

ACTAS DEL II CONGRESO INTERNACIONAL DE FILÓN DE ALEJANDRÍA
SANTA ROSA, 21 Y 22 DE OCTUBRE, 2021

FILÓN DE ALEJANDRÍA MÉTODO, FILOSOFÍA Y RECEPCIÓN

Editado por

PAOLA DRUILLE

LAURA PÉREZ

EDITORIAL DE LA UNIVERSIDAD NACIONAL DE LA PAMPA

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CAPÍTULO V

THE NEGATIVE THEOLOGY IN PHILO OF ALEXANDRIA. SOME GENERAL REMARKS

Marija Todorovska

Abstract: The paper offers some general remarks on Philo of Alexandria's apophatic approaches to God, through Philo's insistence on the de-anthropomorphization of God; and the typical negative-theological categories, such as God's inaccessibility, unknowability, and ineffability. Philo's negative theology is overviewed mainly through his thorough analysis of the ontological and theological concepts about the ineffability and unknowability of God. Some attention is paid to Philo's insistence on the fact the God is not a man, for He is immeasurably outside and beyond any human (or other) characteristics, and must not be presented as limited by such categories. Philo's insistence on the incomprehensibility of God is shown through his use of the apophatic methods (the use of alpha-privatives, or statements affirmative in their form, but negative in meaning etc.). The unnameability of God, resulting from his transcendence, as a key negative-theological category in Philo's works, is briefly outlined, along with the unknowability of God's essence, and his manifestations in various theophanies which allow for humans to know that God is, but not who or how (or what like) he is. Some stances on Philo being the first author to use ineffability as a core apophatic category are offered.

Keywords: Philo, negative theology, apophatic, ineffability

LA TEOLOGÍA NEGATIVA EN FILÓN DE ALEJANDRÍA. OBSERVACIONES GENERALES

Resumen: El artículo ofrece algunos comentarios generales sobre los acercamientos apofáticos a Dios de Filón de Alejandría, a través de la insistencia de Filón en la desantropomorfización de Dios; y las típicas categorías teológicas negativas, como la inaccesibilidad, incognoscibilidad e inefabilidad de Dios. La teología negativa de Filón se revisa principalmente a través de su análisis exhaustivo de los conceptos ontológicos y teológicos sobre la inefabilidad y la incognoscibilidad de Dios. Se presta cierta atención a la insistencia de Filón en el hecho de que Dios no es un hombre, porque está inconmensurablemente fuera y más allá de cualquier característica humana (o de otro tipo), y no debe presentarse como limitado por tales categorías. La insistencia de Filón en la incomprendibilidad de Dios se muestra a través de su uso de métodos apofáticos (el uso de alfa-privativos, o declaraciones afirmativas en su forma, pero negativas en significado, etc.). La innombrabilidad de Dios, resultante de su trascendencia, como categoría teológica negativa clave en las obras de Filón, se describe brevemente, junto con la incognoscibilidad de la esencia de Dios y sus manifestaciones en varias teofanías que permiten a los humanos saber que Dios es, pero no quién o cómo (o como qué) es él. Se ofrecen algunas posturas acerca de que Filón fue el primer autor en utilizar la inefabilidad como una categoría apofática central.

Palabras clave: Filón, teología negativa, apofático, inefabilidad

The de-anthropomorphization of God

The negative theology of the Platonist tradition is wonderfully multifarious, encompassing centuries of multiplex ontological and theological systems that use negative approaches to God, the One, the Absolute (or however the supreme, transcendent, ineffable Being is conceived and called); intertwined stances on the unknowability of the First Principle, the Creator, the Cause of all things; diverging, but not uncomplimentary ideas about the apophatic approaches; layers upon layers of shared references, separate interpretations, and new directions in the attempts to somehow (partially, limitedly, never essentially) access the inaccessible, talk about the unnamable, express the ineffable, conceive the inconceivable.

In this broad and versatile tradition, Philo of Alexandria might be considered as the first proper apophaticist (since negative theology is not one particular manner of thinking, or one-for-all fix for the intricacies of religious language; and since intellectual endeavors do not follow the same rules of biological procreation, it would not be suitable to call him “the father of negative theology”). While Plato, according to a scholarly consensus on the matter, might be considered to be the inspiration, or the inauguratory author for potential clear auto-reflexive negative-theological thinking, the title of “first” should be reserved for Philo. Several aspects of Philo’s negative approaches to the transcendent, unnamable, ineffable God will briefly be tackled on this occasion, not in a thorough and deep analysis of Philo’s theology, but offered as general remarks on the subject.

