

BREAKING THE STOIC LANGUAGE: PHILO'S ATTITUDE TOWARDS ASSENT  
(*SUNKATATHESIS*) AND COMPREHENSION (*KATALÊPSIS*)

CARLOS LEVY, *Paris IV-Sorbonne University*

Neither Cicero nor Philo are generally considered true philosophers. However they made rather significant contributions to philosophy. Cicero was the first to think that philosophy could be exposed in a language other than Greek. The beginning of the first book of the *Libri Academici* shows how strange this decision, which now appears as evident, seemed at the time.<sup>1</sup> Philo did not have to contend with this kind of problem since Greek was his native language, the one which the Jewish community of Alexandria considered as perfectly legitimate to express the word of God.<sup>2</sup> But, by connecting philosophy and monotheism, after some others whose works did not survive, he opened a new chapter in the history of philosophy.<sup>3</sup> At the time of Cicero and Philo, Stoicism was still the predominant philosophical system. Of course, it was in a way “le début de la fin,” since the revival of Aristotelianism after a long period of decay, and the irruption of Middle Platonism were going to break the triad which characterized the Hellenistic period: Stoicism, Epicureanism, and the Scepticism (even if the term is perhaps inadequate) of the New Academy. In this triad Stoicism was indubitably the most active element, especially because Stoic philosophers succeeded in imposing their conceptual innovations even to their opponents, especially in the fields of psychology and gnoseology so that it can be said that our actual gnoseological vocabulary is deeply rooted in this doctrine. Among these innovations, the concept of assent, *sunkatathesis* had a central role, since it was at the same time the mark of a personality, the factor of all kind of decisions and the transition between knowledge and ethics.<sup>4</sup> Stoicism was for Philo both a treasure of philosophical notions and an enemy since it represented the most perfect form of immanentism in ancient philosophy, a form of thought that a thinker who

---

<sup>1</sup> *Lib. Ac.* 1.10-11.

<sup>2</sup> On Philo's cultural relation to his Alexandrian and Roman milieu, see M. Niehoff, *Philo on Jewish Identity and Culture* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001); C. Lévy, “Mais que faisait donc Philon en Egypte? A propos de l'identité diasporique de Philon,” in *La rivelazione in Filone di Alessandria: Natura, Legge, Storia*, ed. A.M. Mazzanti and F. Calabi (Bologna: Pazzini, 2004), pp. 295-312.

<sup>3</sup> On Philo's relation to Hellenistic philosophy and Middle Platonism, see now F. Alesse (ed.), *Philo of Alexandria and Post-Aristotelian Philosophy* (Leiden: Brill, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> On this concept, see G. Kerferd, “The Problem of *Synkatathesis* and *Katalêpsis* in Stoic Doctrine,” in *Les Stoïciens et leur logique*, ed. J. Brunschwig (Paris: Vrin, 2004<sup>2</sup>), pp. 109-130, with a recent bibliography on the topic by Th. Benatouïl.

adhered to a monotheistic faith evidently could not accept.<sup>5</sup> In order to improve our knowledge of Philo's psychology and anthropology, it is interesting to investigate how he tried to locate himself in relation to this essential Stoic concept. In this perspective, we will use Cicero as an element of comparison, since he was himself in a situation of otherness with respect to the world of philosophical schools.

The concept of assent (*sunkatathesis*) as an essential faculty of human mind did not exist in Greek philosophy before Zeno the founder of Stoicism. Zeno used the metaphor of vote since the verb *sunkatatithesthai* meant "to put the ballot in the urn." To give one's assent is to say "yes" or "no" to a proposition, which could be either a verbal one or a proposition inherent to a representation (*phantasia*). In a providentialist system like Stoicism, Nature created the world as "the common house of mankind and gods," and, being full of benevolence towards human beings, she did not want to deceive them by sending them false representations. The Stoics did not affirm, like the Epicureans, that all sensations were true, but they thought that sense-errors were exceptional occurrences that could be easily explained by pathological factors, such as diseases or other physical ailments. Normally, in this perspective, the subject of perception assents to the representations he receives, because they are *phantasiai katalêptikai*, i.e. they bear the distinctive sign of evidence (*enargeia*), which is the mark of their natural origin and of their truthfulness.<sup>6</sup> These representations exert a strong pressure on the soul though Zeno asserted that the liberty of approving or rejecting them was without any restriction:<sup>7</sup> *assensionem adiungit animorum, quam esse vult in nobis positam et voluntariam*. In this relation between assent and representations, the Stoics tried to conciliate to things which could be interpreted as conflicting: the autonomy of human decisions and the existence of a harmonious cosmic order, in which everything was in relation with the others. The conjunction of assent with katalêptic representations resulted in comprehension (*katalêpsis*), defined by Stoics as a katalêptic representation which received an assent.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> On the relation to this doctrine see in F. Alesse (ed.), *Philo of Alexandria and Post-Aristotelian Philosophy*, the articles by A.A Long, "Philo on Stoic Physics," pp. 121-140; R. Radice, "Philo on Stoic Ethics. Reflections on the Idea of Freedom," pp. 141-168; and G. Reydams-Schils, "Philo of Alexandria on Stoic and Platonist Psycho-Physiology: The Socratic Higher Ground," pp. 169-195.

