

# Was Plotinus a Gnostic? An Answer Through and Beyond Phenomenology

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Καὶ εἶπεν αὐτῷ ὁ Ἰησοῦς: Αἱ ἀλώπεκες φωλεοὺς ἔχουσιν  
καὶ τὰ πετεινὰ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ κατασκηνώσεις, ὁ δὲ υἱὸς  
τοῦ ἀνθρώπου οὐκ ἔχει ποῦ τὴν κεφαλὴν κλίνει.

Luke IX, 58<sup>1</sup>

«Guarderei quel ciottolo lungo la via che porta  
al nostro giardino [...] E rimarrei lì fermo per sempre;  
e non vi sarebbero più né giardino né tu stesso Colote [...]  
Vi sarebbe solo Epicuro, Colote. Solo e felice.»

M. Sgalambro, *Della misantropia*, p. 111<sup>2</sup>

The question that stands as the title of this paper is not a new one. For the past seventy years, since the appearance of Hans Jonas' book, *Gnosis und Spätantiker Geist*<sup>3</sup>, scholars have known this question and have engaged themselves on a debate around it. As it is well known, Jonas saw the entirety of Late Antique culture as permeated by what he called the Gnostic spirit. Recurring to the heideggerian *Existenzialien*<sup>4</sup>, he characterizes Gnosticism as the manifestation of a certain way *Dasein* has to approach reality, whereby it feels detached from it and perceives it as completely foreign to itself. Hence, *Dasein* conceives of itself not only as foreign to this world, but as having originated from another world, out of which it fell into this one. The solidification, so to say, of this existential mood of estrangement from the world is made possible in its turn by an «ontologization» of the world and of *Dasein*'s experience in it: the relation of *Dasein* to the world is understood as that between two stable and unchanging substances, both colored with the tonalities of a naïve but very effective mythology. What we have, then, is a mythological

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<sup>1</sup> «And Jesus said to him: Foxes have holes and birds of the air their nests, but the son of man has nowhere to lay his head.»

<sup>2</sup> «I would look at that stone on the way that leads to our garden [...] And I would stand still there forever; and there would be neither garden nor you yourself Colotes [...] There would be only Epicurus, Colotes. Alone and happy.» My translation.

<sup>3</sup> The book has had a difficult genesis: it was supposed to be composed of two parts, but in 1934 only the first one was published, while the second came out first in 1954, in a quite incomplete form, and finally in a final –although not definitive– form in 1993, thanks to the commitment of K. Rudolph: Hans Jonas, *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist, Teil I. Die mythologische Gnosis. Mit einer Einleitung zur Geschichte und Methodologie der Forschung* (published by Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen, 1988), *Teil II. Von der Mythologie zur mystischen Philosophie* (published by Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen, 1993). The second part, which is the one that interests us here, has not been translated into English. Given the impossibility in which I find myself here in Singapore to use the original German edition, I will refer to the Italian translation by Claudio Bonaldi, *Gnosi e spirito tardoantico*, Bompiani, Milan, 2010, in the subsequent references to this book its title won't be quoted, but only the page(s) will be given.

<sup>4</sup> For the «heideggerian» method followed by H. Jonas cf. what he writes at p. 74 and ff.

ontologization of reality. Through it *Dasein* understands itself as a something, a substance with a core identity, which got sullied by the contact with an extraneous element, i.e. the world down here, in its turn conceived of as a definite substance. *Dasein* feels itself captive in a hostile world and longs to return to that other world out of which it imagines itself to have fallen<sup>5</sup>.

Jonas suggests that the philosophy of Plotinus is to be read within this frame and to be understood as a reduction to the domain of consciousness, or a psychologization of the original Gnostic mythological ontologization. What by the Gnostics was understood as the faithful representation of reality as such in its various components became for Plotinus the symbolic representation of the inner reality of the soul. In Plotinus' system, this world, Jonas submits, is not rejected as evil and completely foreign, but as an image of the true world, which the soul has to go back to by exercising a self-distancing from the image. In this scheme, *Dasein* has not only reduced the external world to an image, but has also already reduced itself to a something, a core substance, standing in front of another something, another core substance, understood in its turn as the true unchanging reality. This latter is the Nous, or the Intellect, which in Plotinus' system stands as the paradigm of this material world. Thus, Jonas concludes, the de-ontologization of Gnosticism ended up forging a new ontologization, of a superior level of course, in which both *Dasein* and its relatedness are reduced to as many objects: they are both presentified, being linked by the act of contemplation. Jonas understands this act as one whereby *Dasein* objectifies itself through a vision that reduces its reality to mere presence, i.e. to just another object. In this dynamic we would have, then, a fixed subject standing in front of a fixed object, where the fixing results from the way in which *Dasein* has decided to look at things. Thus, for Jonas the tension that animates Plotinus' thought and the entirety of that very thought have to be read as a sublimation of the Gnostic original mood, ending up in a more subtle kind of ontologization.