The first thing, quite obvious and entirely understandable in his motivation, is Philo’s insistence on the de-anthropomorphization of God. In Philo, as expected, there are numerous instances of insistence on the fact that God is not a man, following the *Old Testament* (like that God is not human, that he should lie, not a human being, that he should change his mind, Nm 23.19; or, he is not a man, that he should have regret, 1 Sam 15.29). What originates from this is the belief that God’s nature cannot be understood as if it were human. Of course, Philo is aware of the scripture picturing God with human characteristics, but he thinks that they should not be literally read, but rather used in the cases when people are incapable to grasp the transcendence of the nature of God, and need to use anthropomorphisms. Even Moses, “the theologian”, had done so, reminds Philo (*Conf.* 139-140). The *Bible*, which continuously declares the conceptions of the divinity in a sacred manner, and also serves to teach the unwise, speaks of God as similar to man, but not any concrete particular man, of course. It is about a general similarity, in a dominantly educational manner. Therefore, these formulations are not used with strict truthfulness, but indirectly, having in mind *who* is reading/hearing them, and how important it is for them to learn something valuable (*Somn.* 1.234-235).

The negations that Philo uses are a part of the usual apophatic formulations: alpha-privatives, negations of predicates, or statements affirmative in form, but negative in meaning. God must be envisaged as free from any specific quality, as indestructible and immutable, Philo posits, in a classic apophatic move (*Leg.* 1.51). This does not mean that Philo only uses alpha-privatives, on the contrary, or that he limits his method to depriving the notion of God of certain attributes. No foolish ideas should penetrate our minds, Philo warns – the entire world would still be an unworthy place of dwelling for God, who is a place in itself and for itself. God is self-sufficient, he fulfills himself and fills and circumvents everything else which is in some sense lacking, or is forlorn, or empty. God, however, is not circumscribable (or, to be lenient with the affirmative formulae with negative meanings, he is uncircumscribable), for He is one with the universe (*Leg.* 3.44). In Philo there can be no straightforward claims whatsoever that God is in any way (like) a man.

Following the warnings of Moses, Philo reminds that no gods made out of silver or gold should be worshipped. Whoever thinks that God has some quality, or that He is not one, or that he is not uncreated, indestructible, and immutable, only hurts himself, and cannot harm God in any way. This goes along the continuous insistence that God should be conceived as free from any quality, infallible and immutable (*Leg.* 1.51).

By being uncreated, Being itself, He who brought into existence everything else, He has no need of things usually attributed to the created creatures (*Deus* 56). Philo elaborates this stance, by first inquiring where God would go, since he already fills all things with his presence, and towards what he would go, since nothing is of his honor and dignity (nor, adds Philo, would he have a reason to go, in the sense that walking is a good exercise for one's health). Nor can it be claimed, Philo continues, that God gives and takes, as if he had hands, for he never receives anything from anyone (because, what and from whom would he ever need?). In the act of not needing anything, God actually has everything; and when he gives, it is actually his creative power with which he had created that which exists (*Deus* 57). God is not a man, Philo writes, but neither is He the sky, or the world, because these are things with specific characteristics and qualities, and fall under the powers of perception.

God is not only unperceivable for the senses, but ungraspable for the intellect, when it comes to his essence (*ousia*). His existence is a fact that we (can) understand about him. Beyond this fact of God's existence, we understand nothing (*Deus* 62). This stance (frequently reiterated and reformulated) is crucial in Philo's negative theology. There is a perfect and supremely purified kind, initiated in the great mysteries, Philo explains, which does not distinguish the cause from the created things, as it would a body from its cast shadow. This kind, having emerged from the created object, receives a clear and manifested notion of the grand uncreated (principle), so that it comprehends him through himself, and comprehends his shadow, so as to understand what it is, as well as his reason, and the universe (*Leg.* 3.100). The entire sky has been made by God, Philo explains, and the creator necessarily comes before that which he creates. Philo considers the mind to be the fastest moving thing in the world, and writes that not even this fast movement of the mind can understand the grand cause of all things, due to the distance which cannot be described and put into boundaries (*Post.* 19).

