

* This paper is part of a triptych dedicated to the relation between Ancient contemplation and political activity. The three essays go from the most «detached» perspective (presented here through Lucretius and Philo of Alexandria) to the most political perspective (Socrates). The second paper dedicated to the problem of moral and intellectual virtues in the Aristotelean and Thomistic conception has been already published: Diego Vega Castro, "Moral and Intellectual Virtues: On the Relation Between Detached Contemplation and Political Prudence" (2021: 21-44).

The Radicality of Ancient Contemplation in Epicureanism and Philo of Alexandria. A Religious and a Non-religious Perspective.*

La radicalidad de la contemplación Antigua en el epicureísmo y en Filón de Alejandría. Una perspectiva religiosa y una no-religiosa

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Abstract

This paper consists in an interpretative analysis of the role of contemplation in two of the most radical ancient conceptions of philosophy. Since one of the ultimate purposes of this article is to demonstrate that the ancient radical account of *theoría* does not suppose a religious framework—as is repeatedly stated by modern scholars and even, by some of the most important contemporary philosophers—. Then, we will reflect on an «atheistic» and a «religious» perspective of philosophy and contemplation, it is to say, Lucretius' disdain for «human things» and Philo of Alexandria's «religious» and apolitical community of therapists. Our interpretation will be mainly guided by some of Leo Strauss's commentaries to Lucretius and some of his remarks on Natural Right—i.e., the difference between the theological and the philosophical approach to Natural Right—. This study must be considered within the

Resumen

Este artículo de investigación consiste en un análisis interpretativo sobre el rol de la contemplación en dos de las más radicales concepciones antiguas de la filosofía. Puesto que uno de los últimos propósitos de este trabajo es demostrar que la radical explicación antigua de la *theoría* no supone un marco religioso—como es afirmado repetidamente por académicos modernos e incluso por algunos de los más importantes filósofos contemporáneos—, reflexionaremos en torno a una perspectiva «atea» y una «religiosa» de la filosofía, a saber, el presunto desdén de Lucrecio por las «cosas humanas» y la comunidad de terapeutas «religiosa» y apolítica de Filón de Alejandría. Nuestra interpretación estará guiada principalmente por algunos de los comentarios de Leo Strauss a Lucrecio y algunas de sus observaciones sobre el Derecho Natural—v.g. la diferencia entre el acercamiento teológico y el filosófico al Derecho

scope of what Strauss referred to as classical political philosophy, i.e., the tension between the concerns of the city and the concerns of the philosopher. We intend therefore that the link between Philo and Epicureanism may restate the profound meaning of philosophy and its respective unharmonious relationship with politics.

Keywords: Classical political philosophy, contemplation, Lucretius, Philo of Alexandria, religion.

Natural. Este estudio debe ser considerado dentro del ámbito de aquello a lo que Strauss se refirió como filosofía política clásica, es decir, la tensión entre las preocupaciones de la ciudad y las preocupaciones del filósofo. Se pretende, por lo tanto, que el enlace propuesto entre Filón y el epicureísmo pueda replantear el profundo significado de la filosofía y su respectiva relación inarmónica con la política.

Palabras clave: Contemplación, Filón de Alejandría, filosofía política clásica, Lucrecio, religión.

Introduction

Modern and contemporary philosophy have become forgetful about the problematic justification of philosophy, not in its epistemic or ontological sense —as seems to be the Postmodern shipwreck— but its justification before the tribunal of the city, i.e. the difference and even tension between philosophical and political concerns. We intend in the following reflection to contribute to the reopening of classical political philosophy, mainly its ancient and forgotten meaning which was inexorably related to contemplation or *theoria*.

As we know, the ancient idea of contemplating the cosmos is usually said to be in accordance with a mythological, religious, or at best, false presupposition of an eternal order —the latter evidently as a demythologization or secularization that has yet the same roots—. However, we aim to show that there is a philosophical basis shared by what is superficially considered to be an atheistic perspective of philosophy and contemplation and a religious perspective. Hence we will reflect on the constitutive elements, such as the exoteric and esoteric clues, of Lucretius' Epicureanism¹ regarding contemplation

1 We must warn, to begin with, against the facile assimilation between Lucretius' philosophical poetry and Epicureanism. As we will suggest in some crucial points—following the difficult and austere threads presented by Leo Strauss (1989, 81) —Lucretius departs from the unpoetic «god» (V, vv. 19, 51) Epicurus in the most relevant respects— his non-deification (as one can assume by the parallel in his opening on Book VI); his utilization of what Strauss (1989: 96) calls, following Epicurus' *Kyriai doxai*, the «fundamental theologoumenon» (the assertion that nothing ever comes into being out of nothing) not as an embellishment of the cosmos (as Epicurus seems to induce) but as a prior step to admit the terrific truth represented by Athens' plague; and finally his account of poetry as a link between the harshness of philosophy and politics (mainly manifested by his addressee Memmius, a politician and rhetor). The relevance of noting this can be seen from the mistakes that the traditional English translator of Lucretius, Cyril Bailey, has done throughout the translation itself; for instance, in his use of the term «superstition» for *religio* instead of «religion». This comes from the dogmatic assumption that Lucretius, plainly following his teacher Epicurus, understands religion simply as an annoying and vulgar lie (see Bailey, 1964: 438-481), a conclusion that cannot be taken as

and Philo of Alexandria's apolitical community of therapists — emblematic cases of a detached radical contemplation that has nothing but disdain for human things—. This will allow us eventually to pose the similarity between the two respective philosophical doctrines and therefore to belie the thesis about the essential and fundamental religiosity of ancient contemplation. Furthermore, it will be analyzed the consequent tension that philosophy entailed at the same time and according to this radical perspective of contemplation, with respect to politics or men's ordinary affairs.

It is imperative to say that this study is located within the scope of Leo Strauss's return to classical political philosophy and should be thought in the light of the bulk of his writings. What Strauss thinks about the relationship between philosophy and politics is a matter of overwhelming difficulty to discern. However, a first approach to the classical comprehension of the unbridgeable gulf between the means for philosophical virtue and the means for political virtue can be undertaken by studying some of the most radical views regarding contemplation or *θεωρία* —understood as an activity that requires a radical separation from and disdain toward human affairs—. This is not, of course, the last word of the Ancients regarding philosophy; we are tempted to say that it is not even the «classical» view if we consider the much more complex and prudent mediation established by Plato or Aristotle. In any case, an overall study of the radical position on contemplation can be used as an introduction or first step. We see this in Epicureanism as well as in some religious ramifications that radicalize the contemplation of the eternal as an activity absolutely separated from society (Philo of Alexandria). In brief, we are compelled to stress that this is not the «complete» version of what *θεωρία* in its classical sense means but rather its

a point of departure since it is one of the major themes developed throughout the poem. The same goes for «correcting» Lucretius and his thread of thought (see Strauss, 1989: 128: "As a rule it is wise to abstain from telling a superior man what he should have done"). Last but not least, it should be mentioned that the Spanish translation by Bonifaz is, in this context, quite superior to Bailey's. On the problem of the tradition of Spanish translations, see Molina (2018). I am in debt in these and many other subtleties to Dr. Heinrich Meier, who brilliantly pointed to these problems in his Spring Course (2021) on Lucretius and Strauss at the University of Chicago.

most radical view.² Even in the religious ramification, such as Philo's community of therapists, we can find a more prudent perspective in, for instance, Thomas Aquinas, that is to say, in a philosopher who followed the Aristotelean «classical doctrine».

