The two-sided nature of humans, the copresence of divine elements and negativity within them, is clearly reflected in the choices they make in life. There are various different types of life men can lead: a contemplative life, a political life, a poietic life which are not reciprocally exclusive. So the true choice does not consist in what type of activity to pursue, but rather in how to make it compatible with the virtues. Thus the Therapeutae and the Essenes, the Patriarchs and kings, the Levites and common mortals have God and His law as a reference. In every waking moment, the complexity of human nature sets individuals before a forking path: we can take the road of virtue and self mastery or, instead, pursue egoistical interests and abandon ourselves to pleasure. This is symbolized by the snake, which already existed in Paradise i.e. at the very beginning of Adam and Eve’s lives. The snake alternately constitutes either a means of enriching one’s knowledge, an element that mediates between intellect and sensation allowing these to express themselves, or a source of transgression and excess. So all individuals on earth can make an ethical choice at any time, whatever the activity they have previously carried out. All they need to do is opt for temperance and self-mastery, comply with God’s commandments and cope with the pangs of desire and the pleasure-snake.

The snakes Philo speaks of are of four types: there is the snake that lived with Adam and Eve in Paradise, Moses’ bronze snake which cured the bites of the desert snakes, the Dan-snake, which is the symbol of rational judgement, and Moses’ other snake, which turned into a rod when the patriarch was ranged against the Egyptian magicians. In all cases, the snake is a cunning and ambivalent creature which, depending on the context, features positive or negative connotations.

However, in some cases, it has both at the same time. Philo calls it by the three terms ὃφις, δράκων, ἔρπετον. The use of different terms is perhaps not a coincidence and may have a precise significance. The
animal is characterized by epithets which highlight its sinuosity, the
movements of its coils, its cunning. Leg II 53 follows in the wake of the
Genesis text, which characterises this animal in the very same way ὀφις,
and describes it as the most cunning of all creatures (φρονιμώτατος).
The term used, which is quoted in the Septuagint, has echoes of phronesis
and connotes positive characteristics, unlike panourgia, which appears
in other passages, such as Leg II 106, and which is also found in other
literature, for example in Paul’s Second Letter to the Corinthians.¹ The
text of the Massorah ‘arum contains an ambiguity that the Greek is obliged
to resolve using two adjectives.²

The context is represented by the nakedness of Adam and Eve who,
in Philo, symbolize intellect and sensation. After an explanation of the
different senses of the term ‘naked’, the text introduces the quotation
from the Bible relating to the nakedness of our forebears: “And the two
were naked, Adam and his wife”. The intellect did not think, sensa-
tion did not feel: they were inactive, in a sort of ‘vacuum’, in a state
preceding shamelessness (ἀναισχυντία) and modesty (αιδός), which are
aspects connected with the ability to make moral judgements. Bare of
thought and feeling, not yet aware of good and evil, Adam and Eve
were free from the presumptuousness brought by knowledge; they did
not feel shame.³ “Here the mind is irrational and has no part as yet
either in virtue or in vice”.⁴ Although, on the one hand, the absence
of thought and sensation involves a corresponding detachment from

¹ 11. 3: εἰς πτήσειν ἐν τῇ πανουργίᾳ. In QG I 31 Philo highlights the sapientia of
the snake/serpent which, effectively, is said to be the most intelligent animal, but
a creature thus designated to indicate the passion it symbolizes i.e. concupiscence
amongst other things.
² M. Harl (La Bible d’Alexandrie (Cerf) 1. La Genèse cit. 107n.) observes that
phronimos has a positive value, unlike the corresponding Hebrew term. Theodotion and Aquila read
a pejorative meaning into the text, to the extent that they translate with panourgus.
³ The interpreters read Adam and Eve’s unawareness of their own nakedness and
their awakening realization after the Fall in a variety of ways. Irenaeus (Demonstratio
Apostolica 14), for example, reads into it an awakening of sexual desire; Origen, in his
Contra Celsum (IV 76 ff.) connects it with an awareness of the requirements of practical
life which distract mortals from their contemplation of God. See M. Harl, “La prise
de conscience de la nudité d’Adam”, Studia Patristica 7, Texte und Untersuchungen
zur Geschichte der alchristlichen Literatur, 92 (1966) 486–495.
⁴ Leg. II 64. Cf. Leg. II 70 “So long then as they are naked, the mind without self-
exertion, the perceptive sense without perceiving, they have nothing shameful: but
when they have begun to apprehend, they fall into shameful and wanton conduct, for
they will be found often showing stillness and folly rather than healthy knowledge […];
but when the mind is in the ascendant, the bodily sense is seen to have nothing to do
and to be powerless to lay hold of any object of sense-perception”.

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