God cannot be thought with(in) the human categories, and he can in no way be limited by them; he belongs to no class, but is a genus in itself, independent and beyond our comprehension. God is self-sufficient – although he creates the world, he has not need of anything contained within the world he has created. God is simple, incorporeal, indestructible, immutable, invisible and unbegotten. God is everything that the created nature is not, and beyond that (*Deus* 26). The divine is invisible and incomprehensible. It is everywhere, but nowhere visible or comprehensible. Philo is completely aware and not shy of reiterating that although God is sometimes depicted so He can be partially understood, this should in no way mean that He is not superior to all created creatures (*Conf.* 138).

Philo explains how allegories function: intricate formulations meant to educate should not be taken literally. So, it is not strange when, according to the rules of allegorical descriptions, the sun is compared to the Father and Ruler of the universe, when, in reality, nothing is similar to God. Some things, due to the self-absorbed opinions of people, are meant as such: the obvious example for something visible is the sun, and the soul can be taken as an example for something invisible (*Somn.* 1.73). Philo also warns against thinking that the world, the most beautiful and marvelous of all works, which encompasses everything else, is deprived of some ruler which maintains it, services it, and rules it through absolute justice. Philo uses a simple analogy to illustrate this. The

fact that such a ruler should be invisible should not come as a surprise, for, even our own mind, which rules (rationally), remains invisible to the senses (*Abr.* 74).

People live (also) thanks to their souls, and through their souls they make plans and do everything expected from them, and yet never manage to discover what souls really are. Neither can they approach their souls through their senses, or manage to imagine what souls truly are even by trying with all possible zealousness, Philo writes. Still, from that life-giving unknown, through a type of comparison, people manage to form concepts about the unbegotten, eternal God, who rules the entire world by providing sustenance and thriving, while remaining invisible and unavailable himself (*Decal.* 60).

By transcending all visible essences by virtue of our reason, Philo recommends, we should elevate towards the glory of the eternal and invisible Being, which can only be understood and properly appreciated by the mind. Philo further elucidates – this is not only the God of all gods, available only to the intellect (or to the senses), but the creator of all of them (*Spec.* 1.20). Although it might seem that in this stance on the understanding of God through the powers of the mind, Philo abandons his apophatic position, in no way does it undermine the clear apophaticism of his opus. He never fully and utterly disallows for some understating of God – otherwise there would be an unsurmountable obstacle in our conception of God, an abyss between us and God, preventing us from even remotely form cognitive and emotional associations with him. Some limited understanding is necessary, if not to achieve a numinous experience, which could bypass reason, then, to have some relation to the religious object (or, to be consistent with Philo, God could not be our object, only we could be his), as a basis for any sound religious structure.

The inaccessibility of the unknowable God

The unnameability of God is a key negative-theological category, and according to Philo, the thesis that God has no name is clearly stipulated in the *Bible*. It is God's nature to be, and not be expressed, according to Ex 3.14. God had not announced his name to the venerable Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Ex 6.3), he says to Moses. Of course, one of the points is also the prohibition to speak God's name in vain. *I am* is not a name at all – it is not some hidden name, forbidden for human use, but is a “name” of one aspect of the powers of God. No hidden name should be expected, since God has no name, insists Philo (*Her.* 170), although there are various appellations in the sacred and pious references to Him.

I am who I am is a formulation important on an ontological level, for God is equated with being, he *is* Being itself, but also in a sense that it underlines the cognitive inaccessibility, the unknowability – He is, and there is nothing more to question. Tautologies like this in colloquial speech serve to deter the listener from asking additional questions. In any case, God as the one who *is*, for Philo serves as a confirmation of God as the first transcendent cause of everything that exists.

Philo does not think that we should completely abstain from the attempts at naming God, but they must be accompanied by an awareness that they are lacking, that they forever remain unsuitable for God's overwhelming glory. Humans must not be entirely deprived of names that they could give to the most glorious existence, which is why it is alright to use *Lord*, for example, for God governs over three natures – of teaching, of holiness, and of the practice of virtues. God is a name forever durable, for whose value there are pure symbols in humanity (like Moses or Abraham). It has been examined and analyzed through time as it exists in regard to *us*, not in time before time (*Mut.* 12, if one can even speak of such “time”/untime of God). With this, Philo highlights that naming

serves *us*, in our measure of time and our structuring of reality, and in no way can be applied to the absolute time and the supreme reality of God.

When the historians of the sacred acts, events and scriptures, call God *the oldest name*, not having any superstitious respect for the position of names, but rather only suggesting to give a true description of that about which it is spoken; and when they ask themselves whether such a name exists, one that would belong to the living God, they realize that there is no such name. Whatever name is used for God, it will be a misuse of terms, precisely because the living God is not of a nature that could be described, but just *be* (*Somn.* 1.230). It is impossible, Philo claims, that God can be contemplated and understood by any existence other than himself (*Praem.* 40).