The presentation of both a religious and a non-religious perspective regarding contemplation must clarify that contrary to a widespread view, contemplation does not necessarily depend upon a religious doctrine about eternity and God. What is more, it is not quite correct to say that the strong philosophical contemplation belongs to a radicalization which religious thought made from Greek philosophy—at least not with respect to the conflict between philosophical knowledge and political concerns—. We will articulate this conflict through the approach of a thought that prescind from gods and, conversely, through a thought grounded in a divine text and an omnipotent God.

The following analysis, especially in the first part addressed to Lucretius, will be conducted by using some of Strauss's remarks on the tension between contemplation and politics. The analysis of Philo's narration *On the Contemplative Life* will be compared with some of Epicurus' recommendations on measured pleasure. We will also shortly consider a misleading interpretation posed in one of Foucault's courses regarding «the care of the self». The main point of this essay is to understand contemplation as a philosophical activity which we argue is in a strong conflict with social-political life.

Lucretius' Poetry

Perhaps the most potent image of what contemplation is and implies is found in Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura*, a book which, as Strauss says (1965: 111), is “the greatest document of philosophic

2 For an introductory account on the origins of the «concepts» theory, practice, contemplative, active, etc., see Chacón (2009: 14-21), which is essentially based on the *Wörterbuch* edited by J. Ritter *et al.* (1971-2007).

conventionalism”,³ and which we will eventually have to differentiate in its purposes and its scope from that of Epicurus. The image detailed by Lucretius invokes the radical distance that the philosopher keeps from ordinary men and ordinary affairs:

Suaue, mari magno turbantibus aequora uentis,
e terra magnum alterius spectare laborem;
non quia uexari quemquamst iucunda uoluptas,
sed quibus ipse malis careas quia cernere suaue est.
Suaue etiam belli certamina magna tueri
per campos instructa tua sine parte pericli.
Sed nil dulcius est bene quam munita tenere
edita doctrina sapientum templa serena,
despicere unde queas alios passimque uidere
errare, atque uiam palantis quaerere uitae,
certare ingenio, contendere nobilitate,
noctes atque dies niti praestante labore
ad summas emergere opes rerumque potiri
(II, vv. 1-13; emphasis added).⁴

3 Another way to understand the radicality of Epicurus and Lucretius' *apoliticism* is by referring them to what Strauss calls conventionalism. Conventionalism is a Pre-Socratic distinction related to the discovery of nature, i.e., the discovery of the things that are by nature and the things that are conventional. In the conventionalist-radical view, all human things, especially those within politics (life among men), are conventional. What really matters is outside the *moenia mundi* (one has to «go beyond» the walls of the city). This is of course behind Epicurus' disdain of public life: "We must release ourselves from the prison of affairs and politics" (*Sententiae Vaticanae*, 58).

4 "Sweet it is, when on the great sea the winds are buffeting the waters, to gaze from the land on another's great struggles; not because it is pleasure or joy that any one should be distressed, but because it is sweet to perceive from what misfortune you yourself are free. Sweet is it too, to behold great contests of war in fully array over the plains, when you have no part in the danger. But nothing is more gladdening than to dwell in the calm high places, firmly embattled on the heights by the teaching of the wise, whence you can look down on others, and see them wandering hither and thither, going astray as they seek the way of life, in strife matching their wits or rival claims of birth, struggling night and day by surpassing effort to rise up to the height of power and gain possession of the world". I use Bailey's English translation and the original Latin version edited by Bonifaz.

It seems that some part of the philosopher's felicity consists in his detachment from the myriad of evils that make men tremble. It is *suaue*, sweet, to look at them, contemplate them from the ground; it is even sweeter to contemplate these evils from the heights of the serene temples. The «sweetness» of this attitude certainly indicates some kind of pleasure. Does this pleasure depend on the misfortunes to which men (non-philosophers) are subjected? Does the philosopher need to witness men's suffering in order to know his superiority? We shall turn to these questions by clarifying the meaning of contemplation according to the Roman poet.

Lucretius uses here the word *spectare* which immediately alludes to being a spectator of the world—one of the senses of θεωρεῖν is to see or to contemplate from afar the theatrical *spectacle*. It is evident that *spectare* implies remoteness and inactivity: therefore it appears that one either sees the spectacle or participates in it; one is either on land witnessing the shipwreck or at sea sinking along with the ship.

In this same passage then, the poet resort to contemplation (*spectare*), behold (*tueri*), and look down (*despicere*). The strongest element is the third one (*Sed nil dulcius est*). The corresponding situations of each of these are 1) contemplating the labors of other men in the sea while one is in *terra*; 2) looking at the war while one is safe, and 3) looking down to the vain longings of men (wealth, nobility and *ingenio*) while one is in the *templum serena* (furnished by *doctrina sapientum*).⁵ All three elements show men's activities contrasted with the philosopher's inactivity. However, inactivity is not pleasant by itself; it must be accompanied by knowledge. As Strauss points out, "The opening of the poem leads from Venus, the joy of gods and men, to the promise of the true joy which comes from the understanding of nature. The poem itself is meant to fulfill that promise" (1989: 81). Nevertheless, the end of the poem is not joyful but quite the contrary —it describes Athens's plague much more drastically

5 It is not entirely clear whether the *doctrina sapientum* is a doctrine that can be used for popular ends or is reserved to philosophers. This will show its relevance in the course of our study.

than Thucydides' report, it seems to be the end of the world (as it is the end of the poem), the breakdown of the fear of the gods. Weren't we supposed to reach joy and true knowledge of nature? "The poem appears to move from beautiful or comforting falsehoods to the repulsive truth" (1989: 83), as is proved by Lucretius' metaphor on the honey: his poetic art consists in showing the terrible and bitter truth while spreading honey in our lips (I, vv. 931-950). Philosophy then "proves to be not simply a «sweet solace»" but rather "the movement from Venus to nature, which is destructive as it is creative, is an ascent" (Strauss, 1989: 83); the ascent is in knowledge gained.⁶

Is truth then unpleasant? We hear from Epicurus that "in all other occupations the fruit comes painfully after completion, but in philosophy pleasure goes hand in hand with knowledge (γνώσει); for enjoyment does not follow comprehension, but comprehension (μαθήσις) and enjoyment are simultaneous" (*Sententiae Vaticanae*, 27). This perfectly explains that the sweetness of which Lucretius speaks is grounded not only in being protected from evils; rather, it is knowledge itself that provides the «sanctuary». Knowledge is pleasant even if the truths discovered by knowledge are not joyful. What may be disturbing, however, is that the knowledge-pleasure of the philosopher seems to be necessarily related to the misery of others—even if indirectly so:

one must admit that our pleasure or happiness is enhanced by our seeing the pains and dangers of others. The sad is necessary as a foil for the sweet, for sensing the sweet. Does the gods' supreme happiness—their complete freedom from pain and danger (I 47)—require that they behold the misery of men? Is

