe (τὸν δὲ τῶν ὅλων νοῦν), God, does not stand outside the whole material nature, and contains, and is not contained, and that he does not surpass it only by his thought, as is the case for man, but by his very essence (τῷ οὐσιώδει), as it befits to God. For our mind did not craft the body, this is the work of someone else, on which account it is contained in the body as in a vessel. But the mind of the universe has engendered all that is, and what crafts is better than what comes into being, so that it could not be contained in what is inferior to him, apart from the fact that it is not suitable for a father to be contained in his son but rather for his son to grow under the care of his father. And in this manner the mind, migrating gradually, will reach the father of piety and holiness. (*Migr.* 192–193)

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. *Her.* 111.

This text works out a detailed argument for the immateriality and transcendence of God. In fact, upon close examination, it spells out the differences between the human mind and God, on account of which God cannot be thought to be contained in the world, as the mind analogy may lead one to infer. This text assumes at the outset the validity of drawing a parallel between the human mind and God but this time it aims at highlighting their intrinsic differences. First Philo argues that the one who is able to contemplate the immaterial and noetic realm understands that the most perfect being, the "really true existent," is necessarily tied to the truly existing side of reality. What is important to notice here is that the analogy proceeds by positing a similar but *non-identical* capacity to transcend physical reality: one by thought, the other by essence. The second continues to pursue the analogy but still points out the differences between man's mind and God. Philo argues that the better is not contained in the inferior, so that God cannot be considered as contained in the world. But this premise could easily lend support to the idea that the mind (which is better) is not contained in the body (which is inferior). That is the reason why Philo has to carefully link two additional premises: (1) the mind did not craft the body and (2) the crafter/father is not contained in its work/his son. Together these premises show that whereas the human mind entertains some critical similarities with God—which warrants the validity of the analogical inference from a directing mind in man to a mind-like entity directing the world—it differs from god in some crucial respects, namely in its ties to sensible reality and in its being contained in the body. By contrast, God transcends the cosmos and cannot be contained in it. Thus, it is the limitation of the analogical inference from mind to God that Philo wishes to stress in this passage. Read in this way, the argument surfaces as an explicit attempt to confront the divinization of the world or of its material soul that may be induced from the human mind analogy. Thus, it provides a much more articulate reply to those who consider god to be contained in the cosmos as its soul rather than the simple mention of an invisible mind.

### CHALDEAN STOICS?

Together these texts indicate that the human mind analogy is recruited by Philo neither to target any atheistic position nor any form of impiety but rather to systematically attack one specific doctrine that, because of its failure to attribute causal efficacy to non-physical entities, mistakenly conceives God as physical.<sup>24</sup> Since this view is most often associated with the Chaldeans, the

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question boils down to whether Philo links the Chaldeans to one specific philosophical school. Of course, in Philo's immediate philosophical environment, it is Stoic physics and cosmology that closely echo the Chaldean position.<sup>25</sup> Not only did the Stoics confine being to bodies but they furthermore defined it as what has the capacity to act or be acted upon. Thus for the Stoics not only is the soul a body, but virtue, impression and truth are all thought to be corporeal insofar as they can effect or be the recipient of causal interactions. Strictly speaking, the Stoics better qualify as corporealists rather than as materialists, since their physics implies that unqualified matter does not actually exist as such in the universe.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, in the actual state of affairs, matter appears to always be pervaded by the active principle, which makes of it a body. It is on account of the specific though-and-through blending of the active and immanent bodily principle, that is god, with matter, the passive and causally inert principle, that the cosmos forms a unified whole, similar to a living organism and characterized by mutual sympathy of its parts.

(1) [Chrysippus] first assumes that the whole of substance is unified by a breath (*pneuma*) which pervades it all, and by which the universe is sustained and stabilized and made interactive (σύμπαθής) with itself. (Alexander, *de mixt.* 216,14–218,6= LS 48C, trans. LS)

True, Philo does not attribute such a sophisticated view to his Chaldeans. Some commentators have even cast doubt on the possibility to spot one specific philosophical doctrine behind the references to them.<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, as we have seen, there exist some striking similarities with the Stoics' fundamental physical tenets that can be summed up as follow: First and foremost, as we have seen, is the Chaldean refusal to predicate being on non-physical entities.<sup>28</sup> Second, is their

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<sup>25</sup> The position held by the Chaldeans recalls the initial position of the Giants in Plato's *Sophist* (246a–247c), who originally confined being to bodies but, after having admitted the twin premises that virtues are "beings" and that they are invisibles, were forced to adhere to a new criterion of being, namely, the capacity to act and to be acted upon. On the connection between Stoic corporealism and the Giants of Plato see, for example, Long and Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, vol. 1, 274 and Vogt, "Sons of the Earth."