<sup>6</sup> We translate *phantasia* by "representation," others prefer "impression," for example A.A. Long and D. Sedley (ed.), *The Hellenistic Philosophers* (Cambridge: CUP, 1987); but no translation is fully satisfactory. On the characteristics of the *katalêptic* representations, see C. Imbert, "Théorie de la représentation et doctrine logique dans le stoïcisme ancien," in J. Brunschwig (ed.), *Les Stoïciens et leur logique*, pp. 79-108.

<sup>7</sup> Cicero, *Lib. Ac.* 1.40.

<sup>8</sup> Sextus Empiricus, *Adversus mathematicos* 7.152, 8.396 = *SVF* (J. von Arnim, *Stoicorum*

According to Stoic philosophers, *katalêpsis* had different statuses. The *katalêpsis* of a fool was ignorance, the one of the wise man was science. Both perceived the object x, and gave their assent to the proposition: “this object is x,” but, in the case of the former, this information/decision was inserted in a net of fragmentary and sometimes erroneous notions, while in the case of the latter, it was incorporated into a stable and perfectly coherent system giving a true comprehension of the whole reality.

The relation between assent and representation was considered as the basis of the Stoic theory of knowledge. To ruin it entailed to ruin the whole system. Cicero was a Roman Academic, Philo a Jew with eclectic interests in philosophy. None of them adhered to Stoicism, though they were both fascinated by the perfect logic of the system. Both tried to get rid of the connection between representation and assent, but in very different ways, and with different intentions.

For Cicero, the first preoccupation was to create Latin equivalents of Greek concepts.<sup>9</sup> In this task he succeeded perfectly, since his translations are still the terms we use in our psychology of knowledge. To translate *sunkatathesis*, he proposed *adsensus*, *adsensio*, *adprobatio*, and to express the process of *katalêpsis*, he used the verb *comprehendere* and its derivatives like *comprehensibile*. But this acuteness in identifying the best equivalents did not signify that he approved the connections which the Stoics instituted between them. As an Academic in the tradition of Carneades, his purpose was to demonstrate that Zeno or Chrysippus were wrong in thinking that a harmonious relation existed between representations and assent. The Stoics, because they were confident in the powers of Nature, affirmed that the world of sensations and representations could be the basis for perfect knowledge and virtuous actions. Cicero, and more generally the philosophers of the New Academy, in the tradition of a certain Platonic defiance towards sensations, pretended that many elements induced them to assert that a rigorous evaluation of the representations led not to assent but to the suspension of assent, the famous *epochê*.<sup>10</sup> In Stoic doctrine the wise man had a positive perfection, he was the man who understood that the natural function of the

---

*Veterum Fragmenta* [3 vol.; Stuttgart: Teubner, 1902-1925]), 2:90-91. See Zeno’s famous simile of the hand (Cicero, *Lucullus* 144 = *SVF* 1:66) and Kerferd, “The Problem of *Synkatathesis* and *Katalêpsis*,” p. 113.

<sup>9</sup> On this point, see C. Lévy, “Cicéron créateur du vocabulaire latin de la connaissance : essai de synthèse,” in *La langue latine, langue de la philosophie*, ed. P. Grimal (Rome: Ecole Française, 1992), pp. 91-116.