6 I should only mention the decisive role of poetry for Lucretius in contrast to the austere Epicurus—Lucretius is not merely presenting Epicureanism in the form of a poem but rather using poetry itself in the service of philosophy. To put it simply, Epicureanism is used by Lucretius as a popular approach to philosophy and not as the true doctrine itself. A poetical atomism is the only way to attract potential mediators between philosophy and politics—this is proved by the rhetorical approach of the poet-philosopher to Memmius, who might consider these teachings as *sceleris*, a religious crime! (see I, vv. 82). Of course, one can wonder why Epicureanism would be the most effective medium for these aims—this is *the* question.

it desirable or even possible that all men should be happy, that is, philosophers? We have seen how much Lucretius is concerned with receiving praise for being the first, with superiority: his happiness requires the inferiority of others (Strauss, 1989: 94).⁷

The question of whether the philosopher's happiness relies on the inferiority or suffering of ordinary men it is one way of approaching the question of whether there is an eternal order to be contemplated and furthermore, whether or not this order is in tension with the idea that nothing lovable is eternal.⁸ We should point to the fact that the knowledge of nature seems to be, at least in Epicureanism, rather impious, i.e., violently irreligious! It is traditionally admitted that both Epicurus and Lucretius' philosophical aim is to free men from religious superstitions (the First Book of the poem is quite

7 On the kinship between gods and philosopher's happiness: "and never shall you be disturbed waking or asleep, but you shall live like a god among men. For a man who lives among immortal blessings is not like to a mortal being" (Epicurus, *Epistula ad Menoeceum*, 135). The radical disdain for humanity is only a preliminary assertion which we will attend more carefully at the end. On the problem of whether the philosopher needs other men in order to corroborate his superiority —and therefore the difficulties that Epicurus' Garden faces— see its development in Strauss's claim of philosophical self-sufficiency and Kojève's claim of philosophical intersubjectivity (Strauss, 2000: xviii-xix, 152, 163-166, 194-195). This is evidently connected with the limitations of a «political enlightenment».

8 Perhaps the most striking development of this problem is found in a discussion which Strauss undertakes with Pascal that concludes as follows: "Strauss then speaks of «a greater danger»: «the philosopher knows that, however high he may rise, he will fall again (death, senility, forgetting due to illness). *The more he enjoys his understanding, the more will he be troubled by his errors and ignorance*». But, Strauss retorts, «he will not expect, and therefore not wish, more than the degree of understanding of which he is capable. *His insight into the necessity of the finite character of his knowledge will prevent him from suffering from these shortcomings*. Man's misery is due to his desire for an unattainable end, for the *impossible*. This desire is based on *ignorance*». Even or precisely if the joy or pleasure that Lucretius' poem arouses is austere, it may still be the most solid pleasure" (Strauss's archival notes on Pascal; Box 20, folder 1016, cited in Minkov, 2016: 70). The austerity or, as Strauss prefers when speaking of Plato, the «sober calm», differentiates itself from the other pole of negating the eternal and divinizing the Nothing: "What is it that suddenly, if after a long preparation, divinizes the Nothing? Is it the willing of eternity which gives to the world, or restores to it, its worth which the world-denying ways of thinking had denied it? Is it the willing of eternity that makes atheism religious?" (Strauss, 1983: 181).

explicit in this respect). Nevertheless, it is of the utmost importance to reflect on to what extent this is a political aim and to what extent the «liberation» from superstitions is reserved for a few. As we are about to suggest, it seems that Lucretius transcends the Epicurean Garden by introducing philosophy to Rome through poetry, not to say by attracting a politician to impious teachings about nature. If this is true, if Lucretius has a political «project» unknown to Epicurus, how is to be conciliated the aristocratic character of philosophy and the seemingly «enlightenment» of ancient philosophy?⁹

Let's consider the condition of possibility of the liberation from religion —it is mainly the knowledge of nature, i.e., the fundamental theologoumenon, the indifference of gods (if any), and the ambiguous philosophical pleasure of discovering bitter truths. One of the principal purposes of Epicurus' philosophy (*Epistula ad Herodotum*, 81) is the study of nature as far as it liberates man from his prejudices toward heaven, death, and gods. Lucretius follows, at least provisionally, his teacher in that respect as is proved by the strong verses, “Quare religio pedibus subiecta uicissim / opteritur, nos exaequat uictoria caelo” (I, vv. 78-79).¹⁰ However, the Epicurean study of nature differs from that of Lucretius to the extent that the poet includes not only the detached nature but «human nature». It seems that religion, according to Lucretius, has an ineluctable role

9 This is even more complicated if we consider the way in which early modern philosophers returned to Lucretius. Compare the opening of the poem (esp. I, vv. 25) with Machiavelli's *The Prince* (1971) Dedicatory Letter. The problem of the political enlightenment (liberating men from the terror of religion as well as the *libertas philosophandi*) is a whole new thread to follow; it suffices to say that we may find in Lucretius one of the first (along, perhaps, with Xenophon's *Hiero*) alliances between philosophy and princes in order to preserve philosophy from political turbulence, mainly religious persecution. That on the philosophical perspective; on the political perspective, it is worth to allude to the benefits that a political man may gather up from Lucretius' teachings, e.g., Frederick the Great who is supposed to have read the Third Book of *De rerum natura* after his defeat at the Battle of Kunesdorf. In this sense, one might say that the addressee Memmius has been projected through modern history. See Meier (2017: 66), Brown (2001; 2010).

10 “And so religion in revenge is cast beneath men's feet and trampled, and victory raises us to heaven”. Before, in the same passage, he refers to Epicurus as the man of Greece who first resisted religion and whose “lively force of his mind won its way, and he passed on far beyond the fiery walls of the world (*flammanitia moenia mundi*)”.

in human beings that cannot simply be avoided by taking refuge in recondite gardens. To put it simply, it is not ignorance of nature and its mechanics that compels men to praise the gods.¹¹ This assertion goes beyond Epicurus' lack of interest in human nature, namely, the political «natural» relations.

These subtle though unavoidable divergences can shed light on the one decisive difference that concerns us most deeply, i.e. the «retirement from the world» as the crucial implication of *theoría* —or in other words, how Lucretius propagates in Rome a popular Epicureanism through poetry and how he modifies the Epicurean «retirement»—. According to the original teaching, we investigate nature ultimately in order to become wise with respect to the means for acquiring the most perfect life. The means for this perfect life entail the «quiet life» and the «retirement» from politics and religious superstitions; Epicurus' Garden has become widely known precisely because of these intentions.¹² However, it is no less true that Lucretius' poem is much more interested in human affairs than are the teachings of Epicurus. To take again what we have just suggested, this is demonstrated by two remarks: the first is the fact that Lucretius presents us the «same» doctrine in a much more rhetorical or poetic manner;¹³ the second consists in his genealogy of human society. In other words, we might find in Lucretius not only a treatment of human ethics or individual advice regarding how the philosopher acquires happiness but a «political philosophy», i.e., a direct treatment

11 "Ignorance of the causes of the motions of the heavenly bodies is not the sole or sufficient cause of men's believing in angry gods. (Hence astronomy is not sufficient for liberating men from the fear of the gods.)" (Strauss, 1989: 131).

