

Workshop

Philo of Alexandria and the Beginning of Jewish Philosophical Scepticism

Dedicated to Carlos Lévy's Scholarly Work on Philo of Alexandria

October 27–28, 2019



© Picture: The Sacrifice of Isaac, Beit Alpha Synagogue, Wikimedia Commons

Convenors

- Carlos Lévy (Université Paris-Sorbonne)
- Giuseppe Veltri (Universität Hamburg)
- Ze'ev Strauss (Hochschule für Jüdische Studien Heidelberg)

There is a paradox within Philonian scholarship. On the one hand, Philo's thought has never drawn as much scholarly attention as it does nowadays, while "scepticology" has become one of the most flourishing fields of research. On the other hand, works on Philo's scepticism are still quite scarce, and most of the studies on the theme at hand limit their scope to a small number of Philonian texts.

The workshop aims to offer something different. By adopting a more holistic approach to Philo's corpus, it will re-evaluate the presence of sceptical concepts in it. Forms of sceptical modes of thought can be found in many treatises, even if they are not explicit. It will be therefore argued that scepticism constitutes an essential component of Philo's Jewish philosophy.

This session will pursue the following questions: (1) How should the relationship between doubt and revelation be described in Philo's thought in view of his scepticism? (2) How does Philo subordinate other forms of the absolute, especially those of Platonism and Stoicism, to his biblical conception of God as the only true Being? (3) Finally, the workshop will tackle one of the most perplexing and influential aspects of Philo's *Weltanschauung*: the integration of sceptical modes of thought into his system of negative theology.

Programme

Sunday, October 27, 2019

| | |
|--------------------|---|
| 17:30 | Registration |
| 18:00 | Welcoming Remarks <i>Giuseppe Veltri (Universität Hamburg)</i> |
| 18:15–19:45 | Panel 1 <i>Chair: Ze'ev Strauss (Hochschule für Jüdische Studien Heidelberg)</i> |
| 18:15–19:00 | A Wise Woman: The Skepsis <i>Giuseppe Veltri (Universität Hamburg)</i> |
| 19:00–19:45 | Philo vs Cicero: Is Scepticism a Fake Concept? <i>Carlos Lévy (Université Paris-Sorbonne)</i> |
| 20:00 | Reception (Room 5050) |

Monday, October 28, 2019

| | |
|--------------------|---|
| 10:15–11:45 | Panel 2 <i>Chair: Giuseppe Veltri (Universität Hamburg)</i> |
| 10:15–11:00 | Transcendence, Skepsis, and the Absolute in the Philosophy of Philo of Alexandria <i>Ze'ev Strauss (Hochschule für Jüdische Studien Heidelberg)</i> |
| 11:00–11:45 | Platonic Scepticism and Philonian Exegesis <i>Mauro Bonazzi (Universiteit Utrecht)</i> |
| 11:45–12:15 | Coffee Break |
| 12:15–13:00 | Panel 3 <i>Chair: Giuseppe Veltri (Universität Hamburg)</i> |
| 12:15–13:00 | Doubt and Certitude: Relativism and the Possibilities of Knowing in Philo of Alexandria <i>Francesca Calabi (Università di Pavia)</i> |
| 13:00–14:00 | Lunch Break (Room 5050) |

| | |
|--------------------|--|
| 14:00–15:30 | Panel 4 <i>Chair: Carlos Lévy (Université Paris-Sorbonne)</i> |
| 14:00–14:45 | ἔδοξα μᾶλλον ἐτέρων ἀκριβῶσαι—Literary Strategies “To Make the Uncertain Certain Again” in Philo’s <i>Vita Mosis</i> <i>Martin Hose (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München)</i> |
| 14:45–15:30 | The Riddle of Philonian Cosmopolitanism <i>Valéry Laurand (Université Bordeaux-Montaigne)</i> |
| 15:30–16:00 | Coffee Break |
| 16:00–16:45 | Panel 5 <i>Chair: Carlos Lévy (Université Paris-Sorbonne)</i> |
| 16:00–16:45 | Sceptical Strategies in a Dogmatic Context: Augustine Deploying Academic Scepticism <i>Therese Fuhrer (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München)</i> |
| 16:45–17:30 | Conclusion and Final Remarks <i>Emidio Spinelli (Sapienza Università di Roma)</i> |
| 19:00 | Dinner |

Abstracts

Panel 1

A Wise Woman: The Skepsis

Giuseppe Veltri (Universität Hamburg)