<sup>10</sup> On the conflicts in relation with the interpretation of this concept, see A.M. Ioppolo, *Opinione e scienza, Il dibattito tra Stoici e Accademici nel III e nel II secolo ac* (Napoli: Bibliopolis, 1986).

individual logos was to be in harmony with the cosmic one. In the Academic dialectical subversion of Stoicism the wise man found his perfection in the capacity to resist the seduction of sensations, even when representations seemed to be perfectly true. In other words, Cicero, as the other philosophers of the New Academy, kept the language of Stoicism but disconnected *sunkatathesis* and *katalêpsis*, replacing the perfect science of the wise by his perfect *epochê*, his absolute capacity of resisting to the seduction of the sensations and propositions he received. It can be noticed that even Cicero who, thanks to his other master, Antiochus of Ascalon, was aware of a dogmatic interpretation of Platonism, showed himself quite parsimonious in his references to a noetic language. They are not only scarce but often ambiguous in the suggestion of a transcendental world. As an example let us mention what is said by Varro, defender of Antiochus of Ascalon in the second version of the *Academica*:<sup>11</sup>

The criterion of truth was not in the senses, they maintained, although it took its start from the senses: the mind was the judge of things. They believed that this was the only faculty deserving our trust, because it alone discerned what was always simple, uniform, and same as itself. (*Idea* was the term they used for this, the name Plato had already given it; but we can rightly call it a form).

Of course, the reference to Plato is explicit, but Varro did not stress on the ontological transcendence of these Forms, perhaps he pretended to expose what Antiochus called the system of *Antiqui*, i.e. a doctrine which in his interpretation was common to the immediate disciples of Plato and to the Lyceum in its early stages. As, in a rather contradictory way, he recognized that Aristotle got rid of Platonic Forms, Antiochus could not insist on the peculiarities of Plato's noetic world. In the first version of the *Academica*, Lucullus, who defends Antiochus' position on gnoseology in a famous Alexandrian **disputation** polemic debate, delivers a speech which is rigorously in accordance with the Stoic doctrine on this point. So, it can be said that both negatively, through the scepticism of Arcesilas and his successors, and positively, through Antiochus' somewhat confused eclecticism, Cicero's texts on knowledge are still deeply influenced by the predominance of the Stoa.

Things are quite different with Philo. The first remark we can make is in relation with a dissymmetry. *Sunkatathesis*, as a noun, is used only twice by him. We can add an adverbial occurrence (*asunkatathetôs*) and an adjectival one (*asunkatathetôi*). It is well known that Philo's works represent a huge number of pages. The paucity of an essential concept of the Stoic vocabulary, and more generally of the *lingua franca* of the philosophers of this time, is

---

<sup>11</sup> *Lib. Ac.* 1.30 (transl. Brittain).

an element that, to the best of our knowledge, has not attracted the attention of scholars. This cannot be considered a coincidence, since *epochê*, which is the negation of *sunkatathesis*, occurs only once,<sup>12</sup> though Philo wrote extensive passages with sceptic themes, especially in *De somniis* and *De ebrietate*. The stylistic explanation, i.e. Philo's refusal to use non-classical terms, too narrowly linked to a precise philosophical context, is not absurd, but it can hardly be the only one since, as we will see, he frequently uses *katalêpsis* which, at least as a noun, was also a technical term rooted in the Stoic vocabulary. As a hypothesis, we will examine an alternative explanation, in relation with the structure of *sunkatathesis*. We will suggest here that the state of the subject in Stoicism, at the same time free to give or to refuse his assent and inserted in the net of the universal causality, was in all respects unacceptable by Philo. The Stoic subject was at the same time too autonomous and too determined for him. The sovereign freedom of approving or refusing representations could appear to him as a sign of *authadeia*, the arrogance of the man obsessed by his own importance. In *Mut.* 56, commenting on Genesis 17:3, the episode where Abraham falls face down before God, sees in it the symbol of the dependence of the human beings upon the Creator: even Abraham, who is the symbol of the mind, without God's help falls down on the ground, and loses his perceptions of reality, his *katalêpseis*. In *Conf.* 123, the posterity of Cain is characterized by the erroneous opinion that our perceptions and conceptions depend on us. But the idea of a natural determinism also was in contradiction with the monotheistic faith in God, who is not subjected to any regulation and can through his miracles disrupt the rules of nature. *Katalêpsis*, on the other hand, was more acceptable, as a mere phenomenon of acceptance of some realities, the content of which had to be specified. Do the reading of texts confirm or refute this hypothesis?

We will first deal with *sunkatathesis*. It is noteworthy that in the two occurrences of this word as a noun, it is accompanied by another word. In the *De vita Mosis*,<sup>13</sup> Philo shows us Moses in a state of great perplexity about the date of Passover, a quite complex religious problem, the details of which need not concern us here. On the one hand, the date of the festival was set at the fourteenth day of the first month;<sup>14</sup> on the other hand, some people, plunged into mourning by the death of some relatives, and due to their ensuing state of ritual impurity,<sup>15</sup> were disappointed because they could not attend the ceremonies of Passover and

---

<sup>12</sup> *Fug.* 136.