12 Or what we can resume, in a moral perspective, as *λάθε βιώσας* (live in obscurity, or, colloquially, being unnoticed). Cf. García Gual (2002: 198-206), who understands quite well the Epicurean «moderation», even when he reduces at some points its apoliticism to a historical issue —the power of monarchs. We intend to deal with this problem, on the contrary, not within a historical necessity but rather as an autonomous philosophical understanding.

13 "The potential Epicurean may be attracted to the Epicurean doctrine only because of the sweetness of Lucretius' poetry, or he may be attracted by it because he suffers from the terrors of religion; surely those terrors are not so great as to make him willing to swallow the naked truth" (Strauss, 1989: 84).

of philosophy confronted with political beliefs or social customs. The main point of his genealogy —although there are some details of great importance which we will not address in this article— is his conception of «the walls of the world».¹⁴

Lucretius points out that the walls of the world (*moenia mundi*) are weak, they tremble at natural disasters (such as Athens's plague with which the poem ends). In their collapse they show man's contingency and the precariousness of everything lovable. Humans intend to protect these fragile walls with gods (or with the belief of gods protecting the walls), but they tremble again when the philosopher realizes the groundlessness of these beliefs; the philosopher's activity, therefore, exists beyond those walls. Strauss interprets this section as follows (1965: 112-113): According to Lucretius, man was originally lonely without any social bonds. The natural dangers and his own weakness led him to gather with other men in order to gain the contentment granted by the pleasure of safety. The transformation of wild life to social life generated kindness and habits of faithfulness. This was apparently the happiest society that ever existed. On the other hand, philosophy arises within the cities, i.e., in a subsequent stage of primitive and «happy» society (it depends on the development of the arts); the city characterizes itself by the destruction of primitive society. Yet this «happy society», which one may immediately relate to the «natural society» (such as Rousseau's), is not, in the last analysis, quite natural, since it lacks what is higher by nature. Life according to nature belongs to the philosopher, implying therefore, that primitive society, which lacked philosophy, could not in fact have lived according to nature (and thus its right could not have been strictly natural). Hence, there is a disproportion between the philosopher's happiness and that of society; the requirements of each are different.

The happiness of early, noncoercive society was ultimately due to the reign of a salutary delusion. The members of early society lived within a finite world or a closed horizon; they trusted in

14 On the genetic description, see Lucretius, *V*, vv. 925-1456.

the eternity of the visible universe or in the protection afforded to them by «the walls of the world». It was this trust which made them innocent, kind, and willing to devote themselves to the good of others; for it is fear which makes men savage.¹⁵ The trust in the firmness of «the walls of the world» was not yet shaken by reasoning about natural catastrophes. Once this trust was shaken, men lost their innocence, they became savage; and thus the need for coercive society arose. Once this trust was shaken, men had no choice but to seek support and consolation in the belief in active gods; the free will of the gods should guarantee the firmness of «the walls of the world» which had been seen to lack intrinsic or natural firmness; the goodness of the gods should be a substitute for the lack of intrinsic firmness of «the walls of the world». The belief in active gods then grows out of fear for our world and attachment to our world [...] Yet, however comforting the belief in active gods may be, it has engendered unspeakable evils. The only remedy lies in breaking through «the walls of the world» at which religion stops and in becoming reconciled to the fact that we live in every respect in an unwalled city, in an infinite universe in which nothing that man can love can be eternal.¹⁶ The only remedy lies in philosophizing, which alone affords the most solid pleasure. Yet philosophy is repulsive to the people because philosophy requires freedom from attachment to «our world». On the other hand, the people cannot return to the happy simplicity of early society. They must therefore continue the wholly unnatural life that is characterized by the cooperation of coercive society and religion. The good life, the life according to nature, is the retired life of the philosopher who lives at the fringes of civil society. The life devoted to civil society and to the service of others is not the life according to nature (Strauss, 1965: 112-113).

15 See the reference in note 11.

16 We might say that Epicurus' doctrine begins with the account of the «unspeakable evils» that religion has arisen (see as well Lucretius, I, vv. 80-101), but he does not explain the genealogy or the coming to being of religion, not to say its «necessity».

Yet how can Lucretius' account on the genesis of society be more «political» than his teacher's thought —how can it take more seriously human things— if it appears radically detached from political relations? The way in which Strauss interprets the genesis of societies according to Lucretius seems to strengthen the radical division between philosophy and politics or between contemplation and political activity.¹⁷ The great difference, as we have already mentioned, is that Lucretius' doctrine is presented in the form of a poem and therefore «it can be put into the service of detachment»; *this is the rhetorical overcoming of Epicurus*: “Because poetry is rooted in the prephilosophic attachment, because it enhances and deepens that attachment, the philosophic poet is the perfect mediator between the attachment to the world and the attachment to detachment from the world” (Strauss: 1989: 85). But the rhetorical enterprise cannot simply serve as a means to attract potential philosophers; the rhetoric of his poem also serves as a mediation with the city.¹⁸ Lucretius “addresses, of course, indefinitely many Romans, most of whom will be men of mean capacities: he attempts to propagate Epicurean philosophy in Rome” (Strauss, 1989: 107). This can be said to be a flagrant contradiction if we recall that Lucretius does not seem to suggest that it is possible —perhaps not even desirable— that all men

17 “It is in agreement with this that Lucretius' «political philosophy» is only an account of the coming into being of political society; it does not deal with the question of the best regime: no regime deserves to be called good; philosophy cannot transform, or contribute toward transforming, political society” (Strauss, 1989: 131). In addition, this represents the inherent limits of the parallelism between *De rerum natura* and the political project of modern enlightenment (Machiavelli, Diderot, and even Marx) —the correct understanding of human nature prevents the absolute transformation (say, secularization) of society.

18 Cicero pointed to this problem by making evident the lack of rhetoric in Epicurus: “«You are quite mistaken, Torquatus», I replied. «It is not the style of that philosopher which offends: his words express his meaning, and he writes in a direct way that I can comprehend. I do not reject a philosopher who has eloquence to offer, but I do not demand it from one who does not. It is in his subject-matter that Epicurus fails to satisfy, and in several areas at that»” (*Tusc.* I. 15). To put it simply, it was quite evident for Cicero that Epicureanism was incompatible with a healthy republican life. Nevertheless, it seems that Lucretius' enterprise was superior enough, as some sources refer, that Cicero himself helped in the publication of *De rerum natura*. We will try to suggest a hidden agreement between these philosophers.

become philosophers. How can we then understand that the poet invites men to liberate themselves from religion if he believes it to be neither possible nor desirable? We are compelled to distinguish, therefore, between at least two different addressees, the political man (such as Memmius) and the unknown potential philosopher in whom the genuine and complete liberation might take place. The multiple directions of the poem are proved by considering that the withdrawal from political life is by definition a rejection of law and, hence it is almost an invitation to be besieged by almost all men—since almost all men live in society and claim that to be good—. We won't be then surprised by the fact that “It is not easy for the lawbreakers to lead a quiet life”, and therefore that “according to Lucretius religion is of a utility which is not altogether negligible” (Strauss, 1989: 127).