<sup>26</sup> Gourinat, "The Stoics on Matter and Prime Matter, 'Corporealism' and the Imprint of Plato's *Timaeus*," and Weil "Remarques sur le "matérialisme" des stoïciens;" Arius Didymus *apud* Stob. II 7.5b.

<sup>27</sup> Runia, "The Beginnings of the End," 290. But for an identification of the Chaldeans with the Stoics see Wolfson, *Philo*, vol. 1, 176–177 and vol. 2, 78 and Radice, "Philo and Stoic Ethics," 162–164.

<sup>28</sup> I leave aside here the complex issue of the incorporeals in Stoicism.

idea that the cosmos is characterized by mutual sympathy of its parts,<sup>29</sup> and third and most important for our topic, is the fact that they equate God with the cosmos or with its physical soul.<sup>30</sup> True the Chaldeans are also depicted as supporters of genethliology—a point which may preclude a thorough identification with the Stoics since, as it has been shown by Long, Stoic determinism does not amount to an endorsement of astrological fatalism.<sup>31</sup> However if we keep in mind that Philo's dominant critic against the Chaldeans concerns the divinization of the world,<sup>32</sup> it is legitimate to assume that he may have a Stoicizing target in his sights when he points to a doctrine that considers the world or its soul to be divine. This was effectively the nucleus of the Stoics' view on god as, as we have seen, they maintained not only that god is the active bodily principle pervading all matter, variously identified with fire or *pneuma* but, like Philo's Chaldeans, they also identified it with the universe, or with its soul (*psuchē*) or mind (*nous*).<sup>33</sup>

So far our analysis has shown that when Philo recruits the human mind analogy in order to spell out a fundamental epistemic step in the search for appropriate understanding of God, he probably knows that he is exploiting a topical argument of the doctrine he attacks. His procedure can therefore reasonably be seen as an attempt to turn the tables against his opponents, by means of their own analogical weapons, and mostly by pointing that similarity between features of the two domains of the analogy does not preclude fundamental differences.

### KNOWLEDGE OF THE SELF

So far we have seen that the analogy supposes that man and world exhibit some critical similarities, on the basis of which one further common feature can be inferred, namely that of being governed by some power. Thus fundamental to the mind analogy is the request to gain knowledge of the self as this constitutes the first step in gaining an appropriate apprehension of God. However, on the face of it, it may seem that the analogy assumes two different kinds of cognition, one concerned with man and the other concerned with an ungraspable Being. It is then necessary to understand

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<sup>29</sup> For the Stoic parallels see Cic. *ND* 2.19 and 39–40 and Sext. *M* 9.79.

<sup>30</sup> On the identification of god with the world or its soul, see, for example, Zeno's argument for the rationality, sentience, and intelligence of the cosmos in Sext. *M* 9.104; and Cic. *ND* 2.20–22 and 1.39. And for the Stoics' identification of fate with God or Zeus, see Diog. Laert. 7.136 and Cic. *ND* 1.39.

<sup>31</sup> Long, "Astrology: Arguments pro and contra;" Frick, *Divine Providence in Philo of Alexandria*, 118–138.

<sup>32</sup> See for example, *Op.* 7–9; *Migr.* 178–179, 184; *Abr.* 68–72; *Mut.* 16; *Virt.* 212–213.

<sup>33</sup> Diog. Laert. 7.134–135.

more precisely what knowledge of the self consists of, and on which ground it is held to be a valid means for inferring the existence of a Being whose true nature is beyond the reach of human apprehension. Some interpreters have argued that the specific piece of knowledge that is achieved by a thorough examination of the self refers to the nothingness of the created human being. Thus, according to Anderson, for instance, self-knowledge amounts to acknowledging the faultiness of sense-perception, which leads in turn to the recognition of the "nothingness of the created being." This in turn, and by means of a dialectical opposition, begets knowledge of God.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, according to Courcelle, man's recognition of his own insignificance shatters his natural arrogance and lead him to understand that the divine power surpasses everything.<sup>35</sup> Without doubting the importance of the theme of the nothingness of man in relation to God, it seems that it constitutes an incidental upshot of self-knowledge rather than its main object.