Philo offers additional explanations for Ex 3.14. He reiterates that in the formulation of this part, some known names (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) are associated with God's name. The use of a relative term, instead of an absolute, adds Philo, is quite natural. Although God has no need for a name, he grants humans with some appellation or naming, so they can approach him with pleadings, prayers, gratitude, and hope (*Abr.* 51).¹ God told Moses to relay to people that God is the one who *is*, who exists eternally, so that they can learn that there is a distinction between He who *is*, and he who is not, Philo recounts.² As the only existence to which existence belongs, no name can be applicable (*Mos.* 75).

God allows the usage of "He who is" (*I am who I am*), or the relational "God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob", because these are eternal names, which benefit the human weakness that needs to name things in order to form connections with them. The construction "He who is" should in no way be considered a personal name, but rather a substitute name, to play a role in the religious belief and sacred referencing and addressing. Philo underlines the importance of the existential quantifier in "He is who He is", because while the essence of God is unknown and inaccessible, the existence of God (*that he is*) is the only thing that can be grasped.

When Philo interprets the commandment against the speaking of God's name in vain, he is aware that the matter at hand is the divine name that we are using, which is useful for our addressing to God and referring to Him. The name comes at a second degree of that which it designates, sort of like a shadow that follows the body that is casting it, explains Philo (*Decal.* 82). This is inapplicable to God, for there is no known essence, nor body, that would produce a name as a secondary order, nor can the comparison with

¹ Philo interprets this episode elsewhere as well. People have feeble natural abilities, so they will continue to ask about the name of God. Moses should not only convey the fact that it is God, but that it is God of those people who receive their names from virtue; that he is God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Apart from this, Philo mentions the wisdom that comes from the sacred teaching, the natural wisdom, and the wisdom that is built through the practice of piety and virtue (*Mos.* 1.76). No personal name can be given to the one who is the living God. Philo underlines that *I am who I am* is equivalent to "it is in my nature to be, but not to be described by a name". Cf. *Abr.* 121, where Philo claims that *to on* in "He is who He is" (*I am who I am*) is a personal name. Still, the main idea remains: various human sacred names are used, so that the human race can refer to the supreme being (see *Mut.* 11).

² Cf. *Post.* 169 – God does not grant access to his essence even to the most pious of people, but merely shows that the things that come after God (all of the things) are within the framework of the understanding of the virtuous. God remains non-understandable through a direct approach, but can be understood in his successive produced functions, which, through the action they perform, declare not the essence, but the existence of God. As it was mentioned several times - one might know that God is, not what (how) like He is. Philo mentions this in one of his claims that God is not a man, too. Scripture, as well as the prophecies and sacred events, teach that God is not a man, but God is not the sky or the earth either, for they all possess certain qualities, and thus some of their parts fall under the domain of our senses (*Deus* 62). God, on the contrary, is not understandable even to the mind. God's essence remains non-understandable, but his existence is a fact about him that we can understand – simply, God exists.

the shadow of an object be suitable. The name of the Lord has not reached his creatures, for it is ineffable. The name which is constantly being applied is that which is manifested through his powers, and that is the name that must not be spoken in vain (*Her.* 170).

Philo notices a proof of the hidden nature of God in the prophetic response to the person who has posed the question about His name: “I am who I am” is so that the person asking the question can know that there are things which, if not for their relationship to God, would be entirely inconceivable (*Somn.* 1.231). This could be overviewed as further elaboration of this onto-gnoseological problem. The Father of the universe is in the center, writes Philo, and in the Scripture, He is called with something which we consider to be – although this is not true – the personal name “I am who I am”.

The creatures on each of his sides, of whom we gain notions thanks to Him, are the oldest powers, always close to the living God. Of these, one is the creative power, and the other is the regent, governing, power. The creative power is not next to God, exactly, for Philo thinks that it is (in a sense) God, seen how God creates and orders the world through it. The governing power is the Lord (which, again, means that it is God, not merely close to God), for it is fitting that the Creator should rule over his creation (*Abr.* 121).³ However this ontological relation is constructed, Philo is adamant that one should not doubt that the thing that is the oldest of all things, cannot be described.

