APPENDIX THREE

GALEN AND MOSES

Moses and Epicurus

In *De usu partium* (XI, 14, K III 905–906) Galen sets the doctrine of Moses against that of Epicurus, showing that they had both fallen into error. Unlike Epicurus, Moses admits that there is an order in nature and a providential plan but—and in this lies the reason for Galen’s attack—he maintains the possibility of God’s intervening at any time to establish order in nature, and acting in an arbitrary manner foreign to any rule or law. He says:

> Did our demiurge simply enjoin this hair to preserve its length always equal, and does it strictly observe this order either from fear of its master’s command, or from reverence for the god who gave this order, or is it because it itself believes it better to do this? Is not this Moses’ way of treating Nature and is it not superior to that of Epicurus?

It is not only that God can intervene to change nature; nature itself keeps to certain, particular rules. This is not for intrinsic reasons, because there exists a set of rules and this is for the best, but in order to obey God’s will, out of fear or reverence. However, continues Galen,

> it was certainly not sufficient merely to will their becoming such: it would not have been possible for him to make a man out of a stone in an instant, by simply wishing so.

> It is precisely this point in which our own opinion and that of Plato and of the other Greeks who follow the right method in natural science differs from the position taken up by Moses. For the latter it seems enough to say that God simply willed the arrangement of matter and it was presently arranged in due order; for he believes everything to be possible with God, even should He wish to make a bull or a horse out of ashes.

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2 Ὅν γὰρ δὴ τὸ βουληθῆναι τοιαύτας γενέσθαι μόνον ἢ αὐτάρκης· οὐδὲ γὰρ, εἰ τὴν πέτραν ἐξαίφνης ἐθελήσειν ἀνθρώπων ποιήσαι, δυνατὸν αὐτῷ.
3 Τῷ μὲν γὰρ ἀρκεῖ τὸ βουληθῆναι τὸν θεὸν κοσμῆσαι τὴν ὅλην, ἢ δ’ εὐθὺς κεκόσμηται· πάντα γὰρ εἶναι νομίζει τῷ θεῷ δύνατα, κἂν εἰ τὴν τέφραν ἵππον ἢ βοῦν ἐθέλοι ποιεῖν.
We however do not hold this; we say that certain things are impossible by nature and that God does not even attempt such things at all but that he chooses the best out the possibilities of becoming.

Although Moses’ interpretation is preferable to that of Epicurus, it is, in any case, incorrect. The best system is that which does not consider only the demiurge as a source of creation, but adds the material principle. In the specific case of the length of the eyebrows, the demiurge created them because he considered it good to do so and, as a consequence of his decision, he took care of the material conditions. Even if God were to express his will an infinite number of times, the eyebrows would never issue forth from a soft substance and they can be nothing other than straight, and fixed in something hard. That is why God put cartilage there.

For Moses, instead, 1) it is sufficient that God should wish to give an order to nature and this immediately becomes ordered 2) everything is possible for God, even the creation of a man out of stone or a bull or a horse out of dust 3) not only does Moses think that God can do impossible things, but he also maintains that He does do them; whereas for Galen, He does not even try, because He chooses the best out of the things that can be done. In other words, for Moses, order in nature is given by God by an act of will that immediately translates into reality, notwithstanding the material conditions which might be opposing it. Moreover, the conviction that everything is possible for God induces Moses to believe that God can do the impossible and achieve things which are unconnected with the natural order, such as creating a horse out of dust. According to Moses, God can, at any time, impose His will on each individual phenomenon, by intervening in an individual and arbitrary manner in order to set up or change the order of anything. It is not a case of rules and laws taken tied up with nature, but extraordinary interventions, impossible things which, as such, Galen cannot accept as being the best thing, which is what God always chooses.

There thus emerges the image of a world subject to arbitrariness, to irregularity, to a capricious will which does not necessarily pursue what is best. The very use of the verb βουληθηναι instead of προαιρετοθησαται indicates a will which does not consider all the possibilities and disregards the option of choosing the best.4

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4 Cf. R. Walzer, op. cit. 25: προαιρετοθησαται «denotes the discursive activity of the will»