<sup>13</sup> *Mos.* 2.228.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Lev 23:5; Num 9:5.

<sup>15</sup> *Mos.* 2.225; cf. Num 9:6.

asked to change the date. Moses is divided between contradictory sentiments, he does not know if he will accept or refuse these protestations, his temptation to assent (*sunkatathesis*) to the queries is counterbalanced by the respect of Law, which impels him to refuse (*arnêsis*).<sup>16</sup> In this situation, a philosopher of the New Academy would have practised the suspension of assent, *epochê*, and a Stoic, considering that grief was a negative passion, probably would have rejected the mournful persons. In both cases the decision would have been a personal one. But for Philo, this cannot be. When Moses does not know what to do, he asks God to find a solution and God gives an oracle that preserves both the Law and the desire of attending the ceremonies, expressed by the persons mourning their beloved. The sense of the passage is clear. Human capacity of assent and refusal is limited by the incapacity of the mind to go beyond some contradictions. Moses' attitude shows that in these cases, it is wise not to remain in perplexity, but to ask God to bring the solution, at the risk of changing the laws of Nature, as it was the case in the episode of the sacrifice of Isaac.<sup>17</sup> There is a kind of subtle irony in the use of *sunkatathesis* by Philo in this passage. Even the man who is the closest to God and who, in Philo's representations, has many features of the Stoic *sophos* is bound to require an explicit intervention of God when the natural link between perception and assent divides itself in two contradictory possibilities.

In the second passage,<sup>18</sup> *sunkatathesis* and *boulê* are used by Philo in an allegorical way, to qualify Lot's daughters. They wanted to be pregnant from their father, who is the allegory of Mind, and they made him drunk to this end.<sup>19</sup> For Philo, they are the symbol of the temptation of sensation and intelligence to impose their authority fraudulently, regardless of God's omnipotence: "What He the Existent One did for him, they say that Mind can bring about them". The negative connotations could hardly be more evident. Philo does not limit himself to the passage of Genesis in which this episode is related. He argues from Deut 23:3 that Ammonites and Moabites are the posterity of Lot's daughters, which is a mean to signify that they could not be considered as isolated characters. They represent an everlasting

---

<sup>16</sup> *Mos.* 2.228: ἀρνήσεως καὶ συγκαταθέσεως μεταξὺ φορούμενος ἰκετεύει τὸν θεὸν δικαστὴν γενέσθαι καὶ χρησμῶ τὴν κρίσιν ἀναφῆναι.

<sup>17</sup> On Philo's interpretation of this episode, cf. C. Lévy, "Le 'scepticisme' de Philon d'Alexandrie : une influence de la Nouvelle Académie ? ", in *Hellenica et Judaica. Hommage à Valentin Nikiprowetzky*, ed. A. Caquot, M. Hadas-Lebel, J. Riaud (Leuven-Paris 1986), p. 29-41.

<sup>18</sup> *Post.* 175.

<sup>19</sup> *Gen* 19:33.

tendency of the human mind to ignore that God is the author of everything that concerns the life of man, in contradiction with the faith and the values personified by Israel. They are also the image given by Philo of the Stoic ambition of a human wisdom based only on the freedom and the authority of the mind, at least in the wise man.

In *Leg.* 2.65, we find the adverbial form *asunkatathetôs* in an ethical context, about Adam and Eve's nakedness, of which they were not ashamed. Philo says that it is necessary to distinguish between three different realities: decency, which characterizes virtue; impudence which is the sign of perversity; the absence of both, which was precisely Adam and Eve's situation, since they were unable to have an understanding of good and evil and to give an assent to one of them.<sup>20</sup> The commentary shows how far Philo is from the Stoic concepts. While in this doctrine, there is a natural complementarity between sensation, intelligence and assent, in Philo's opinion the pacific coexistence between *aesthesis* and *nous* is only possible when they are, like in the case of Adam and Eve, empty frames. All this was simply absurd from a Stoic point of view, since it was ontologically impossible for them to have faculties without a real object. Here again Philo mentions *sunkatathesis* only because by using it he is in situation of suggesting something deeply contradictory with a Stoic dogma.