Thus Plotinus would be a perfect representative of his own age, that age known by scholars as the «age of anxiety»<sup>6</sup>. But is this true? Philologists have long debated about this problem, using the methods and tools proper to philology. Textual dependence, use of thematic words, recurrence to similar images, these are the things on which philologists have concentrated their attention in the effort to solve the matter. However valuable and important, all these pieces of evidence run the risk either to state the obvious or to try to gainsay it, namely that from squash seeds it's impossible that beef springs up, as Manlio Sgalambro puts it<sup>7</sup>. The fact that Plotinus

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<sup>5</sup> For this cf. H. Jonas pp. 142-144.

<sup>6</sup> This label comes from the title of a book by E.R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety*, CUP, Cambridge, 1965, which has opened the debate among philologists.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. M. Sgalambro, *Del pensare breve*, Adelphi, Milano, 1991, p. 29, "Prodigi".

was involved with his own time is something obvious, no man can abstract himself from the time and place in which he finds himself to be. The point is to understand how he interacted and reacted to it, whether his thought can be completely assimilated to the time in which he lived, or there are in it elements, maybe even a core, that point towards a different direction. The first step to take is to start looking at the word ‘anxiety’ not just as a word indicating a vague and generalized pessimism of sorts. In this case, by closing an entire epoch and all its actors within the boundaries of a rather simplistic understanding of a term, this word would work as the kind of absolute Hegel rants against, in which all cows are black. This is the risk ran by a certain kind of historicism<sup>8</sup>. Instead, the word ‘anxiety’ should be looked at as a philosophical term that opens up a determined horizon of comprehension of reality, which characterized indeed the time of Plotinus, but is also a possibility the human being as such has to deal with reality. Once this point has been clarified, we could proceed to ask ourselves: in which way does Plotinus deal with anxiety? Starting from here the second step can be taken, namely finding an access point to the entirety of his thought that allow us to at least formulate a hypothesis regarding its inner thematic core that governs all the rest. In this we are already facilitated by the fact that Hans Jonas himself has individuated such access point, although he misinterpreted it, as I shall show. That access point is found in the word ‘contemplation’, which translates the Greek θεωρία [*theoria*], and what it implies.

## 1. Anxiety

It is well known that this term has been a central one in the development of philosophy starting from the 19<sup>th</sup> up to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It took a steady position within philosophical discourse in a moment when, thanks to Kierkegaard and Schopenhauer, philosophers started to reflect on *Stimmung*, on mood, and its meaning for the comprehension of the human phenomenon and its world. In his *magnum opus* Martin Heidegger recognised in it the fundamental mood through which *Dasein* is disclosed to himself and the world opens up to it. Anxiety, or *Angst*, to use the German word<sup>9</sup>, is that mood in which the world, previously assumed by *Dasein* within a certain

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<sup>8</sup> In this categorization there are two assumptions at work: the first is that a philosophy can be looked at merely as a product of the period in which the given philosopher lived; the second is that a particular historical period can be looked at from the vantage point of the present and thus be judged, as if the preoccupations that agitate any given period were not ultimately human preoccupations, as such *in a way* timeless. In this sense the work of Jonas shows a different way of doing history, one that starts from considering *Dasein*'s ontological structure, as Heidegger says in the introduction to *Being and Time*.

<sup>9</sup> The word *angst*, has been adopted in English after the '20s of the past century. The adoption of this word is not the result of a particular fancy on the part of philosophers, who prefer an exotic word to the more common *anxiety*: for, as G. Zaccaria made me notice, *anxiety* is linked and limited to the sphere of psychology, of feelings, whereas *angst* refers to the original constitution of *Dasein* in its experience of nothingness (*Nichts*). As such the first belongs to the sphere of un-reflected, almost instinctive reactions, in the latter there is a much more fundamental experience capable of grounding a certain meditated approach to life. By not grasping the difference between these two words,

meaning, stops making sense, thus provoking in *Dasein* a feeling of estrangement and alienation. It is in this precise state that *Dasein* discovers itself as fundamentally other from the world in which up to that point it was immersed. It is only through this state, however, that *Dasein* can start deciding regarding its relation to the world: in other words, it is only now that it discovers itself as the producer of meaning<sup>10</sup>. This definition of *anxiety* goes well beyond any simplistic division between rational and irrational; rather anxiety is acknowledged as one of the most fundamental components in the formation of the dealing with reality typical of the human phenomenon.