First, it is important to observe that Philo's developments on self-knowledge figure prominently and consistently as the second stage of a two-steps process that starts with a departure from astronomical and physical inquiries (that is from Chaldea), as was the case with Abraham's journey. Assuredly, the most prominent representative of the Delphic maxim for Philo is Terah, who has left Chaldea with his son Abraham to settle in Harran (*Som.* 1.52). Terah is for the Hebrews what Socrates—who has devoted the major part of his life to knowledge of the self—is for the Greeks, with one notable difference: Socrates was a man but Terah is himself the very account (*logos*) of self-knowledge (*Somn.* 1.57–58). Here again knowledge of the self is seen as a step that follows upon relinquishing the vain inquiries into heaven. Similarly, in *Migr.* 133–139, Philo firmly condemns the vanity and arrogance of the "seemingly-wise" men, who pretend to be able to accurately know not only what each thing is but also what causes them to be so, as if they attended the creation of the world. They are enjoined to leave the foolish investigations regarding the moon and the sun and to learn instead to know themselves.

In *Somn.* 1.47–60, Philo offers detailed exposition of what self-knowledge consists of: it starts with the examination of the organs of the sense, continues to sense-perception itself

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<sup>34</sup> Anderson, *Philo of Alexandria's View of the Physical world*, 69.

<sup>35</sup> Courcelle, "Philon d'Alexandrie et le précepte delphique," 248–9. But he also notes the importance of the motif of self-knowledge for recognizing that the apprehension of God's true nature is beyond man's cognitive ability.

(*aisthēsis*) and finally turns to its mechanism (*Somn.* 1.55).<sup>36</sup> In *Migr.* 137, knowledge of the self is described as the observation of what man is in respect to his body, his soul, his sensation, and *logos*, and as an examination of the functioning of the senses, of their activity and origin. Likewise, in *Fug.* 46, *Gen.* 27:44, which depicts Rebecca enjoining Jacob to momentarily dwell in Haran, is read as an appeal to

learn the land of the senses, know yourself and your own parts (τὰ σαυτοῦ μέρη), what each [part] is, for which end it was made and how it naturally operates, and what it is which, being invisible, sets in motion and pulls the strings of the puppets in an invisible manner,<sup>37</sup> whether it is the mind in you (εἴτε ὁ ἐν σοὶ νοῦς) or the mind of the universe (εἴτε ὁ τῶν συμπάντων). (*Fug.* 46)

Without entering here into the issue of the different topographies of the human soul that Philo offers throughout his oeuvre, it seems clear that he commits himself to the idea that self-knowledge amounts to recognizing that the different parts forming the individual are all subjected to one directing principle.<sup>38</sup> In fact, the request to focus on sense-perception and its mechanism, which emerges prominently in the different treatments of self-knowledge, precisely fulfills this function. In effect, learning how sense-perception operates leads to appreciate the distinctive ranking and role of the mind in the economy of the self. In Philo's view, sense-perception gives the mind access to the objects of the external world. However neither the senses organs nor sense-perception constitute the ultimate agent of cognition. They are the messengers, as Philo sometimes calls them,<sup>39</sup> which present the mind with impressions coming from outside, but it is the mind that is ultimately responsible for cognition. Knowledge of the self amounts thus to the recognition of the cohesive function of the mind, of its superiority over the other parts of the self, and of its agency in apprehending sensible reality.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Phil spells out a further step that consists in leaving sensible perception for the immaterial realm, but it was not undertaken by Terah.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Plato *Leg.* 644d7–645c5. See also *Op.* 117; *QG* 3.42; *Abr.* 73; *Fug.* 46.

<sup>38</sup> On the parallel connective function of God see, for instance, *Post.* 14; *Conf.* 136–137; *Praem.* 1.

<sup>39</sup> *Somn.* 1.27.

<sup>40</sup> See, for instance, *Mut.* 111; *Deus* 42; *Op.* 139 and 166; *Her.* 53.



The different treatments of self-knowledge may lead us to assume that Philo is confident that we can gain knowledge of our own mind. If such is the case, the human mind analogy seems to imply two different types of cognition according to each domain: one that recognizes essence, in the case of men, while the other acknowledges existence, in the case of God. But, as we shall see, Philo is careful enough to assume an identical epistemic relation in both domains of the analogy.