In *Deus* 100, Philo tackles the problem of those who try to do something without having the capacity to realize this purpose, while others perform any other right action without the assent of their judgement or will, but by doing violence to their inclination. The former fail in their purpose and incur disgrace, the latter are wounded and chased by their inward feelings. Here, apparently the reference to *sunkatathesis* is more positive since it appears as a condition *sine qua non* to perform ethical actions. But there are still some nuances. Philo does not say *aneu sunkatatheteôs* or *asunkatathetôs*, as any Stoic would have said, but *asunkatathetôi gnômêi*, an expression in which Philo counterbalances the presence of the technical adjective by using the classical word *gnômê*, which is scarcely found in Stoic texts. But the problem is no merely terminological. For the Stoics, assent was an essential faculty, because it entailed action and revealed in different ways all the features of a personality. Philo's anthropology was much more complex, especially because he gave a prominent place to an element which was as theological and ethical as psychological: *suneidos*, conscience.

Unlike *sunkatathesis*, *katalêpsis* is a quite frequent concept in Philo. It would be

---

<sup>20</sup> τὸ δὲ μήτε αἰδεῖσθαι μήτε ἀναισχυντεῖν τοῦ ἀκαταλήπτως ἔχοντος καὶ ἀσυγκαταθέτως περὶ οὗ νῦν ἐστὶν ὁ λόγος· ὁ γὰρ μηδέπω κατάληψιν ἀγαθοῦ ἢ κακοῦ λαβὼν οὔτε ἀναισχυντεῖν οὔτε αἰδεῖσθαι δύναται.

tempting to explain this dissymmetry, which was simply impossible from a Stoic point of view, by Philo's ignorance of the technical aspects of this doctrine. However this hypothesis is refuted by the presence, in *De congressu*,<sup>21</sup> of a passage which gives with great accuracy some Stoic definitions in which *katalêpsis* is included. *Technê* is "a system of conceptions coordinated to work for some useful end," and science "a sure and certain apprehension which cannot shake **changed** by argument." These definitions are expressed in the same way as in the best Stoic sources. Philo's *paideia* was certainly excellent and he seems to have never forgotten the content of his philosophical handbooks. However we can find an interesting confusion in this same field of perception. In *Her.* 132, in the context of a quite complex reflection about the *logos tomeus*, which divides realities, he writes that *aisthêsis* is divided in *katalêptikon phantasia kai akatalêpton*. These adjectives are specifically Stoic and prove again Philo's relative familiarity with the gnoseological concepts of this school. However there is a problem since in the Stoic theory of knowledge, *aisthêsis* is generally defined as the assent to a *phantasia kataleptikê*, i.e. to a representation prepared by nature to receive this assent. In Cicero's *Academica*, this definition is carefully respected, when he writes about the invention of a new gnoseology by Zeno:<sup>22</sup> *quod erat sensu comprehensum, id ipsum sensum appellabat*, a sentence in which *sensu* designs the sensation as the function of a physic organ, while in the second occurrence *sensum* is the representation which received an assent. All this is in accordance with the three Stoic senses of *aesthêsis* that we find in Diogenes Laertius:<sup>23</sup> "The Stoics apply the term sense or sensation (*aisthêsis*) to three things: the current passing from the principal part of the soul to the senses; apprehension (*katalêpsis*) by means of the senses; the apparatus of the sense-organs, in which some persons are deficient." In other words Cicero perfectly respects the Stoic terminology, which is not the case with Philo. This is all the more surprising because Aetius' doxographical testimony, reflecting scholastics teachings, insists on the difference between sensations which are always true, while representations can be true or false.<sup>24</sup> To the best of our knowledge Philo's allusion to the division of *aisthêsis* is an *unicum* to the explanation of which we can bring the following elements:

---

<sup>21</sup> *Congr.* 141, cf. *SVF* 1:73 and 2:9-97: τέχνης μὲν γὰρ ὄρος οὗτος· σύστημα ἐκ καταλήψεων συγγεγυμνασμένων πρὸς τι τέλος εὐχρηστον, τοῦ εὐχρηστοῦ διὰ τὰς κακοτεχνίας ὑγιῶς προστιθεμένου· ἐπιστήμης δέ· κατάληψις ἀσφαλῆς καὶ βέβαιος, ἀμετάπτωτος ὑπὸ λόγου.

<sup>22</sup> *Lib. Ac.* 1.41.

<sup>23</sup> Aetius, *Placita* 4.8.1 = *SVF* 2:850.

<sup>24</sup> Aetius *Placita* 4.9.4 = *SVF* 2:78.