This concept, delineated in this way, represents the central pivot in Hans Jonas' approach to Gnosticism. The German philosopher, former student of Martin Heidegger, in the introduction to *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist* states that *Stimmung* offers indeed a privileged entry point to investigate the human phenomenon in its historical unfolding. He acknowledges, in other words, that investigating man in his historicity consists ultimately in an interrogation on the fundamental position taken by man in each moment of his history. When we deal with the history of humanity, each moment spans an entire epoch. He recognises that the mood of anxiety constitutes the core of the Gnostic experience together with, *ça va sans dire*, the take on this human mood typical of that experience, namely the refusal of the world and the projection of oneself in another dimension, understood as totally *other*. The Gnostic experience, that is, starting from a general human mood, develops a very peculiar position, which as such is a constant possibility within the human phenomenon *per se*, one whereby *Dasein* responds to the experience of estrangement to the world by withdrawing from it and imagining himself as part of another world, opposite to this one and to which he must aspire to return. It is, in its core, a position of rejection of the world that at once brings about the breaking of any substantial commitment to it.

The study of Hans Jonas, then, did not aim at conducting a merely philological analysis of the texts that document to us the existence and uses of Gnostic religious groups already categorised as such by scholarship before his work. It, instead, wanted to provide one fundamental philosophical category, through which it would become possible not only to bring under a certain unity the rather chaotic universe of the various Gnostic sects, but also to grant a more penetrating understanding of phenomena that might have occurred either during Late Antiquity

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philologists have *de facto* reduced the Plotinian experience of thought to a conditioned reflex, I would say, and this has happened much probably under the impulse of an ambiguity that lurks already in Jonas' pages. We shall see that what goes on in Plotinus' thought is something quite different. However, for the sake of continuity with the terminology adopted in the philological debate, I will keep using the word *anxiety*, about which the reader has to think in connection with the much deeper meaning of the word *angst*.

<sup>10</sup> M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, tr. by J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson, Blackwell Publisher, Oxford, 1962, all of ch. VI of Division One of the First Part, especially pp. 228-235.

or other historical periods. One such phenomenon Jonas found in Neoplatonism, and chiefly the philosophy of Plotinus. The philosophy of Plotinus is one that invites to the withdrawal from the world and a substantial dis-engagement from it. In short, Plotinus was at core a Gnostic. The thesis put forth by Hans Jonas cannot be dealt with through a sheer philological analysis of the texts, but it must be met on its own terrain, namely that of philosophy. For, the thesis of Jonas is *not* that Plotinus' philosophy, or better that his body of philosophical doctrines is Gnostic, but that in it we can detect an *existential attitude* that makes Plotinus a Gnostic. To that fundamental human mood that is anxiety he reacted in the same way in which the Gnostics did, although in a more subtle and philosophically minded way. This thesis can be met only on its own terrain: and that's the terrain of phenomenology.

We have, therefore, to ask ourselves whether any reflection on that mood we call anxiety surfaces in Plotinus' speculation and if so how he treats it. We have, that is, to find evidence of an understanding of the human being as fundamentally severed from the world, in a way that is particular to Plotinus. Of course, this implies a more careful look at what the human phenomenon is for Plotinus: this look must be guided by what speaks in the *Enneads* of estrangement and alienation. In what does Plotinus concretely see the actual separation between man and the rest of reality? Where does it appear in such a way as to become a problem and solicit the taking up of a certain position? Bringing some clarity in the darkness that these questions point to will mean, I submit, to understand Plotinus from a slightly new perspective, one that will make all of his thought much more akin to certain preoccupations of modern philosophy than it has been noticed so far; and at the same time to refute Hans Jonas' categorization of Plotinus' philosophy and the experience it contains under the umbrella of Gnosticism.