In his *De fuga et inventione*, 54–55, Philo seems to approach the sceptical rhetoric strategy in a positive way: “Well knowing that he [i.e. the lawgiver] never puts in a superfluous word, so vast is his a desire to speak plainly and clearly, I began debating with myself why he said that the intentional slayer is not to be put to death only but ‘by death to be put to death.’ ‘In what other way,’ I asked myself, ‘does a man who dies come to his end save by death?’ So I attended the lectures of a wise woman, whose name is Skepsis, and was rid of my questioning; for she taught me that some people are dead while living, and some alive while dead. She told me that bad people, prolonging their days to extreme old age, are dead men, deprived of the life in association with virtue, while good people, even if cut off from their partnership with the body, live for ever, and are granted immortality.” The exegetical problem on which Philo focused is the well-known expression *mot yamut*, rendered as θανάτω θανατούσθαι (“he shall surely die”) in the Greek of the Septuagint, attempting to resolve the query about the double repetition of the verb “to die.” According to Philo, and also to the rabbinic exegetical tradition, every repetition necessarily implies an addition of meaning. A hermeneutic rule of Rabbi ‘Aqiva says that every duplication of a word is an amplification of meaning, especially in the use of the infinitive before the finite verb, as in our case. In my lecture, we will consider the elements of this passage: the wise woman called Skepsis, the enquiry, and the answer.

Philo vs Cicero: Is Scepticism a Fake Concept?

Carlos Lévy (Université Paris-Sorbonne)

The concept of scepticism has become ubiquitous in studies of ancient philosophy, especially those of the Hellenistic and Roman periods. But what are we talking about exactly? Brochard and Conche, in pages which are unfortunately too little known, have demonstrated that Pyrrho was not the creator of scepticism in the sense in which it is commonly understood. However, this has not prevented the emergence of new “sceptics” created by some well-known scholars. Cicero has recently been presented not as a Platonist, nor as an Academic of the Carneadean tradition, but as a “Roman sceptic.” He was thus defined with a term he had never used, a term that did not exist in Latin. Philo is an even more complicated case, since he was the first to spread the sceptical tropes, though he strongly vituperated the sceptics of his time. In an attempt to bring clarity to all this confusion, we will examine the cases of these two thinkers based on the following criteria:

- their historical situation in relation to the thoughts which today are said to be sceptical;
- the question of self-referentiality, since the masterly intuition of Aenesidemus was that scepticism should not depend on any other doctrine;
- the question of transcendence: Platonic in Cicero, monotheist in Philo.

It will therefore be necessary to evaluate the legitimacy of the term “sceptical” applied to two such different thinkers.

Panel 2

Transcendence, Skepsis, and the Absolute in the Philosophy of Philo of Alexandria

Ze'ev Strauss (Hochschule für Jüdische Studien Heidelberg)

In my lecture, I will discuss the correlation between God and sceptical thought patterns in Philo's philosophy. I will attempt to show that Philo utilises the sceptic notion of ἐποχή to account for the transcendence and unfathomableness of God's being. I would also like to argue that the Alexandrian philosopher employs sceptic ideas to attain a more purified vision of God as the Absolute. Lastly, I will call attention to Philo's image of Abraham as a sceptic.

Platonic Scepticism and Philonian Exegesis

Mauro Bonazzi (Universiteit Utrecht)

Scepticism is displayed in many ways in the ancient world. Scholars have now shown that different versions of scepticism were circulating at that time. However, while this is now widely agreed for the Hellenistic world, much remains to be done in the imperial world, when new and original forms of scepticism were developed. While during the Hellenistic centuries scepticism depends first and foremost on epistemological issues, during the imperial epoch, it rather becomes an ontological problem. Paradoxical as it may appear, what we know of reality (metaphysical dualism, the existence of a transcendent God) shows that we cannot have a proper knowledge of reality. This position is endorsed by Philo and many other Platonist philosophers. The aim of my talk is to investigate this parallel in order to better assess the (always controversial) relation between Philo and Platonism.

Panel 3

Doubt and Certitude: Relativism and the Possibilities of Knowing in Philo of Alexandria

Francesca Calabi (Università di Pavia)

The only certitude is in God. Men are characterised by an inability to see, an incertitude in knowing, an impossibility of grasping things. God, the powers, and the origins of the soul and the world cannot be known by men, and likewise, perishable things cannot be fully seized and understood as they change. Their continuous movement hinders us from obtaining stable and steady opinions about them, and still less from gaining any real knowledge about them.

The problem is seeing whether there is any possibility of a gradual approach to the knowledge of truth as represented by Abraham's progress. This is the aim of all those who try to reach knowledge, an image which is in contrast with the sceptical idea of the suspension of judgement, of the impossibility of making statements.

There are people who, while proceeding along an erroneous paths, also advance steadily and self-confidently, smug in their beliefs, as Pharaoh does. Other people examine themselves and hesitate, such as Hagar at the spring: she runs away and does not reply to the question “Whither goest thou?”, for it is a matter of uncertainty, and it is both safe and necessary to restrain oneself from speaking of what is uncertain (*Fug.* 206, transl. Younge).