1) We find in Sextus Empiricus<sup>25</sup> some interesting comparative material, in the passage that states that “the Stoics and Peripatetics, opening a middle way have said that some sensibles really exist, as being true, and some do not exist, as sensation lies about them.” The participle *temnontes* means exactly “cutting,” so that we find, in a quite different context, the same metaphor as in Philo’s passage. But in Sextus’ passage, the way opened by the Stoics divides not the *aisthêseis* but the *aisthêta*, i.e. the objects of sensation, of which some are true, while others do not exist. In our opinion, Sextus uses here *aisthêsis* with the first sense given by Diogenes Laertius;

2) In Cicero’s passage about Zeno’s theory of knowledge,<sup>26</sup> we find the same idea of a division, but this time about *uisa*, a term which is his translation of *phantasiai*: “that what had been apprehended by one of the senses, he called ‘a sensation’ itself. And if it had been apprehended in such a way that it couldn’t be dislodged by reason, he called it ‘science,’ if not he called it ‘ignorance’.” **Fin de la citation ?** This time the line of division goes through “sensations,” which is equivalent to *katalêpseis*, since they are representations that received an assent.

It is not impossible to consider that Philo’s expression is due to haste and lack of precision in a context which is much more exegetical than philosophical. But whatever the causes, the result is identical: he does not accept the implication between *phantasia* and *sunkatathesis*. It is noteworthy that, while he defines accurately *technê* and *epistêmê*, by using *katalêpsis*, this concept is never defined by him, perhaps because it contained a precise reference to *sunkatathesis*. We saw that, from his initiation to *paideia*, Philo got a precise knowledge at least of the main dogmas of Stoicism. It remains to investigate what he did with them.

In Stoicism, *katalêpsis* is exactly the point of contact between man and Nature, the point of departure of a natural process of knowledge which leads human beings who exercise their freedom in the correct way to become equal to God, and even, to some extent, superior to Him, since human perfection is reached through many hardships. That is at least what Seneca says in one of his letters:<sup>27</sup> “There is one point in which the sage has an advantage over the god; for a god is freed from terrors by the bounty of nature, the wise man by his own bounty”.

---

<sup>25</sup> *Adv. math.* 8.185 = *SVF* 2:76. We changed on this point the translation given by the Loeb edition, which does not respect the sense of *temnontes*: “pursuing a middle course.”

<sup>26</sup> *Lib. Ac.* 1.41: *Quod autem erat sensu comprehensum id ipsum sensum appellabat, et si ita erat comprehensum ut convelli ratione scientiam, sin aliter inscientiam nominabat.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ep.* 53.11-12: *Est aliquid quo sapiens antecedit deum : ille naturae beneficio non timet, suo sapiens.*

In Philo, *katalêpsis* is at the boundary between what human mind can know and what is out of its reach. The point is well illustrated by the following excerpt from *Deus* 62, which begins with the assertion: “God is not like a man, he is not even the sky, nor the cosmos.” He is *akatalêptos*, a recurring idea in Philo, in contradiction with the Stoic definition of science that the wise man reaches by a perfect knowledge of Nature, which is also God. The only *katalêpsis* we can have of him is that of his existence. *Akatalêpsia*, in a Stoic context necessarily leads to doubt or ignorance. To affirm that every knowledge, every virtue had their origin in an *akatalêptos* reality was for them a nonsense. In an interesting passage Porphyrius indicates that Stoics did not limit sensation to representation, since for them, in this sensitive process, it is possible to reach the substance (*ousian*) through assent.<sup>28</sup> That is exactly what Philo rejected. However, he admitted that human beings could have *katalêpseis*. What are they exactly? We believe that there are two great tendencies in his treatises.

The first one can be illustrated with his description of the capacities of human mind in *Det.* 89. Using a *topos* of philosophical literature which affirms that the human mind is swifter than any other reality, Philo writes: “(...) and now, having come not only as far as the bounds of earth and sea but of air and sky also, not even there did it stay its steps, deeming the limit of the universe to be too narrow for its constant and unceasing course, and aiming at proceeding further, and at apprehending if possible the nature of God, which, beyond the bare fact that He is, is inapprehensible”. Philo’s description is reminiscent of the one found in Cicero’s *De legibus* and *Tusculans*. In the first book of the former,<sup>29</sup> in a way which is quite close to that of Philo, he describes the capacity of the soul to understand all the realities of the universe: “And further, when it has examined the heavens, the earth, the seas, the nature of the universe, and understands whence all these things came and whither they must return, when and how they are destined to perish, what part of them is mortal and transient and what is divine and eternal; and what it almost lays hold of the ruler and governor of the universe...” Cicero, who wants to demonstrate that the wise man will discover his own nature through knowledge of the universe, does not affirm that this man knows God’s nature. He is a little more prudent, since he says that he “almost reaches the comprehension” of the ruler of the world. The word “almost” is an

---

<sup>28</sup> Porphyry, *De anima*, ap. Stobaeum 2.349, 23 W = SVF 2:74: τῶν ἀπὸ τῆς Στοᾶς τὴν αἴσθησιν οὐκ ἐν τῇ φαντασίᾳ ἱστάντων μόνον, ἀλλὰ τὴν οὐσίαν ἀναρτώντων ἀπὸ τῆς συγκαταθέσεως.