## 2. Contemplation and its counter part

As already noted above, Hans Jonas identifies in the concept of "contemplation," which translates the Greek *θεωρία*, the one through which Plotinus elaborates that kind of ontologization of a second level that characterizes his thought. Through it, Plotinus severs *Dasein* from its relatedness to the phenomenic world, marked by contingency, and reduces it to a subject, whose main feature is a static identity to itself, facing an object, in its turn just as static in its self-identity, a true world that Plotinus calls *Νοῦς* [Nous]<sup>11</sup>. Thus, Jonas, effectively reads all

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. H. Jonas, p. 954, pp. 971-972, p. 974, p. 978: in all these passages it is clear that the paradigm Jonas uses to read Plotinus is that of the subject-object dialectics as the ultimate limit and indeed the foundation of reality; a dialectics which Plotinus, in his turn, read –according to Jonas- not through the dynamism of relatedness but the static immobility of self-identity.

of Plotinus' thought as the implementation of a subject-object dialectics, in which the simplistic and rudimentary opposition already found in the naïve Gnostic system is transposed to a more sophisticated philosophical level, in which we can already find the first elements of a kind of idealistic system. Thus, Plotinus' system would be a forerunner of Idealism opposed to a rudimentary and mythological realism<sup>12</sup>: in both cases, though, what remains stable is the opposition subject-object, which reduces both reality and its observer to just two static substances, each marked by an identity to itself.

However, a closer look at the two words θεωρία and πίστις [*pistis*] in their specificity and above all in their mutual interaction would convince us, I submit, that the subject-object dialectics is not an adequate paradigm to understand Plotinus' philosophical endeavor. For, an analysis of the former will show that the starting thrust of Plotinus' thought is a desire for unity that can be such *only if* this unity be understood as unity with the world; while the latter represents the necessary human counterpart of it, as man experiences himself always in a dimension of severed-ness and dispersion. These two poles cannot be separated, as they each represent the core of the human phenomenon, which then appears as something never stable in the quietness of total and secure possession and enjoyment, but rather as a constant struggle that binds man to a restless life. I would even add that the entirety of Plotinus' philosophy is deeply marked by the necessity of the coexistence of these two poles, which gives it its peculiar trait of dynamic struggle.

## 2a. Theoria

To understand the meaning of the word θεωρία (*theoria*) in Plotinus we must refer to what it originally and most basically points to. That is a certain way of seeing. In Ancient Greek the word indicates primarily the action of the θεωρός (*theorós*), that is of the envoy that a city sent to Delphi or to any other sacred place in Greece to observe on behalf of the city the unfolding of the sacred rites. As such, we can think of it as the way of seeing that happens when one looks at a procession of any sort, be it a royal pomp or a religious procession. When we look at it we can indeed focus our gaze on a member of the procession, for example those who serve at the altar, but that is less than θεωρία. We are in a certain way of seeing that can be labeled θεωρία only when we embrace at once the entire procession and see both its unity and its articulation. The vision of the unity and its articulation is the act of that particular way of seeing Plotinus calls θεωρία. On this point Plotinus remains in line not only with the Platonic tradition both

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<sup>12</sup> This is the way in which Plotinus' thought has been usually read, and not only by Jonas, but by the vast majority of scholars and philosophers, as K. Rudolph notices, p. 919.

preceding and following<sup>13</sup> him, but also with an approach that characterizes the entirety of the Greek way of thinking<sup>14</sup>.

What distinguishes Plotinus from all the rest of the tradition is the creative role that he ascribes to θεωρία. For him –and this is the paradox he himself points out at the beginning of one of his treatises–, everything that is tends to θεωρία, as it is in it that the highest creative power, i.e. the act that makes everything subsist, resides<sup>15</sup>. But how to understand this position, which at first cannot fail to appear rather eccentric? At first we can notice that<sup>16</sup> θεωρία, as that act of vision that looks at an articulated unity produces unity in the beholder, who is then unified around its center. Thus, the act of θεωρία appears as a unifying and an ordering act. Its being creative resides then in the fact that it is in itself an act, namely a turning towards that unity that is foundational, though ineffable in its nature, and at the same time being an act in this sense makes it constitutive of an entire reality and its order, which on this very act depend. In this sense, the act of θεωρία is at once an act that is constitutive each time of the foundational level of reality –the various hypostases– and *because of and through this* of the realities that depend on these former. Moreover, also the dependent lower realities are in themselves essentially that very same act of vision.

The clearest case of this is provided by the way in which Plotinus talks about the Νοῦς (*Nous*)<sup>17</sup>. The Νοῦς embraces the One through θεωρία and out of this embrace the scatteredness it is –being at its first moment ‘just’ intelligible matter– comes into a unity: this is the appearance of Νοῦς<sup>18</sup>. That act of unity, then, is both immanent and transcendent to the Νοῦς.