In the passage that offers the set-piece discussion of self-knowledge in *Somn.* 1.47–60, Philo stresses the importance of the injunction to know one's own mind or soul but adds that it is impossible to grasp (καταλαβεῖν) what the mind is (*Somn.* 1.56). In this remark, Philo explicitly connects his treatment of self-knowledge to a former discussion in the same treatise in which he interprets the four wells dug by Abraham and Isaac in Gen. 1:25 as symbolizing the four elements composing the universe. Philo argues that men are shaped by the same number of basic constituents that make up the cosmos. *Prima facie*, the argument presented here looks like an occurrence of a well-known argument in support of the cosmic origin of the human soul—an argument that has Socratic or even pre-socratic pedigree,<sup>41</sup> that emerges in Plato's *Philebus*<sup>42</sup> and is recruited by the Stoics for proving the existence of god.<sup>43</sup> The classic argument sets out to show that since humans are composed of the basic cosmic constituents or stuffs that compose the universe, the human soul or mind necessarily originates from an external cosmic supply of soul or intelligence. In its classic version, such as it appears for instance in Xenophon, the argument posits that since we possess a small proportion of air and earth in ourselves deriving from the cosmic mass of earth and air, the existence of our personal mind entails that of a mind-like cosmic stuff from which it is derived. In Philo however, this classic argument is worked out for a different purpose, namely to show that the mind in us is ungraspable (*akatalēptos*). Philo does not argue that we are composed out of the same basic stuffs that compose the world but rather that the fourth element both in the world—that is heaven (*Somn.* 1.15 and 20–24)—and in man—that is the mind—is akataleptic.

His point is, I take it, as follow: drawing an analogy between the world and man is justified on the ground that they share one critical similarity, namely that of being composed of four

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<sup>41</sup> Xen. *Mem.* 1.4.8–9; Diogenes of Apollonia B4, and Heraclitus B36 with the analysis of Bethge, "On the Physical Aspect of Heraclitus' Psychology." see also *De mundo* 399a30–b22.

<sup>42</sup> *Phlb.* 29a–30d.

<sup>43</sup> As in Sextus M 9.92–94 and Sedley, *Creationism and its Critiques in Antiquity*, esp. 212–225.

principal constituents. But just as the fourth constituent of the world, namely heaven, is *akataleptic*, so too the fourth element in us, namely the mind, is beyond the reach of human comprehension. Thus the critical similarity between man and the world enables one to assume a further shared property. Here the shared property bears on the epistemic relation we stand in with respect to one corresponding item in both domains of the analogy.

Noticeably, Philo accounts for the ungraspable nature of heaven by providing a list of multiple contradictory opinions concerning its substance, nature, dimension, and by exposing opposite views on the stars, their ensouled status, the illumination of the moon, and so forth. Similarly, it is by highlighting the *diaphonia* concerning the substance, nature and location of the human mind (*Somn.* 1.30–33) that Philo sets out to show its ungraspability. For Philo, these multiple disagreements show that these issues are obscure (ἄδηλα), ungraspable (ἀκατάληπτα), based on conjecture and probabilities (στοχασμοῖς καὶ εἰκασίαις) and not on the true.

The doxographical character of this text has already been noticed by scholars, and notably by Wendland, Bréhier, Mansfeld and Runia. Whereas Wendland points to the *Vetusta Placita* as a possible source of Philo's text, Bréhier to Aenesidemus, and Mansfeld defends a Skeptical or Academic source combined with "mildly dogmatists arguments,"<sup>44</sup> Runia wishes to stress Philo's freedom in the adaptation of the material available to him.<sup>45</sup> Without denying Philo's independence, it seems nevertheless that the Skeptic academic orientation—and hence also the origin—of this passage is attested on several grounds: the choice of the terminology (*akatalēptos*, *adēlos*, *stochasmos*), the use of the *diaphonia* for showing that the issue cannot be settled, and especially the view that the nature of the mind is beyond the reach of human comprehension.<sup>46</sup>

Furthermore, and as we have seen, Philo explicitly connects the discussion on the ungraspability of heaven and mind (*Somn.* 1.14–40) to that of self-knowledge (*Somn.* 1.52–55). This suggests that Philo endorses the view that knowledge of the self not only amount to discovering the distinctive position of the human mind but also to acknowledging its ungraspable

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<sup>44</sup> Mansfeld, "Doxography and Dialectic," 3121.

<sup>45</sup> Wendland, "Eine doxographische Quelle Philo's;" Bréhier, *Les idées philosophiques et religieuses*, 211–212; Mansfeld, "Doxography and Dialectic;" esp. 3117–3121; Runia, "Philo of Alexandria and Hellenistic Doxography," esp. 24–28.