<sup>29</sup> *Leg.* 1.61: *Idemque cum caelum, terras, maria rerumque omnium naturam perspexerit, eaque unde generata quo recur<s>ura, quando, quo modo obitura, quid in iis mortale et caducum, quid diuinum aeternumque sit uiderit, ipsumque ea moderantem et regentem paene <deum>prenderit...* On textual problems, see A.R. Dyck, *A commentary on Cicero, De legibus* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan, 2004), *ad loc.*

interesting nuance, but this text is full of optimism about the possibilities of the human mind to attain a rational perfection in this world, and certainly is the opposite of Philo's negative theology. In the *Tusculans*, Cicero is more cautious. He admits that the senses can receive true informations about colours, sounds, odours, and tastes. But he says that during life on earth they are blocked up by some material elements that prevent them from perceiving more subtle realities, so that it is impossible for the soul to know its own nature.<sup>30</sup> However, in his view, what is impossible during a human life will become possible after death. It seems evident that for Philo God's nature will not become *katalêptos* after death. In *Her.* 74, he says that when, in a process of ecstasy, the soul leaves the body, it offers its capacity of *katalêpsis* to the One who is the Cause of the true *katalêpsis*. This oblation is not itself a *katalêpsis*.

The second direction is a far more Sceptic one. It is the one we find in the Sceptic modes of the *De ebrietate*, where Philo, the first witness of Aenesidemus' renovation of Scepticism, tries to demonstrate the impossibility of knowledge, *akatalêpsia*.<sup>31</sup> While for Cicero, in the *Academics*, the central terms are *adsensio* and its contrary, *adsensionis retentio*, which is the equivalent of *epochê*, for Philo the main purpose is not, at least explicitly, to prove that it is necessary to suspend the assent, but to recognize that nobody can know anything. More to the point, everything is itself *akatalêpton*, and we can only have a relative knowledge of it, by comparison with other things. The same inspiration is present in *De somniis*, where the sky, and not only God, is proclaimed to be *akatalêpton*<sup>32</sup> and the same affirmation is given about the soul<sup>33</sup>, as it is the case in Cicero's first *Tusculan*.<sup>34</sup>

Can we find a kind of coherence in these two contradictory orientations? Perhaps it is expressed in *Mut.* 9, when Philo says that, with the exception of God, everything in the world is submitted to *katalêpsis*, even if this is not realized. The world is made to be known by human beings, but they have to recognize that God cannot be an object of *katalêpsis*. To persuade his reader about the existence of this limit, Philo uses sometimes Sceptic arguments which are certainly much more radical than his own position. There is an interesting remark in

---

<sup>30</sup> *Tusc.* 1.47: *quamquam foramina illa , quae patent ad animum a corpore, callidissimo artificio natura fabricata est, tamen terrenis concretisque corporibus sunt intersaepta quodam modo.*

<sup>31</sup> On these modes in Philo, see C. Lévy, "Deux problèmes doxographiques chez Philon d'Alexandrie : Posidonius et Enésidème," in *Philosophy and Doxography in the Imperial Age*, ed. A. Brancacci (Firenze: Leo Olschki, 2005), pp. 79-102.

<sup>32</sup> *Somn.* 1.21 : ο d' ouranoj akatalhpton ecei thn fusin. ὁ δ' οὐρανὸς ἀκατάληπτον ἔχει τὴν φύσιν

<sup>33</sup> *Somn.* 1.30

<sup>34</sup> *Tusc.* 1.23.

this respect, in *Her.* 247. After having described the conflict between Sceptics and Dogmatics, he explains that they were generated by the fact that the mind is credulous, and ignores too often how long and difficult the research for truth is. The imperative of search is absolute, a point on which Philo's Platonic and religious beliefs coincided perfectly.