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. e.g. what Plethon says in his *Περὶ ἀρετῶν*, I, 1, 47-53: ἐπεὶ δὲ καθ’ αὐτὸν ἄνθρωπος γέγονεν οὐκ ἄλλο τι μάλιστα ἢ λογικόν τι ζῶον, δῆλον δὴ ὅτι ὡς θεωρός τις οἰόντες ἐν πανηγύρει τῷδε τῷ παντὶ εἰσῆκται, ἐπισκευόμενος εἰς δύναμιν, καὶ θεωρήσων τί τέ ἐστι τῶν ὄντων ἕκαστον, καὶ πῆ ποτε πρὸς ἄλληλα ἔχει, καὶ διὰ τί ἕκαστα γίνονται τῶν γιγνομένων, εἴη τε ἂν καὶ τοῦτο φρόνησις, τὸ λοιπὸν καὶ τελεώτατον μῦριον ἀρετῆς, ἕξις ψυχῆς θεωρητικῆ τῶν ὄντων, ἧπὲρ ἐστι ἕκαστα. (“Since man in itself is nothing else but a certain rational animal, it is certainly clear then that it has been brought into this whole as if into a festival, so that it may investigate according to its faculty, and see (*theoreson*) what each of the beings is, and in what relation they are with each other, and why all that happens comes into being, and this is what can be called reason, the last and most perfect part of virtue, the theoretical disposition of the soul, [that sees] where everything is.” My translation)

<sup>14</sup> Cf. G. Calogero, *Storia della logica antica*, Laterza, Bari, 1967, who recognizes the primacy of the act of vision as the foundation of Greek logic.

<sup>15</sup> The treatise where this concept is for the first time brought into focus is III 8. It is significant that that treatise opens the so called *Großschriften* against the Gnostics, as it seems to be that this shows that Plotinus did not aim at attacking only certain doctrinal details in Gnosticism, such as the multiplication of the level of realities, but also at denouncing how naïve their concept of creation was and with that their concept of action.

<sup>16</sup> For this and for what will be said about the *Nous* and its act of contemplation the main reference is V 3, for which cf. the introduction and commentary by W. Beierwaltes, *Selbsterkenntnis und Erfahrung der Einheit*, Klostermann, Frankfurt, 1991.

<sup>17</sup> About what I say here regarding the *Nous* cf. V 3, above all the first paragraphs, where the concept of θεωρία is specifically applied to the *Nous* and to its creative activity. There the vision of the *Nous* is referred to as ἐνέργεια, i.e. act.

<sup>18</sup> The concept of intelligible matter is developed by Plotinus in *Enn.* II 4, for which see the introduction and commentary by J.-M. Narbonne, *Plotin: les deux matières*, Vrin, Paris, 2000.

It is immanent because it cannot take place without the primeval scattered-ness of the intelligible matter, and it is constantly to this matter that it must refer to; at the same time it is transcendent because its act can never be fixed in a state that be a given, or better a *factum*. It is, instead an act that keeps acting. Hence, the relation between the unifying act and the intelligible matter it is acted upon is not temporal, such that the question is then what came first, but one involving a correlation of synchronicity marked by the hierarchical primacy of the act that verges on unity – to be sure, the unity that the One is: hence, also the One is both immanent and transcendent<sup>19</sup>. Precisely this unifying act is the thing for us so difficult to conceptualize; if, indeed, concept is understood for what the word says, i.e. a complete grabbing –*cum-capio*, κατά-ληψις (*kata-lepsis*), *Begriff*. For the concept, in order to be clear, looks at an articulation to grasp. But, the unifying act of θεωρία is just what it is, a dot, a point. Thus, as such, it escapes the relatedness proper to an articulation thought of as the relation of a subject to an object. Instead of that articulation –so familiar to our mind as to be almost inescapable- we find in the Νοῦς the perfect coincidence of the seer and the seen: the Νοῦς must be coincidence of ὁρῶν and ὁρώμενον, because otherwise we will face a *regressio ad infinitum*, whereby the vision of itself will never be such, but rather vision of itself *seeing* something else<sup>20</sup>. But, if the Νοῦς is indeed this coincidence, then it is a pure unfolding act. Out of this act an articulation unfolds, it is not the unifying act that results from an articulation of whatever kind. What remains true, instead, is the synchronic solidarity between the unrelated unifying act and the scattered-ness of the primeval material: the dynamic stability of the articulation results from this solidarity, marked as it is by transcendence and immanence.