Philo explains the theophany in the episode with Abraham, by suggesting that the phrase “God was seen by Abraham” should be interpreted not as if it meant that the Cause of all things somehow became visible (for what human mind would be capable to contain the glory of its manifestation?),⁴ but rather like it means that one of the powers surrounding him, his governing power, came to be seen, to be known, thus confirming that it is alright to call God “Lord”, due to his independence and authority. No one rises enough to enter the essence of God, but only looks upon him from a distance, or rather, Philo adds, one is incapable of looking, but merely manages to know the fact the God is at a distance from every created creature, and with this – all comprehension is removed, placed beyond any human mind (*Somn.* 1.65).

The claim which permeates Philo’s works, like in numerous other adherents to the basics of negative theology, as it was mentioned, is that since the divine nature remains non-understandable and unknowable, and the divine existence can be grasped through theophanies and the existence of the maintained creation (the universe), one can know *that* God (*is*), but in no way *what* (like) God (*is*). Our mind, faster than any other part of us, is capable to reach the limits of the land and the sea, the air and the sky, and to not stop there, thinking that the world is but a short boundary in his continuous and infallible endeavor. The mind is impatient to progress further and further on, and, if possible, to understand the non-understandable nature of God, even if this means to only confirm His existence (that He is) (*Det.* 89).

God thinks Himself, and only God can (think himself), Philo claims. That which is better than the Good, older than the unit, and simpler than the one, has no way of being contemplated by any other creature. It is impossible, he adds, for God to be contemplated and grasped by any existence other than Himself (*Praem.* 40).⁵ God’s nature is to be, but

³ On the appropriate illustration of the powers of God, that are simultaneously over and in (or rather under) the Logos, and can thus be envisaged as matryoshka dolls (as being one inside the other, but perfectly capable to stand on their own), see Cox (2005: 113).

⁴ The ideas of the (in)visibility, unknowability of God, through Philo’s metaphor of God as a blinding light, in Calabi (2003). A summary of the topics in Philo that most clearly link to the inaccessibility of God, in seven points (*op. cit.*, 229-230).

⁵ A man who searches for God is limited by himself, but he might be helped by God in his inquiry, Philo reckons. He who, guided by the desire to learn and to know, has elevated his head above the entire world, begins to research on the Creator of the world, whose nature is hidden and cannot be deduced by any known

not to be expressed, conveyed, framed in speech. Philo elaborates this in his interpretation of Ex 3.14, in his numerous formulations about the impossibility to properly and genuinely name, understand, and know God, and in his use of the mechanisms of (abstained or restricted) religious language. This places him as a clear apophaticist (the first proper one in the Platonist tradition).

The unknowability and the ineffability of God

The ineffability and the unknowability are connected – that which is unknowable cannot be expressed, nor can that which is so far beyond our cognitive powers be known, as no concepts and terms can be formed. The ineffability and the unnameability are connected, too – if something cannot be expressed, it cannot be properly named; while if something can be fully, correctly and properly named, it means that it is not ineffable. The concept of the ineffability of God’s nature, therefore, is ineluctably linked with the concept of the divine unnameability, and both of them are related (causally or otherwise) to the impossibility to (properly, essentially, comprehensively) know God.

According to Wolfson, the attribute “ineffable” can be located for the first time in Philo, from where it then proliferated through the Middle Platonism. The concept of the ineffability of the nature of God cannot be separated from the concept of the unnameability of God. Wolfson writes that the theory of the negative attributes, overviewed by Philo (and then Alcinous and Plotinus), is one way to approach and describe the divine ineffability (Wolfson 1957: 145). He takes the ineffability as a given, as an assumption in Philo, seen as it is clearly in the basis and the construction of his metaphysical-theological position, and not something that he discovers or concludes through a lengthy process of contemplation. Carabine takes an issue with ineffability being assumed in the opus of Philo, and claims that “ineffable” is based on the biblical texts, following the concept “unnamable”, so much so that it cannot be divorced from it (Carabine 1995: 210). This stance is a tad problematic. It is unclear how the fact that it appears in biblical texts means it is not an assumption of the negative theology in Philo, and it is also unclear how the interpretation of biblical texts like they mean that God is ineffable also means that Philo does not link ineffability with unnameability (especially since he clearly often pairs them in his work).