In the context of imperial philosophy, Philo's originality resides in the fact of having, through many variations, disconnected knowledge and autonomy of the self. For the Stoics as well as for the philosophers of the New Academy, knowledge or doubt about knowledge absolutely needed a fixed point, identified with the *sunkatathesis*, expression of the freedom of every human being. The former and the latter, though radically opposed, agreed in thinking that the central problem of the self was to assent or not. For Philo, the only fixed point is God, both *akatalêptos* himself and source of all the *katalêpseis*. If M. Foucault was right in speaking of a "herméneutique du sujet" about authors like Seneca, Musonius Rufus, or Epictetus,<sup>36</sup> he should certainly have stressed the fact that, almost at the same moment and with a language often almost identical, at least in appearance, a new voice claimed that the only possible hermeneutics was the one of God's word.

---

<sup>36</sup> M. Foucault, *L'herméneutique du sujet*. Cours au Collège de France. 1981-1982, éd. par F. Gros (Paris: Gallimard-Seuil, 2001).

## **Bibliography**

- ~~F. Alesse (ed.), *Philo of Alexandria and Post-Aristotelian Philosophy* (Leiden: Brill, 2008).~~
- ~~Ch. Brittain, *Cicero On Academic Scepticism* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co, 2006).~~
- ~~J. Brunschwig (ed.), *Les Stoïciens et leur logique* (Paris: Vrin, 2004<sup>2</sup>).~~
- ~~A. Dyck, *A commentary on Cicero, De legibus* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan, 2004).~~
- ~~M. Foucault, *L'herméneutique du sujet. Cours au Collège de France. 1981-1982*, éd. par F. Gros (Paris: Gallimard-Seuil, 2001).~~
- ~~A.M. Ioppolo, *Opinione e scienza, Il dibattito tra Stoici e Accademici nel III e nel II secolo ac* (Napoli: Bibliopolis, 1986).~~
- ~~G. Kerferd, "The Problem of *Synkatathesis* and *Katalêpsis* in Stoic Doctrine," in Brunschwig 2004<sup>2</sup>, pp. 109-130, with a recent bibliography on the topic by Th. Benatouïl.~~
- ~~C. Lévy, "Cicéron créateur du vocabulaire latin de la connaissance : essai de synthèse," in *La langue latine, langue de la philosophie*, ed. P. Grimal (Rome: Ecole Française, 1992), pp. 91-116.~~
- ~~C. Lévy, "Le 'scepticisme' de Philon d'Alexandrie : une influence de la Nouvelle Académie ? ", in *Hellenica et Judaica. Hommage à Valentin Nikiprowetzky*, ed. A. Caquot, M. Hadas-Lebel, J. Riaud (Leuven-Paris 1986), p. 29-41.~~
- ~~C. Lévy, "Mais que faisait donc Philon en Egypte? A propos de l'identité diasporique de Philon," in *La rivelazione in Filone di Alessandria: Natura, Legge, Storia*, ed. A.M. Mazzanti and F. Calabi (Bologna: Pazzini, 2004), pp. 295-312.~~
- ~~C. Lévy, "Deux problèmes doxographiques chez Philon d'Alexandrie: Posidonius et Enésidème," in *Philosophy and Doxography in the Imperial Age*, ed. A. Brancacci (Firenze: Leo Olschki, 2005), pp. 79-102.~~
- ~~A.A. Long, "Philo on Stoic Physics," in F. Alesse (2008), pp. 121-140.~~
- ~~A.A. Long and D. Sedley ed., *The Hellenistic Philosophers* (Cambridge: CUP, 1987).~~
- ~~M. Niehoff, *Philo on Jewish Identity and Culture* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001).~~
- ~~R. Radice, "Philo on Stoic Ethics. Reflections on the Idea of Freedom," in F. Alesse (2008), pp. 141-168.~~
- ~~G. Reydams-Schils, "Philo of Alexandria on Stoic and Platonist Psycho-Physiology: The Socratic Higher Ground," in F. Alesse (2008), pp. 169-196.~~



## **Abstract**

While there is in Stoicism a strong connection between assent (*sunkatathesis*) and perception (*katalêpsis*), this is not the case in Philo. Unlike the Neo-Academic philosophers, he does not try even to demonstrate that *sunkatathesis* must be linked with the suspension of assent (*epochê*). He uses *aisthêsis* frequently, and *sunkatathesis* very scarcely. This cannot be explained by stylistic reasons. In the philonian rare occurrences of *sunkatathesis*, the concept of assent is considered as a negative one, since it supposes that human being has in him an independent faculty of approving or denying. For Philo, all this depends on God. By disconnecting assent and knowledge, he introduces of conception of the self very different of the one developed by Roman Stoics, which Foucault enhances so much.