Lucretius' hide-and-peek game and his «restoration» of a rhetorical union between philosophy and poetry represent a deep understanding of the relationship between philosophy and politics. The ambiguous arguments against and on behalf of religion imply “that philosophy belongs to political society no less than religion does or that philosophy is impossible in prepolitical society: philosophy presupposes a high development of the arts” (Strauss, 1989: 131). This means, as we saw in the genealogy of society, that even if the philosophical attempt is higher than—and to some extent contrary to—social concerns, philosophy is placed necessarily in society—or in a «high development of the arts»—. Contemplation, therefore, is not simply contemplation; it is, at its deepest core implicated by a distinction of its activity from common human activity—it is, just as is nature, a term of differentiation—. With this analysis we might better understand Cicero, whose “initial task is the restoration of the primacy of the political sphere” (Holton, 1987: 160). This restoration was not made as a concrete apology of politics or by claiming the obligation of philosophy to pay attention to human affairs but rather through subtle and ambiguous dialogues presenting Epicurus' doctrines as well as the alleged Socratic interest *only* in human affairs.¹⁹ Cicero was completely

19 On the interest *only* for human affairs, cf. Cicero (*Tusc.*, V. 4). On a subtle discussion

aware of the difficulties that philosophy could encounter if it openly and explicitly followed Epicurus' recommendations. "He was aware of the ultimate dependence of philosophy on the city, and thus of the necessity for philosophy, if it was to survive, to concern itself with the development of a healthy political order" (Holton, 1987: 157). The rhetorical form that Cicero used —and which is today rejected as a platitude— was the distinction between *vita contemplativa* and *vita activa* (Cicero, *Tusc.*, V. 35). This might be indeed a popular view and a platitude as well; nevertheless, we will not even understand what this platitude consists of if we fail to see the profound concerns behind it.²⁰ We have at least three ways in which the distinction of the two lives and the suggestion for attention to politics develops: a closer relation of philosophy with the *res publica* in order to secure philosophical pursuits; the reminder that philosophical inquiry transcends political inquiry or administration; and finally, the creation of political men who are interested in philosophy and nevertheless do not have a philosophical nature.²¹ Based on this, it appears then that Lucretius and Cicero share a hidden agreement.

between Epicureanism vs. Socratism: "I have demonstrated that wisdom, temperance and courage are so closely connected with pleasure that they cannot be severed or detached from it at all. The same judgement is to be made in the case of justice" (Cicero, *De Finibus*, I. 50). The Epicurean opinion regarding the pleasure of justice is dangerous when identifying the good with the pleasant, i.e., when rejecting that there is something just/good by itself. The most evident opposition is Socrates' argument in *Gorgias* regarding suffering injustices.

20 Cf. Chacón (2009: 24) who seems to feel uncomfortable when using such terms as *vita contemplativa*, *vita activa*, theory or praxis. From a historical perspective, we, of course, must be careful with those terms; however, not when we study their meaning and their philosophical-political connections.

21 See all these three possibilities in Cicero: "What power, what office, what kingdom can be more desirable than the ability to look down on all things human, ranking them lower than wisdom, and never turn over in one's mind anything except what is divine and eternal [?]" (*De Legibus*, I. 27-30); and "I am speaking of the art of governing and training peoples, an art which in the case of good and able men still produces, as it has so often in the past, an almost incredible and superhuman kind of excellence. If, then, someone thinks, like the men who are taking part in the discussion recorded in these books, that he should add scholarship and a deeper understanding of the world to the mental equipment which he possesses by nature and through the institutions of the state, no one can fail to acknowledge his superiority over everybody else" (*Rep.*, III. 4-7).

Thus far we have treated ancient contemplation seen through its philosophical basis, its relation with the political community, and Lucretius' particular and ambiguous intentions with respect to religion. Now we shall look at these same problems through what is commonly accepted as a radical religious perspective of contemplation, which by definition, though superficially, would be entirely different, not to say opposed, to the atheistic frame of Epicureanism.

To my knowledge, Strauss did not ever pay attention to Philo's philosophy nor his myriad of interpretations of the Torah (except for one single mention in his early *Philosophie und Gesetz*). However, he is very well known for his studies on Judaism and esoteric-exoteric discoveries in the Arabic-Jewish tradition. I would dare to say that Strauss's studies on Maimonides can be applied to some extent to Philo of Alexandria's texts and thought. This is certainly an assertion to be proved. Suffices it to say that the place of the allegory and the absolute importance of the exegetic labor as a mediation between philosophy and theology are very present both in Philo and Maimonides, for instance in Philo's quite rational understanding of the biblical Genesis (*Leg. All.*, I) and Maimonides's distinction between figurative and literal speech—which manifests its decisive role already in the opening of the *Guide*, I. 1 by distinguishing image (*selem*) from likeness (*demuth*)—. Both of these exegetic labors have enormous consequences in the tension between the rational and philosophical understanding of the cosmos and the accepted revelation or religious dogmas.

Only by seeing what is philosophical in Philo we may transcend the assertion that contemplation is equal to exegesis and exegesis to the analysis of the biblical text (Calabi, 2008: 159). This may be true only in so far as the biblical text has a «natural» basis (i.e. in so far as it is not unquestionable due to its sacred and revealed origin). Strauss already suggested the impossible conciliation between Jerusalem and Athens when he pointed to the absence of a Hebrew word for nature—there is no nature (rational and philosophically discoverable order) in the religious tradition. However, Philo seems to be

closer to Athens when he speaks of Moses as a man who studied nature and when he refers to the study of the biblical text as a way of learning the nature of the first things, which is certainly much closer to philosophy than to an orthodox labor of exegesis.

These remarks are necessary in order to understand both the similarities and differences between the «classical» contemplation (e.g. the Aristotelean knowledge for the sake of knowledge) and the «religious» *theoría*. We intend to show that Philo's account of *theoría* is ultimately rooted not in religion but philosophy, and to this extent there is a philosophical basis shared between the «atheistic» perspective of Epicureanism and the «religious» perspective of Philo. It is evident we are swimming against the tide since Philo himself contrasts the *sacred* character of Moses' laws with pagan laws and, what is more, he clearly rejects the cosmological view of the Sceptics, Aristotle (the world has not a beginning), and Epicureanism (the idea of *intermundia* and the lack of Providence) (Borgen, 1997: 58). Nevertheless, his very well-known narration *On the Contemplative Life* about an ascetic community poses all the elements that will allow us to stress the philosophical (not religious) core of contemplation.