That “ineffable” was not a determination used in Greek philosophy before Philo is an accepted fact. The gnostic Basilides defines the divine as hyper-temporal, trans-spatial, beyond consciousness and existence. Besides, Basilides thought that if we rise towards the Divine which transcends existence, which is beyond Being, we should not consider it Ineffable, but not-even-ineffable (Basilides, Mead 1906). By this Basilides highlights the logical fact looming over all negative theology: if something is truly ineffable, it cannot be expressed, but cannot be truly ineffable either, which is why it can tentatively be *not-even-ineffable*. While Wolfson underlines on multiple occasions that before Basilides, “ineffable” was used only by Philo, Whittaker sees a problem in the fact that Wolfson singles Philo out as one of the first (or, the first) who used the attribute “ineffable” in relation to God. According to Whittaker, the use of the term was generally accepted in the speculation of his time. To show this, Whittaker offers examples from the hermetic

facts, thus wondering whether it is a body, or an incorporeal existence, or something beyond corporeality and incorporeality, whether it is a nature simple as the one or a being constituted by ordinary existing things. When such an inquirer sees how difficult it is to determine, and to understand all this, the only remaining thing is to learn from God what God is, as he must not hope to receive such knowledge from any of the created creatures that surround him (*Fug.* 164).

tractate *Poimandres* with references from *Corpus Hermeticum*, and thinks that they are not later than the career of Basilides or the Middle-Platonist speculation, along with a Neo-Pythagorean work ascribed to Lysid, in which god is described as ineffable, which is also not later than Basilides (Whittaker 1969: 368).

To this Wolfson replies by underlying that if one says that some work was written “no later than Basilides”, this still means about a century after Philo. Besides, it is generally accepted that the *Corpus Hermeticum* contains influences from both Philo and Christianity. Also, Whittaker himself places Lysid after Philo. Wolfson is right with these chronological facts, but perhaps Whittaker really only gives these instances of the use of “ineffable” to illustrate that since they were in general use in the time of Basilides, they must have been generally known and used in the time of Philo (which is, granted, a leap that cannot be confirmed). It is possible that the motive for Basilides was to contradict Philo, reminds us Wolfson (1957: 367-368), by countering Philo’s love for “ineffable” with the insistence that the divine is not even that. Still, there are some opinions that the use of *ineffable* for God was wide-spread, and, as shown in Basilides, in an affirmative form, almost like a name, adds Jufresa (1981: 1-15).⁶ Following a completely plausible historical development, after the destruction of the temple, the possibility to properly utter the name of God was lost, and the only safe thing was to use “ineffable”, both due to the disruption of the cultic actions, and the material impossibility to pronounce the name of the infinite supreme excellence of God. It is important to state that Philo is the first author in whose works the conception of ineffability is located. It is later found in authors after him, like Alcionus, Apuleius, Basilides, Plotinus, Damascius, and other authors who may or may not be inspired by him.

God’s nature is incomprehensible and ineffable, especially because the cognitive powers of men are limited (men are uneducated about the nature and essence of their own souls, let alone the notion of God, who is the soul of the world, *Leg.* 1.91). In the doctrine of the Logos, God is at least partially available when manifested in the world. God is thought and known as manifested in the mediatory role of the Logos. The soul manages to form a notion of God only thanks to the inspiration by the Logos, and thanks to his power, for the mind of man is too poor (feeble), to be able to grasp God in itself (*Leg.* 1.38). God is essentially unnamable (*Mut.* 11), while the Logos (and, when it comes to that, Moses as well) is multi-named (*Conf.* 146; *Mut.* 125). We have no suitable linguistic constructions to grasp even his subordinated powers, through which he created the world and rules as its king, and through which he predicts the future, nor his other beneficent, and punishing-corrective powers (*Legat.* 6).

In Philo, despite the clear stances on the ineffability, unnameability and unknowability of God, as well as on God’s timelessness and spacelessness, immutability and impassion, there is no overwhelming use of alpha-privatives.⁷ The negative statements about God, as it was briefly shown, serve to oppose the anthropomorphization of God, and to stand

⁶ See the summary in Carabine (1995: 85). A part of the summary of this discussion also briefly in Todorovska (2017: 359-360); Тодоровска (2018: 55-56).

⁷ The use of negative attributes in describing God in Philo, as invisible, incomprehensible, unnamable, ineffable, immutable, serves to emphasize the incomparability of God to the created creatures. According to Wolfson, the use of the negative attributes is represented merely as way to express the biblical principles of differentiation (non-similarity) between God and all there is (Wolfson 1962: 98, 126, *passim*; 1957: 145). It is possible that this is the point for the use of negations: a simple distinction between the unknowable and everything else. Consistently speaking in the framework of negative-theological thinking, there is nothing to say about the unknowable. Still, that which is implied by the negations is a reality whose greatness cannot be imagined, with all its elements of supreme power, excellence and magnificence, which is why the theological-philosophical aspect is more significant than a purely methodological distinction.

at the basis of Philo's conception of God as transcendent and the Logos as immanent, as an intermediary, creative and executive principle.