<sup>46</sup> For the skeptical version of the acataleptic nature of the soul's claim against the dogmatic philosophers see Sext. *PH* 2.31–32.

nature. If this is the case, we can understand how the human mind analogy further supports the qualification of God as akataleptic, as the inapprehensibility of the mind in man easily leads to inferring that of God. Further, as it has been noticed by Mansfeld and Runia, it seems that in both these discussions, Philo relies on the same source of material.<sup>47</sup> Therefore, it can be reasonably assumed that the explicit connection between the akataleptic nature of the human mind and that of God was already at work in Philo's source(s).

Such an explicit connection is made in several places in Philo's corpus. Thus in *Leg.* 1.90–92, Philo interprets the fact that Adam, who symbolizes the mind, gives names to the other creatures at the exception of himself, as an indication to the effect that the mind is able to conceive other things but cannot “grasp” (καταλαμβάνει) itself, just as the eye see all things but not itself. Note that here again, in order to shore up his claim Philo mentions a *diairesis* exposing a checklist of questions concerning the substance of the mind: whether it is *pneuma*, blood, fire, air, or any other body, or whether it is corporeal or incorporeal. More important, Philo immediately connects the question of the substance of the soul to that of God.

Also, are not those who inquire into the substance of God silly? For how these people who ignore the substance of their own soul, would know with precision that of the universe. Indeed, according to the [common] conception,<sup>48</sup> the soul of the universe is God. (*Leg.* 1.91)

The correspondence between our cognitive limitation concerning our own mind and that concerning God emerges also in the context of Philo's interpretation of the creation of man after the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:26). Since Philo takes the biblical term ‘image’ to refer to the mind of the universe, it is in virtue of his mind that man resembles God:

On that single mind of the universe, as on an archetype, the mind in each individual human being was modelled. In a sense it is a god of the person who carries it and bears it around as a divine image. For it would seem that the same rank that the great leader holds in the entire cosmos is held by the human mind in the human being. For it is itself invisible, yet it sees all things; its own substance is obscure (ἄδηλον),

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<sup>47</sup> *Op. cit.*

<sup>48</sup> I believe that by *ennoia*, Philo refers to ‘common notion’ (*koinē ennoia*). For a similar usage commonly found in Plutarch see Babut, *Plutarque, Sur les notions communes*, 122, n.3.

yet it comprehends (καταλαμβάνων) the substances of other things. (*Op.* 69; trans.: Runia, slightly modified)

Likewise in *Mut.* 10, Philo contends that the fact that the Being (τὸ ὄν) is ungraspable (*akatalēptos*) should come as no surprise given that our own mind is also unknowable (ἄγνωστος). To further support his claim, Philo adds that the obscurity (ἀδηλότης) of the soul has engendered countless disputes among the sophists, who have brought forward many opposite views.

Given that most of the texts that explicitly draw a parallel between the incomprehensibility of the human mind's nature and that of God take the *diaphoniai* concerning the mind to attest to its ungraspability, it seems plausible that the Sceptically-orientated tradition on which Philo relies in these passages made the analogy explicit. This assumption may find confirmation from parallel arguments figuring in Cicero's first *Tusculan*—a text whose exposition of contradicting views on the mind (1.18 ff) is so closely paralleled in Philo's *Somn.* 1.30–33<sup>49</sup> that it has lead scholars to posit a common source for both texts.<sup>50</sup>

#### PARALLELS IN CICERO

The most striking parallel to the claim of the ungraspability of the mind in connection to that of God is found in Cicero's first *Tusculan disputations*. In this book, in which Cicero attempts to refute the opinion that death is something bad, Marcus (Cicero) endorses the Platonic position of the eternity of the soul (*Tusc.* 1.49–55) upon the request of his interlocutor and as an *ad hoc* step in an vast attempt to show that fearing death is unwarranted. First, Marcus attacks the position of some philosophers who contend that the mind perishes with the body on the ground that they cannot understand what is the mind is without a body. On Marcus' view, their claim is unfounded since it is in fact harder and "more obscure" to understand what the mind is within a body: "as if they could understand what [the mind] is (*qualis sit*) in a body, what is its form, its size or its place" (*Tusc.* 1.50). According to Marcus, it is because of the extreme difficulty of understanding the nature and properties of the soul that some philosophers were lead to deny its very existence. Cicero's point is to argue for the possibility of grasping some fact about the mind, just as it is possible to grip with reasoning (*cogitatione complecti possumus*) something about god. This, Marcus adds, is the import of the Delphic maxim. The injunction to know oneself is an appeal to

<sup>49</sup> Mansfeld, "Doxography and dialectic," 3121.