At this point we might ask ourselves why the Νοῦς has that act called θεωρία? Or in other words, why does the Νοῦς verge towards its unity? The answer Plotinus would give us could probably be: because that is the way it is. That is to say, he would point to a necessity which is

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<sup>19</sup> Regarding the transcendence and immanence of the One it is particularly illuminating what Rocco Ronchi, *Il canone minore. Verso una filosofia della natura*, Rizzoli, Milano, 2017, p. 62 says: «L'Uno della intuizione intellettuale, l'Uno che "intuisce", non è l'Uno che unifica un molteplice già dato. Non è l'Uno della sintesi che, secondo il Kant della *Deduzione trascendentale*, deve essere preordinato a ogni analisi. È piuttosto un Uno "magico", un Uno che, essendo Uno, senza rapporto con l'altro, genera i Molti nei quali non diviene altro ma permane "magicamente" in se stesso (*mansio*).»; *ibid.* pp. 211-219. Of the One we can say what R. Chiaradonna, *Sostanza movimento analogia. Plotino critico di Aristotele*, Bibliopolis, Naples, 2002, p. 23 says of the intelligible world in its relation to the sensible world: «(Plotino) sviluppa la differenza tra mondo sensibile e mondo intellegibile traendone la conseguenza più rigorosa, e, cioè, che l'essenza intellegibile, in virtù della sua stessa differenza e separazione ontologica, agisce rispetto a quest'ultima come una causa immanente.» Cf. also J. Rist, *Mysticism and Transcendence in Later Neoplatonism*, in «Hermes» 92, 1964, pp. 213-225, which analyzes interesting passages where the immanence of the One to the Nous is mentioned, although it does not escape the usually inappropriate use of the word 'mysticism' so dear to philologists. As for the *Enneads* cf. VI 8.18, 3; V 3.17, 29-31; III 9.4, 1-2; V 5.12; V 8.11; VI 5.12; VI 7.34; VI 9.4.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. *Enn.* V.3, 5, 10-15; cf. also Rocco Ronchi, *op. cit.*, p. 151: «Si pensi al caso di quel pittore così scrupoloso da voler mettere nella sua rappresentazione proprio tutto, anche lui stesso che lo sta dipingendo. Si produrrà inevitabilmente una situazione di *mise en abyme* e di regressione infinita. Nel paesaggio che dipinge dovrà mettere lui che dipinge il paesaggio e poi lui che dipinge un paesaggio dove c'è lui che sta dipingendo un paesaggio e via così all'infinito, mancando sempre il termine della serie e mancando sempre il tema del paesaggio, cioè la semplicità dello sguardo in atto.» (the underlining is mine).

not the fruit of a chain of causes whereby what is, is the way it is; but rather a necessity that shows to us what is originally as the most grounding datum. This act is the ground of what exists and, being an everlasting act that has no beginning or end, it has no cause<sup>21</sup>. This answer might seem to some to cut the question short in an unsatisfactory way. However, if we reflect on it, we realize that on the contrary it points to one fundamental aspect of θεωρία, namely its absoluteness as an act<sup>22</sup>. Θεωρία as an act is unrelated in the sense of its absoluteness. In other words, while as a source it does have relations to what depends on it, as an act it is self standing and unbound (*ab-solutum*). It is its own justification. As such, it is also the purest act, strictly speaking the only act: the more it is unbound, both to something else and to itself (self-consciousness is already a form of bound-ness), the more immediately productive it is, as in the case of Nature; whereas the actions of human beings are always hindered from both the outside and the inside. So, absoluteness is the first characteristic that can be ascribed to the act of θεωρία.

The second one is its being all-encompassing, thus being in itself whole. Also in this characteristic resides its being the purest act and it goes hand in hand with its absoluteness. For, *qua* whole and all it is also unbound. Opposite to this is the particularism of individuation. Since each individual being can be only partial, as such also its acting is only partial, hence feeble and limited. The Νοῦς chiefly represents this side of the absoluteness of the act of θεωρία, as it embraces fully everything that it contains in such a way that its parts are not such in the sense of being other from what the Νοῦς is, but each is Νοῦς, thus each participates fully in the act of θεωρία. As such, the noetic world is unbound in the sense that no other meter can be brought against which to compare and measure it. Or, in other words, it does not know itself through external criteria, but through an immediate act of knowledge, which is at core an act of vision. It is immediate vision, immediate knowledge and together with these immediate creative act<sup>23</sup>.