In the doctrine of the Logos, God is at least partially accessible when manifested in the world; God is contemplated and known as exteriorized through the Logos. The majority of people, not knowing the nature of things, necessarily make mistakes in their attempts to name the nature of God, known only by God (for he is the only one in a position to know Himself).

The reason cannot progress to be able to gain a thorough knowledge of God, Philo writes, for God cannot be touched or observed; he withdraws and does not fit in any immeasurable height. Besides, there are clear stances on the fallibilities of language in Philo. We are incapable to apply a proper language as a step toward the manifestation of God (Philo abstains in this part to call him "the living God", for even if the entire sky should be endowed with an articulated voice, there would not be an expression suitable to worthily encompass such a subject of speech). Philo's point is, as it was referenced previously, that we lack proper linguistic constructions to encompass God's subordinate powers (*Legat.* 6), let alone the entirety of God's overwhelming excellence.

God is unknowable, but manifested through the Logos and the powers, Philo claims. Or rather, God is not entirely unknowable (although Philo is not perfectly consistent about it): God can be known with the mind, only if it is supremely purified.⁸ The mind can ascend towards a knowledge of God, in a process that resembles that later described by Plotinus – the mind reaches further and higher, in successive acts of self-abandonment and self-oblivion, for later to return back – or rather a process which resembles a classic description of a mystical ascent.

The Logos is also described with negative attributes by Philo (as *Nous* in Plotinus also gets some negative characteristics, for example): the Logos is a divine name, but at the same time has no name to speak of (*Mut.* 15); the Logos, as the word of God, is the highest of all powers, but it is also not visible (it is the image of God, and God is invisible, so the Logos cannot be truly visible).⁹ The nature of Gods is unknown, but the attempts to know God are not futile: they will not make us know God, but will bring other merits, like the practice of virtue, and of practical wisdom.

It is interesting that Philo calls *to on pre-Logos*, and considers the Logos a second God, an idea typical for the ancient demiurgical conceptions, and the Middle-Platonist and Neo-Pythagorean interpretation of *Timaeus* 28c (like the ontology of the Gods in Numenius, for example). God is manifested through the powers, through which he announces his existence and activity, but He can in no way be reduced to the powers, as he surpasses them, exists independently from them (*Spec.* 1.209). Anyway, the powers are also beyond the human cognitive capabilities.

In Philo's opus there are topics later developed in Pseudo-Dionysius, and in John Scott (Eriugena), who meticulously develops the conception of God as "more-than-(attribute)" (the more-than formulae), and the hyperphatic synthesis of the apophatic and kataphatic

⁸ The ability and inability to know God through the powers of the mind is a problem which represents the tension which Philo experienced when reading Plato, suggests Carabine (1995: 214). On the one hand, for Plato it is difficult to know the Father, on the other hand, the Good is beyond existence (beyond the mind), which yields sufficient reasons for confusion. Carabine wonders whether these two positions are contradictory and concludes that they are not, especially not if read also through the distinction between the divine essence and the divine powers, which seems like a plausible solution.

⁹ He who is above us, Philo explains, is considered by Moses as the image of God, and he who lives among us, is the imprint of the image. This is because God has created man, not as an image, but according to the Image. The mind in each of us, which is really what we are, is a third image which comes from the Creator, and the intermediary image is the copy of the former, and a model for the latter (which means that the Logos is according to God, and man is according to the Logos, *Her.* 231).

approaches. The “hyper-(attribute)” formulations are used to show that God is more than any adjective, adverb or noun we might attribute to him. God is non-good for he is more than Good; God is even non-existence, for he is more than existence. In Eriugena, the powers of God are a revelation of God, and his Word is an intermediary between God and the creation. Still, one must not overdo with the parallels, which is why it should not be claimed that Philo, centuries before Eriugena, has explicitly used his later hyperphatic formulae, nor should it be claimed that Philo arrives at a systematic negation of the hyperbolae used for God. Philo does not position God as good, and then hyper-good, and, due to being hyper-good, as non-good (or beautiful, One, or any other determination), like the Neoplatonists do after him.