Philo describes a *community* conformed by *Therapeutae* and *Therapeutrides*. These therapists, both males and females who are healers of their souls —most of them are in their old age²²— dedicate themselves to a complete and radical contemplative life. This is not the place for a philological analysis, yet suffices it to say there is a very wide discussion on the origins of the text and the possible historical existence of the community described by the philosopher. For instance, López (2009: 53-55) settles *Vit. Cont.* within the apologetic texts along with *Hypothetica. Apologia pro Judaeis (Hyp.)*, which consists of two summaries of Eusebius of Caesaria's *Preparations for the Gospel* where the second describes the customs of the Essenes. This is of an importance which is not altogether negligible since the

22 As is suggested from the beginning: "through their yearning for the deathless and blessed life, believing that their mortal existence is already over, they leave their property to their sons or daughters or even to other kinsfolk, freely making them their heirs in advance, while those who have no kinsfolk bestow them on comrades and friends" (*Vit. Cont.*, 13).

customs of the Essenes are identified with the *vita activa* or the life of work. The *vita contemplativa* represented by the therapists can be seen as the counterpart of the Essenes, although we have not any evidence at all of a community such as Philo describes it nor we know whether this was a philosophical idealization (in the same vein as Plato's *Republic*), nor, in these same speculations, whether or not he was presenting a community that coincided with his ideals of life. Moreover, the opposition, combination, or transition between the contemplative and the active life are even more problematic when we consider the ambiguity in Philo's different texts where he does not distinguish with accuracy the different kinds of active life: *bios politikos*, *bios praktikos*, and *bios poietikos* (Calabi, 2008: 163). To put it simply, the classical frame of the different kinds of lives has to deal with the two-fold nature of politics as is expounded, for instance, in *De Josepho* —the pastoral activity and the degeneration of a good politician into a demagogue.

Putting aside this extensive discussion, we intend to take Philo's narration of the therapists in itself and point to some subtleties which allow us to see the philosophical roots of contemplation. It is worth pointing out that the *community* of therapists is certainly, as Calabi intends to stress, a community; it is not absolutely apolitical. Philo rejects the idea of the anchorite who lives as a wild or a beast. The community of therapists is, as it were, the greatest degree of human contemplation within human life —a life which alternates the active and the contemplative life just as God alternated the active creation and the intellectual rest, an alternation imitated by the Jewish Sabbath and which the therapists invert by studying and reflecting the whole week and celebrating banquets in the seventh day. Nevertheless, this is rather a harmonical view of the «two lives». It presupposes, as Calabi does, that there is not any sort of tension between a life dedicated to philosophy and a life dedicated, for instance, to political activity. Calabi does not seem to take seriously the fact that the community described by Philo has rejected the life in cities, i.e., the political life as it necessarily develops among men. To put it simply, the «little village» is not political *stricto sensu*; and Philo seems to have this in mind in his narration.

The therapists, to begin with, leave their wives, children, cities, and relinquish everything that belongs to the mortal life in order to fill themselves with the desire of immortality and wisdom. This is perhaps why they consider their mortal existence to be already over, but it suggests as well that all the wealth and human relationships which they renounce are a fundamental part of the whole of political life. It is true that this is mostly related to the rejection of «the city of vice» or simply the «pagan city», just as “Israel left the city to found a new society, to receive a law which established new social and political relationships. Choosing to take the people into the desert was thus one way of creating a new situation free of negative conditioning and pre-existing rules” (Calabi, 2008: 168). Nevertheless, the therapists are not *founding* a new political community, they are quite aware of the intrinsic vices of political life. It is not, as Calabi believes, a «tabula rasa», but a refuge. This is proved by the allusion to a life that has overcome the obstacles of the mortal existence, that is, of the life which is necessarily political. The radicalness of this apoliticism is confirmed again by the fact that they are not seeking a better city:

They do not emigrate to another city like unfortunate or worthless slaves who demand to be sold by their owners, thus obtaining for themselves a change of masters but not freedom. For every city, even the best governed, teems with tumult and indescribable disturbances that no one could abide after having been once guided by wisdom (Philo, *Vit. Cont.*, 19).

They are not concerned then with the imperfect character of a city but rather of *every kind* of city.²³ The parallel with Epicurus and Lucretius’ doctrine is evident, as we can see by the following

23 Strange as it may seem, Socrates, the political philosopher *par excellence*, reaches a similar conclusion: “great hatred has arisen against me and in the minds of many persons. And this it is which will cause my condemnation, if it is to cause it, not Meletus or Anytus, but the prejudice and dislike of the many. This has condemned many other good men, and I think will do so; and there is no danger that it will stop with me” (Plato, *Ap.*, 28a-b; emphasis added).

elements: “they spend their time outside the walls” —we shall understand, the walls of the city, just as Lucretius referred to *moenia mundi*—. They pursue “solitude in gardens or solitary places” (20) —just as Epicurus’ Garden is the place formed not by some kind of misanthropy but by the realization of the most befitting place for the philosopher (a premise corrected by Lucretius’ poetry)—. On the other hand, Philo proffers a wink toward former wise men: there have been wise men in the Greek and the non-Greek world (21) —does this mean that there can be philosophers within cities and, therefore, that the community which “is situated above the Mareotic Lake on a rather low-lying hillock” (22) is simply the happiest place for philosophers to reside, but not necessarily to flourish?—. ²⁴ In other words, the Platonic Islands of the Blest might be the happiest place for the philosopher to live, but they might not necessarily be the best place for becoming a philosopher. We are tempted to compare, however, the role of the contemplative man seen through philosophy and seen through religion, as is shown by Thomas Aquinas and Aristotle’s respective examples on the man who cuts himself off from society—whereas Aristotle speaks of the philosopher, Aquinas refers to St. Anthony, “a third-century hermit notorious among other things for his opposition to philosophy” (Fortin, 1987: 259).

And again, one is tempted to consider Philo’s therapists on the side of Aquinas. For there are indeed, one might say, similarities in the Epicurean gardens and those frequented by the therapists, yet the former are gardens of philosophy whereas the latter are gardens of pray and study of the Scriptures. However, it seems that the community of therapists is grounded in knowledge of nature—we have already pointed to the study of the Torah and its exegesis as the knowledge of the natural first principles—and, as we will show at the end, the therapists are *inspired* by something quite similar to philosophical *eros* and not by an unquestionable religious reverence.

24 I cannot go further on this parallel between Plato and Philo. Suffices it to say that Philo did not have an apolitical life but played a role in his Jewish community very similar to what he considered the role of the philosopher who returned from the cave—a tense situation in which the highest by nature has to be conciliated with political demands. See Calebi (2009: 162).

Be that as it may, we realize that even when Philo poses such an ascetic life —as is presented in the significant difference between the therapists’ banquets and Plato and Xenophon’s²⁵— the life in this community does not anyway pose any difficulties, i.e., corporal difficulties. The place where this community is located has excellent climatic conditions, and the way they arranged their houses is simple but pleasant (21-24). It seems that the Epicurean doctrine regarding pleasure is strictly followed.²⁶

What might strike us though is the combination of this philosophical anchoritism with a radical religious perspective. We hear from Epicurus that one of the fundamental requirements of attaining *ataraxia* is the understanding of our lack of relationship with gods — and the respective knowledge of nature needed—. ²⁷ Veneration of gods is a manner of relating to gods; it is a manner of expecting some kind of retribution. The closest to the veneration of gods in Epicurus is simply to admire their superiority in the face of chaos, just as the philosopher is to be venerated for his superiority. In Lucretius’ account, we see the veneration of Venus at the beginning of his poem and the lack of gods at the end (Strauss, 1989: 134). Nevertheless, the two principal activities of Philo’s therapists are Prayer and Study.

25 It must be stressed that the core of this text is related to banquets and not specifically to contemplation —strange as it may seem—. Philo’s account on banquets extends through paragraphs 40 to 77, i.e., it covers the central and most extensive part. The role of banquets (i.e., of wine) can be understood as the «peace zone» with respect to the city, i.e., those walls *within* the city which allow to speaking beyond the city. This is, I think, one of the teachings of Plato’s *Symposium*. See Bloom (2001) and Strauss (2001).