This particular way of seeing, which grants access to the truth that is one with being, belongs primarily to the Νοῦς. As such it is the foundation of reality, i.e. what lies beneath the appearance of phenomena. It is the true world, of which this world is a copy. Its being and its truth reside in its ontological stability and are objectively the foundation of reality. This point

<sup>21</sup> On the type of causality proper to the One cf. R. Ronchi, *op.cit.*, pp. 196-219.

<sup>22</sup> Something similar is expressed by Rocco Ronchi, *Immanenza assoluta. Il senso metafisico dell'operazione tecnica in Gilbert Simondon*, «Nóema» 6-1, 2015, p. 41, at the internet link [noema.filosofia.unimi.it](http://noema.filosofia.unimi.it) : «l'azione del vivente (la natura naturans) è la sua individuazione. Questo è il suo atto primo, in quanto sempre presupposto, sempre fungente al fondo di tutti i "movimenti" che comunque caratterizzano il vivente.»

<sup>23</sup> On this particular act of vision, in which the distance between subject and object does not exist, because this act is in fact the presupposition for the very emergence of any distance and with it of a subject and an object, cf. Rocco Ronchi, *op. cit.*, pp. 101-102: «Quel guardare senza vedere sarà piuttosto l'evento di un *contatto* –non abbiamo altra parola per indicarlo- che prescinde dalla distanza nella quale ha luogo ogni rappresentazione, senza per questo annullarsi in una non-intuizione.»

marks the difference regarding Idealism, with which yet Plotinus' philosophy has important links, the most conspicuous of which is –for the point of view of this argument– the identity between the act of knowing and the constitution of a reality as totality. For Plotinus the world, in its very material constitution, is an orderly ensemble as such governed by a principle. This principle finds in its turn the possibility for its very existence and action only in its conversion through vision to the One. Hence, to understand Plotinus' stance on this matter we must be ready to accept that what he says about the constitution of the Νοῦς and its concomitant creative activity is not to be solely referred –as we would if starting from a purely idealistic point of view– to the mind understood as human self-consciousness and hence creative consciousness. However, it remains valid that Plotinus' understanding of the Νοῦς and all that it entails provide us with a more than adequate model to understand deeply how the human subject, *qua* mind, constitutes itself and its own world.

The next step Plotinus takes is to follow the unfolding of θεωρία as creative act along its descent towards the lower realities through the activity of the soul. Treatise III 8, *On Contemplation*, opens by paraphrasing a sentence of Eudoxus referred to by Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics*<sup>24</sup>. Where Eudoxus had postulated that everything that is, both rational and irrational beings, desires and tends to pleasure (ἡδονή), Plotinus proposes that everything desires and tends to θεωρία. In so doing he not only denies what Eudoxus was saying, but goes also against Aristotle who had already changed pleasure with θεωρία, ascribing the latter only to rational beings, among whom of course there is man. Plotinus affirms that everything tends to θεωρία, hence also animals and plants, i.e. the so-called irrational beings. Accepting this point entails a particular understanding of what nature is. Plotinus is well aware of this: his vision of nature stands as one of the most radical visions that Greek philosophy had provided and at the same time seems to recuperate certain intuitions that might be seen in the thoughts of some previous thinkers<sup>25</sup>.

In one of the most potent of the images disseminated in the *Enneads*, Plotinus imagines the dialogue between an interlocutor and Nature itself<sup>26</sup>. The hypothetical interlocutor asks Nature why it creates. The words Plotinus uses to formulate this question make it clear that he has in mind the concept of final cause (τέλος ἕνεκα), i.e. the question already presupposes that Nature is guided in its creative act by an ultimate goal, which as such must be based on a pre-established

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<sup>24</sup> *Enn.* III 8.1, 1-8 for which cf. *Ar. Eth. Nic.* K 2. 1172b10.

<sup>25</sup> Regarding the understanding of Nature that early Greek thinkers supposedly had cf. M. Heidegger's essay *On the Being and Conception of Φύσις in Aristotle's Physics B, 1*, in M. Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, tr. by W. Macneil, CUP, Cambridge, 1998.

<sup>26</sup> *Enn.* III 8.4.

operational plan. In such a perspective Nature would operate through some kind of deliberation, hence it would be understood as a subject establishing and operating on an object. The answer Nature gives gainsays this presupposition: it does not operate on the basis of deliberation. This marks a distance, then, between the kind of making belonging to Nature and the kind of making typical of man. How does then Nature operate? What's the engine of its creative activity?