Still, it should not be overlooked that there are formulations in Philo that describe God as “better than”, that is to say, beyond or “over” the good(ness), the beautiful (beauty), virtue, etc. So, when he narrates that Moses in his studies has reached the peaks of philosophy, he writes that Moses was aware that it is necessary to have a cause for all things, and some passive subject. The active cause for things is the mind of the universe, unmixed and undisturbed, superior in virtue, above knowledge, beyond the abstract good or the abstract beauty (*Opif.* 8). God transcends virtue, knowledge, the good itself and the beautiful itself. The idea is that he is beyond all these things. Philo places God beyond bliss, happiness, and similar wonderful things. When Philo describes the purest and most extraordinary souls, who managed to explore the nature of all the created things, he explains that they have learned to contemplate the uncreated divine existence, which is, Philo remarks, the first good of everything, the one beautiful, happy and glorious, blessed existence. Even better, he adds, if the pure truth should be spoken, it is better than the good, more beautiful than the beautiful itself, happier than happiness itself, more blessed than blessedness (*Legat.* 5). The happiest and most blessed existence will not stand for similarity or comparisons, or any enigmatic descriptions, Philo warns, for it surpasses the bliss and the happiness themselves.¹⁰ Whatever it is that which can be imagined as better than them, God will be above that most wonderful thing (Gn 2.54). God is better than the good (and the better), older than the unit, simpler than the monad, which is why he cannot be truly contemplated by any created creature, but only by Himself (*Praem.* 40). Although there are no “more than” formulae, like in Eriugena, the attempts to place God as entirely transcendent, as the perfect existence beyond any hyperbolization, are clear in Philo.

There are no explicit remarks on the methodology of negation in Philo, nor is there a use of privation, but there are some notes on abstraction (*aphaeresis*), associated with prosthesis. Mortley remarks that Philo does not suggest the method of abstraction as a way to attain knowledge for the transcendent, or the divine, nor does he say anything about the negation and privation, which are later the main tools in the Neoplatonist and patristic metaphysics (Mortley 1986: 156).

Philo’s negative theology should be considered in the context of his works, and his attempts to mediate between the Greek concept of Being, and the living God of the Jews. Philo is not (always) comfortable to consider God as the One, and sometimes he goes into bursts of negative theology, Dillon writes, acknowledging that Philo must have been well acquainted with the formulae of negative theology (1996: 156).

In Philo, as was mentioned several times before, there is an inauguration, a beginning, of negative theology within his philosophy, but there is no fully developed and systematic apophatic method. Chadwick thinks that *via negativa* leaves Philo with a layer of

¹⁰ Carabine remarks that these attempts to reserve for God “the most transcendent” terms in the language are not too noticeable in the Middle Platonists. She thinks that the idea according to which the God of Philo, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob surpasses the Platonic Good, and the Pythagorean monad, would not have made Philo too popular among the pagan Platonists (1995: 219-220).

existence that has no other function to perform, which says nothing else, except that what is expected from him is far more than it should be expected from an eclectic author of the first century AD (Chadwick 1967: 149). While Chadwick thinks that Philo must claim something more than the mere existence of God, if he wants the *Bible* to be seriously taken, Carabine reminds that God in Philo is not just a pre-concept of the One in Plotinus, but also a development of Plato's concept of the demiurge from *Timaeus* (1995: 221).

In this text some aspects of Philo's negative theology were outlined. His insistence on the fact that God is not a man was shown through his argumentation about God's divine, and not humanly, characteristics. Philo insists that God should not be presented in the limiting and utterly unsuitable human categories, as He is beyond our comprehension. Philo uses formulations typical for the apophatic method, like alpha-privatives, or statements affirmative in their form, but negative in meaning. The unnameability of God, resulting from his transcendence, is insisted upon in Philo's works as a key negative-theological category.

The unknowability of God's essence, and his manifestations in various theophanies allow for humans to know *that God is*, but not *who* or *how* (or *what like*) he is. The ineffable God remains unnamed, uncircumscribed, unrestrained, unknown. In Philo's doctrine of the Logos, however, God is partially available to the insufficient human cognition, when manifested in(to) the world – contemplated and known as exteriorized in the Logos.

Philo's negative theology is clearly shown in his approaches to God acknowledging and underlining his ineffability and unknowability. Although one cannot go so far as to point to a developed apophatic system in Philo, he undoubtedly pertains to the tradition of negative theology (or, it might be said, trailblazes it), both because of the negative-theological structure of his exegetical-philosophical approach to the divine transcendence, and because of his awareness of the challenges and merits of the apophatic methods.

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