26 “When, therefore, we maintain that pleasure is the end, we do not mean the pleasures of profligates and those that consist in sensuality, as is supposed by some who are either ignorant or disagree with us or do not understand, but freedom from pain in the body and from trouble in the mind. For it is not continuous drinkings and revelings, nor the satisfaction of lusts, nor the enjoyment of fish and other luxuries of the wealthy table, which produce a pleasant life, but sober reasoning” (Epicurus, *Epistula ad Menoeceum*, 132).

27 “The man who has best ordered the element of disquiet arising from external circumstances has made those things that he could akin to himself and the rest at least not alien: but with all to which he could not do even this, he has refrained from mixing, and has expelled from his life all which it was of advantage to treat thus” (Epicurus, *Κύρια Δόξαι*, XXXIX; cf. *Epistula ad Menoeceum*, 128).

They read the Holy Scripture; they study its hidden and revealed nature; they love God; they even dream with God.

Philo does not say that they *fear* God. But must they? We might say with Epicurus and Lucretius that the fear and trembling of men toward God is one of the greatest evils which religion has brought to humanity and which prevents the philosopher's happiness. The strict and thorough rituals made by the therapists in their banquets, and as opposed to Greek banquets, are not just an overcoming of Athens regarding prudence and sobriety but an overcoming regarding knowledge; they *know* God and therefore they seem to know better. At any rate, Philo's conception of contemplation has the same political consequences or comes from a similar understanding of the requirements of society and the requirements of wisdom. He *does not seem to* draw any sort of conciliation, nor even prudential treatment with politics²⁸—as we do find some glints of this in Lucretius—. Contemplation for Philo seems to be absolutely in conflict with the active-political life.

In a very different approach, Foucault treats Philo's community as a radical way of obtaining what he calls ἐπιμέλεια ἑαυτοῦ (care of the self). The fact that they are therapists, that is, healers is a reference, Foucault says, to a kind of subjective care for oneself. He compares Philo's *On the Contemplative Life* with the principal thesis of Plato's *Alcibiades* and Epictetus' *Discourses* (2005: 90-95). Foucault seems to be concerned with the same issue with which we are dealing here though he has begun from a framework that is, to say the least, suspicious. In a few words, we should warn that the «care of the self» is related to contemplation to some extent and yet it is entirely misleading. Contemplation, *theoría*, presupposes that there is something much higher in dignity than man, i.e., than the ordinary activities of men—and as we believe to have demonstrated, this superiority is not dependent on a joyful, lovable, and charitable cosmos or God—. This means that the «self» in Foucauldian terms is not the core of wisdom but rather an element of it, namely, self-knowledge. In conclusion, the «retirement from the world» in its more radical way is for Foucault a degradation of what ἐπιμέλεια

28 See the penultimate paragraph of this essay.

ἑαυτοῦ must have meant in the beginning;²⁹ for classical *contemplation*, on the other hand, the retirement from the world is a very real consequence; it is even a very pleasant consequence if it were achieved without dangerous and paradoxical consequences.

The comparison made by Foucault refers specifically to the problem of «ages» in which the care of the self is inserted. For instance, we find that in Plato's *Alcibiades*, it is located in a pedagogical structure whose purpose is to relate philosophy with politics: one cannot guide a city if one cannot guide oneself.³⁰ This education and guidance are certainly embraced in young men. In Philo, on the contrary, the guidance has been placed on old people (according to Foucault), it is addressed to those who have an intense longing to be wise and leave their homes and their families to join the community of therapists. Foucault's conclusion is that the radicality of Philo's apoliticity is somehow related to the displacement of the care of the self in young men to the care of the self in old men.³¹

29 The imprudent veneration of the self is, I think, the core of Foucault's mistaken interpretations. I'd like to put very clearly that this is not a philological critique based on mere accurateness; it has deep philosophical concerns. Foucault's eagerness to find a politically «active» position in Greek and Roman philosophers prevents him from seeing just the opposite thesis, the assertion that, contrary to the Enlightenment values, philosophy has not the duty of transforming society nor, in fact, any political charity but it is deeply concerned with the means to preserve the philosophical life within the unstable city. In the wide spectrum of solutions to this problem, we deal now specifically with the most radical one, which in spite of its radicalness is not correctly understood by the French intellectual. For further examples of Foucault's misleading readings, see the two cases analyzed in *The Hermeneutic of the Subject* and in *The Government of Self and Others*, namely his apology of the alleged *παρηγορία* in Pericles' discourses and the alleged revolutionary journeys to Syracuse by Plato (cf. Foucault, 2019: «16 February 1983» and «23 February 1983»).

30 "You can see that we are dealing here with a world that is completely different from, and even the reverse of, the world of the *Alcibiades*. In the *Alcibiades*, the young man who took care of himself was someone who had not been sufficiently well brought up by his parents or, in the case of Alcibiades, by his tutor, Pericles. It was with regard to this that when he was young he came to question, or at any rate let himself be stopped and questioned by, Socrates" (Foucault, 2005: 91-92; cf. «13 January 1982»).

31 "One takes care of one's soul not at the beginning, but at the end of one's life. At any rate, let's say that rather than the transition to adulthood, it is much more adult life itself, or perhaps even the passage from adult life to old age, which is now the center of gravity, the sensitive point of the practice of the self" (Foucault, 2005: 91-92).

Now, what we are interested in is to address the meaning of this distinction between youth and old age. The philosopher, when old, can be released from his duties to the city. The philosopher, when young, is asked for his services as an average citizen. This is a central topic of Philo's thought and, as Calabi has pointed out, the transition from the practical to the contemplative life seems to be of the utmost importance in Philo's conception of happiness and knowledge. This sort of philosophical pedagogy is evidently akin to Plato's premises on education in the *Republic* and the *Laws*. Nevertheless, we differ from Calabi in that Philo also follows Plato—and for that matter also the radical Epicurean perspective—in the decisive *rupture* that comes along with the contemplative or philosophical life. Whereas Calabi presents this as an almost natural path (e.g. the way of God who actively created the world and then rested), the community of therapists are not in any respect in good terms with cities and political men. There is a fundamental rupture that comes with philosophy and which still depends on a political education; as we already pointed out, it seems that the philosopher cannot flourish outside the walls of the city.

Foucault is therefore quite sharp when he refers to the ages as the «center of gravity» from which philosophy (for him, the care of the self) arises. However, he takes the problem of ages too much literally. For it is not the youth or the old what is constitutive of philosophy but rather the political situation to which each of them is confronted. To put it simply, Foucault pays attention only to the corporeal surface that hides the very deep problem of the relation between philosophy and politics, even when he correctly sees the problem of ages related to the political preparation of the citizens (as is posed in Plato's *Alcibiades*) and its displacement to old men in Philo's community of therapists. From this misconception, Foucault's interpretation stands or falls by his claim that all members of this community are old, which is evidently contradicted by Philo's mention of the youth who has a relevant part within the rituals in banquets (*Vit. Cont.*, 77, 81).³² By this omission, we are entitled to suspect that

32 This problem is quite interesting since Philo does not even consider age to be something admirable in itself: "After the prayers the elders recline in accordance with the

Foucault did not even read this oeuvre entirely. Nevertheless, his remarks can be used to point out that Philo does not speak of raising citizens—it seems that all therapists had lived before in a regular city—and he is completely silent about sexual relations among men and women. This might be another way of approaching the problem between contemplation and political life, which would introduce, worth's to say, the distinction between moral and intellectual virtues.