If it is right to be aware of the limits of knowledge and to suspend judgment (i.e., to believe that Hagar’s actions at the spring were correct), are characters like Abraham who seek knowledge wrong to pursue it? Of course, they are aware that they will never reach a complete knowledge and that everything is transient, but then what distinguishes their research from the bold statements of Pharaoh, convinced that he holds the truth? Abraham knows that he cannot reach the certainty that God may have, but why does he not suspend judgment? Is he certain about his path? From another angle, Ishmael, the emblem of the sophist, quarrels with everyone: he has an excessive openness to doubt and welcomes controversial arguments (*Fug.* 209–10).

My aim in this paper is to see how the awareness of human limitations and of the continuous changes of perishable things interferes with any search for knowledge and with the self-confidence of those who seek the truth.

Philo on the Dangers of the “*pithanos*” – CANCELLED –
Sharon Weisser (Tel Aviv University)

Although Philo’s thought is often presented as a conciliation between Greek philosophy and the Torah, this picture does not square easily with some criticisms that he levels against Greek philosophy. In this presentation, my purpose is to make sense of these negative comments by showing that they are the expression of Philo’s distrust towards the philosophical practice of his own days. Philo’s objections mainly concern the contemporary philosophical practice of presenting disagreements between various philosophical systems (διαφωνία)—a practice that is strongly associated with the sceptics. Whereas the goal of the sceptic philosophers in listing the contrasting opinions was to lead to suspension of judgment on the grounds of their improvability, the doxographical exposition of the different views on one subject was, in Philo’s time, a valid mode for learning and practising philosophy. For Philo, the existence of many contradictory opinions among philosophers on most important issues shows that the truth has escaped the philosophical arena. More specifically, it is the *persuasiveness* of these contradictory discourses which constitutes, in Philo’s eyes, the main threat to the soul in search of wisdom and happiness. Their persuasive character has the power to allure the soul and to instill erroneous beliefs which will ultimately lead to passions and a vicious disposition.

Panel 4

ἔδοξα μᾶλλον ἐτέρων ἀκριβῶσαι—Literary Strategies “To Make the Uncertain Certain Again” in Philo’s *Vita Mosis*

Martin Hose (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München)

In Philo’s *Vita Mosis*, there are traces of a questioning or even a critique of the Moses who appears in the Pentateuch. This indicates that the tradition of the Jewish legislator conveyed by the Pentateuch in (late) Hellenism was massively questioned regarding its reliability and thus its credibility. Philo’s *Vita* uses various strategies against these arguably sceptical readings of the figure of Moses. The aim of my paper is first to analyse the strategies of questioning, then to analyse Philo’s techniques or strategies of questioning the questioning, and finally to determine more precisely those areas or components of the figure of Moses which Philo’s techniques “make safe” again, but also those which they leave “unsafe.”

The Riddle of Philonian Cosmopolitanism

Valéry Laurand (Université Bordeaux-Montaigne)

A Philonian “theory of the city” would be difficult to identify: the city appears to be both a place of perversion and a place of law and order. If that second aspect justifies a characterisation of the world as “μεγαλόπολις” (because of the universal law, which ensures its order and consistency), this *polis* does not fit the political and social reality of a city, but the state of a wise soul, κοσμοπολίτης. A comparison with stoicism seems obvious, with, however, three main differences. (1) The Stoic sage is an active citizen of the world, because the Stoic *cosmos* is essentially political, whereas the Philonian sage seems to be a passive subject of the divine law. (2) The Philonian sage transmits the divine law only if he has tested the nothingness of the world, of knowledge, and of his own being, while the Stoic sage has become an incarnation of the system. The world as “megalopolis” is not, for Philo, the area of political bonds, but the itinerary of a progressive dispossession: the citizen of the world understands the inanity of human knowledge and endeavours to assimilate himself to God. (3) The Philonian universal republic seems to be a place of illusions and doubts, which could justify *in fine* the political pattern applied to the world, while another republic is reserved for the “man of God”: the “republic of lasting and incorporeal ideas,” the nature of which must be determined.

Panel 5

Sceptical Strategies in a Dogmatic Context: Augustine Deploying Academic Scepticism

Therese Fuhrer (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München)

In the autobiographical narrative of the *Confessions*, Augustine presents himself passing through a “sceptical phase,” followed by his conversion experience in Milan and the composition of four philosophical dialogues (386 CE). In the first, *Contra Academicos*, he argues against Academic scepticism and speaks in favour of an anti-sceptical, Platonic–Christian position. My aim is to show that Augustine, both in his refutation of the “Academics” and also in his later dogmatic works,

repeatedly deploys sceptical arguments as a method of testing dogmatic positions, which includes the Platonic ones. In the second part of my paper, I will discuss the dialogue *De magistro* (which is not part of the early tetralogy), in which Augustine maintains a position of scepticism regarding language. Finally, in the third part, I will try to show how even when dealing with the text of the Bible, Augustine remains a sceptic, at least as far as his exegetical method is concerned.