<sup>50</sup> Mansfeld, *op. cit.* 3121–3137.

see the mind with the mind itself (*animo ipso animum videre*). Self-knowledge amounts thus to recognizing the mind's existence by means of its activity: "what is done by you, is done by your mind (1.52)." The mind does not know what itself is but it knows that it *is*.<sup>51</sup>

Later on in the same treatise when presenting the second argument for the eternity of the mind (1.56–76), Marcus draws an analogy between the intellectual human attributes and that of god in order to support the divine character of the human mind and hence its immortality. According to Marcus, some questions concerning the human mind, such as its seat, the kind of thing that it is, its precise substance cannot be settled.<sup>52</sup> What is important to recognize, however is that its origin—be it fiery, pneumatic or even from the fifth kind of nature—is divine (*Tusc.* 1.60 and 65). In the same manner that the eye sees all but itself, the mind cannot to see itself nor capture its own shape (1.67). What the mind can perceive however is its capacity, memory or motion. Marcus adds that in the same manner that the one who observes the beauty, regularity and perfection of the natural world cannot cast doubt on the existence of a being who rules over—or has created—this perfect order, anyone noticing the activity of his mind necessarily concludes that it exists.

Thus although you do not see the human mind (*mentem*), as you do not see god, nevertheless, you recognize god by his works, so you shall recognize the divine capacity of the mind by its memory of things, its invention, the swiftness of its motion and by all the beauty of its virtue (*Cic. Tusc.* 1.70)

This is a fine case of an inverted design argument. Whereas arguments from design usually reach the conclusion of the existence of a purposive creator standing behind the order, organization, and beauty of the world, in this case, it is the existence of god which leads to infer that of the human mind. This is not the only case of a reversed design argument in this treatise. For example the standard Stoic proof referring to Archimedes' sphere<sup>53</sup> is turned around to prove the existence of the divine *ingenium* in man (*Tusc.* 1.62–63). In fact, *Tusc.* 1. offers many occurrences of standard

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<sup>51</sup> This is according to Marcus, the origin of Plato's famous argument for the eternity of the soul in the *Phaedrus* (245c–246a) that he quotes in this passage.

<sup>52</sup> He rejects however the possibility that the mind originates from the heart, the brain or the atoms (*Tusc.* 1.60), adopting thus a moderate skeptical attitude.

<sup>53</sup> *Cic. ND* 2.88; *Sext. M* 9.115.

theological arguments which are paralleled in the systematic expositions of Hellenistic theology in his *ND* (and also in Sextus), such as the *consensus omnium* concerning the existence of god (again, used to prove the existence of the human mind; 1.36) or the idea that gods are in fact deified men of old (1.29).<sup>54</sup>

Thus in addition to the parallel *diaphoniai* on the mind already spotted by commentators, the first *Tusculan* entertains with the Philonic texts that we have studied many structural and doctrinal similarities: the reference to the Delphic maxim, the moderate skepticism concerning the nature of the mind, the conspicuous theological background, the explicit link between the incomprehensibility of the human mind and the ungraspability of God's nature as well as the view that whereas god's and mind's substance is obscure, their existence cannot be doubted. All that, together with the academic mold that has shaped the discussion of the *Tusculans*, not only in the genre (that of the "*contra thesim disputare*"<sup>55</sup>) but also in the philosophical position endorsed by Cicero, strengthens our claim of a common tradition with a strong Academic orientation for both Philo and Cicero. That this source may have explicitly posited the mind analogy in order to support the akataleptic claim concerning God substance seems, in light of these elements, a reasonable assumption.

Of course, pointing to plausible influences does not amount to denying Philo's originality and independence in the adaptation of this argument. As we have seen, the human mind analogy plays a fundamental role in his epistemology, as it constitutes the first step towards gaining appropriate knowledge of God. What is more, as we have seen, the dialectical setting in which the argument is laid out shows that Philo enlists it with the aim of combatting a contemporary dominant theological point of view that relied on this argument and thus attests to Philo's involvement in the philosophical theological discussions of his time. Finally, the study of the possible sources of the mind analogy provides some clue concerning the origin of Philo's important notion of God's akataleptic nature. It emerges as an idea that may have originated in a theological tradition with Academic orientation, on which Philo relies and which he ingeniously integrates in his theological system in order to support the utmost transcendence of God.

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<sup>54</sup> Note that the *Tusculan* and *ND* correspond to the same year of Cicero's activity.

<sup>55</sup> *Tusc.* 2.9; see also 1.8 and 1.17.

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