There is then a fundamental agreement between the «religious» and the non-religious account regarding contemplation: it cannot be properly embraced within cities.

Concluding Remarks

Although we mentioned Strauss's reflections when we dealt with Lucretius' doctrine, it is worth circumscribing our conclusions to the Straussian remarks on the tension between philosophy and politics. The shared soil between Philo's «religious» posture and Lucretius' «atheist» posture points directly to a larger problem, namely, on the one hand, whether philosophy as a *regimen solitarii*, as an activity that might conduce the individual to cut off from society is *philosophically* justified; which brings, on the other hand, to the problem of whether the unbridgeable conflict between philosophy and every kind of society ultimately depends on «theistic» assertions, not to say religious conceptions of the world—as seems to be the case of Philo's community of therapists—. A brief reflection on Strauss's account of the beginning of philosophy and the discovery of nature may clarify the aforementioned problems.

order of their admission; for they regard as elders not those who are rich in years and of silvery brow [but consider them as mere children] if they have only in later years come to conceive a passion for this way of life, but those who from their earliest years have spent the prime of their youth and the flower of their maturity in the contemplative branch of philosophy, which is indeed the most beautiful and most godlike part" (*Vit. Cont.* 67; emphasis added).

At the beginning of this paper, we mentioned Strauss's reference to Lucretius' poem as the greatest document of philosophical conventionalism. What the German philosopher calls «conventionalism» comes from the very well-known classical distinction between νόμος and φύσις. The beginning of philosophy as Strauss understands it is the «discovery» of nature or *physis*. Nature in this newly coined sense is not firstly a separation between human affairs and cosmic affairs; it is not even the comprehension of the Being of every single thing that is. Rather, it is the quest for the roots of our customs. According to Strauss, nature in its pre-philosophical sense is identified with custom: *our* customs are the *natural* customs because they are ours and the same as our ancestors. However, the multiplicity of customs may raise the demand for a justification of our precise and determined ways —of our way of life—. Eventually the «conventionalist» philosophers in their most radical form (which is very close to sophistry, as Plato's dialogues evidence) claim that all human things are conventions —in the precise sense that human things are not by nature—. Therefore, life according to nature is impossible within the walls of the city.³³

It is interesting, on the other hand, that Strauss's account of this «beginning» of philosophy is framed in an extensive discussion on Natural Right. Natural Right, what is good by nature, is justified by these same means: our customs, our ancestors. The city justifies its morality, its deepest comprehension of what is good, by what non-philosophers understand as nature: their original myths, the relation of their ancestors with gods, etc. As we can see, religion has a profound connection with the justification of the political community. Therefore, the philosophical quest for nature —even the very distinction between *physis* and *nomos*— degrades political-religious grounds.

Two concluding remarks stem from this. The radicality of Lucretius and Philo's thought must be seriously taken into account when discussing the separation or differentiation between moral and

33 See the development of this argument in Strauss (1965:10-11, esp. 92-111), which is connected to Lucretius. Cf. Guthrie (1971: 55-63).

intellectual virtues —typical of Aristotle and Thomas—. Although we did not reflect on the role of the distinction between virtues related to reason and intellectual capacities, and virtues related to society and morality, it is evident that the same problems we have addressed here from the perspective of a radical contemplation were posed by more prudent philosophers as a difference of realms and objects. In other words, the most coherent further investigation shall be addressed to the resolution, modification, and moderation of these almost violent theses.

One might find, therefore, a thread of the utmost importance that goes from some esoteric recommendations by Lucretius and Philo —such as the undeniable utility of religion and Philo’s suggestion of leaving known people to take care of the «business»— to Cicero’s Socratic way of engaging with political and social affairs, and hence the Aristotelean and modified Thomistic way of separating the realm of Metaphysics and the realm of Politics and Ethics.

The second remark is perhaps more complicated and can be stated in the following terms: What are we to expect if we ask for the justification of contemplation in the non-religious and in the allegedly religious account of Philo? For Lucretius and Epicurus, as we have shown, contemplation and the retirement from the political world is justified by the fact that the life according to nature is philosophy, which in turn belies the belief in gods, eternity, and the outstanding place of man in the cosmos. Contemplation is for them to philosophize as the most solid pleasure within a contingent world. Yet, how can Philo justify the community of therapists? He says that what drives men and women to this community is «their yearning for the deathless and blessed life», i.e., it is not a divine commandment but a yearning. The deathless and blessed life is evidently referred to a religious basis which is reinforced by the fact that the therapists study the Scriptures, pray, dream with God, etc. The yearning for the deathless life is not quite the same as the philosophical desire for knowledge, and hence we would be compelled to admit that there is no other justification for Philo’s community except for a religious account.

Nevertheless, Philo claims that those who arrive at the community come not “through force or habit nor on the advice or exhortation of others”, i.e., they are not forced nor compelled by a divine commandment (nor by any mediator of the divine commandment) but rather “they have been ravished by a heavenly passion”. What is more, therapists will stay “possessed like Bacchants and Corybants until they behold the object of their longing” (*Vit. Cont.*, 12). We are compelled to ask whether this passion is not in some sense opposed to the principles of any other political community which is not governed by the desire and longing for knowledge (or the beholding of the respective object). If we consider that any political-religious community is governed on the basis of a revealed law (at least in post-pagan religions) that determines what nature is,³⁴ it seems that Philo’s description of the therapists is heretical rather than pious since the radical passion which drives them to cut off from any city is not guided by a divine commandment itself but by «merely» human desire.

Perhaps this is the reason why Philo oddly emphasizes the difference between those therapists who leave all their possessions and the Pre-Socratics like Democritus or Anaxagoras. Even when leaving every possession, therapists ensure that they make their sons, daughters, friends, etc. their heirs, unlike the Pre-Socratics who madly “allowed their property to be laid waste by sheep” (13). This would mean that the therapists’ community is so radically apolitical that it must be prudentially concerned to leave at least their former property to their family or friends since that preoccupation implies a not altogether disdain for human things—even if *stricto sensu* therapists are not at all interested in their property—.

What we began to analyze as two different perspectives toward contemplation—one non-religious and the other religious—through the result of this analysis appear *to a considerable extent* to agree with each other. As a result, we shall rather say that the almost evident religious account by Philo is not religious, at least in its political terms, and instead strictly philosophical. We have no doubt,

34 On this important and difficult discussion, see Strauss (2006).

therefore, that Philo does not ground philosophical *theoria* in a religiously revealed law but rather in a philosophical yearning or passion, and hence in a very similar way to Epicureanism. This means then, due to its grounding in philosophical and not religious terms, that Philo's account of contemplation faces the same problem as Epicureanism does regarding politics—and hence we can absolutely reject the prejudice which claims that *radical* apolitical contemplation pertains exclusively to religious or mystical thinkers.

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