Plotinus uses here a term heavily loaded with symbolism. Nature answers to its interlocutor that like it also its interlocutor should have remained silent (σιωπή), and in this silence reach an intimate understanding. We should not run too quickly to conclude that Plotinus is here advocating for some kind of mystical –whatever this word might mean– way to describe the working of Nature, maybe using as a term of reference the silence commanded to the initiated in the sacred Mysteries. If this connection can be suggestive on the hand, on the other it obscures the real parallel that represents the negative term of comparison. This other term of comparison is the very act of speaking through which the interlocutor interrogates Nature. The act of speaking must necessarily proceed through the sequential unfolding of thoughts manifested in words and in itself it contains already the finality manifested in the very formulation of the question: τίνος ἕνεκα (*tínos héneka*), *what for?* We find here one of the two most important acceptations of the word λόγος in Plotinus, that which refers to the act of *discursive thought*<sup>27</sup>. Through it the totality cannot be seen but as the unfolding of a sequence, which proceeds and constitutes itself only step by step. In this way, the totality itself is not anymore an immediate act of vision, but is reconstructed through the mediating act of the discursive thought that acts through a sequence.

Nature does not act sequentially according to the process of discursive thought. Its making is not guided by the sequential unfolding of an act of deliberation and analysis. Rather, Nature creates by *immediately* apprehending in its totality the noetic world that is the Νοῦς. This act of immediate apprehension Plotinus calls θεωρία, like in the case of the Νοῦς, which constitutes the paradigm to understand the coming into existence of reality in its articulation. What Nature apprehends through its act of vision are *objects of vision* (θεωρήματα [*theoremata*]) resulting in their turn from the act of vision that belongs to the higher soul; what Nature produces are other *objects of vision*, i.e. all the things that constitute the primary seeds of reality. Hence, each object of vision is a λόγος. In this case we are dealing with the second acceptance of the word in Plotinus: in it

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<sup>27</sup> On the two acceptations of the word *logos* in Plotinus cf. F. Tazzolio, *Logos et langage comme lien à l'origine*, in Michel Fattal ed., *Logos et langage chez Plotin et avant Plotin*, L'Harmattan, Paris, 2003; the author underlines the fact that in Plotinus these two acceptations mark also two interwoven complementary functions of the *logos*, as producer of images in the procession and as tool of the ascension towards the One in the conversion. On *logos* in general in Plotinus and its functions cf. M. Fattal, *Logos et image chez Plotin*, L'Harmattan, Paris, 1998.

λόγος is understood as seed, which in its being yet *not* unfolded gathers and keeps together the power appearing in the unfolding of everything. All things that form reality are, then, the unfolding from this primeval gathered-ness, which is λόγος and as such object of vision. It must be marked here that we find again in the creative activity of Nature the same relation between the act of θεωρία, which is in itself unified by the apprehension of its object, and the unification of an otherwise scattered matter, which on that act depends for the possibility to receive a unified shape. In other words, the act of vision unifies and forms because it is in its turn unified and in-formed by the object of vision. This process causes the coming into being of a descending chain of objects of vision (θεωρήματα), each lower one being the image of the higher one.

In all this descending chain there is also a descending gradation of self-knowledge, as something that can be labeled metaphrastically consciousness. It is important to keep in mind that this concept of consciousness and the question relative to it are an import of a concept that is *necessarily* human. Human beings possess self-consciousness and thus self-knowledge, but in them it proceeds through discursive thought. Such a self-consciousness is, Plotinus stresses, to be denied both for the Νοῦς and for Nature, because neither of them proceeds through discursive thought. The former possesses self-knowledge in the act of θεωρία, which in it is marked by a complete *immediateness* with what is contemplated: in short the contemplated, the seen, is the contemplator and the seeing thing<sup>28</sup>. The latter also possesses self-knowledge, but in an obscure way. Plotinus uses an image to try to illustrate the kind of self-consciousness proper to Nature: he says that Nature's self-consciousness is similar to that a sleeping man can have<sup>29</sup>. That is to say, like a sleeping man, Nature has a sort of knowledge of itself and its seeing and producing act, in which –like in a dream– there is no clear distinction between the seer and the seen. In both cases, thus, we have an *immediateness*, which corresponds perfectly to, in fact *is* truth (ἀλήθεια). Perhaps stretching a bit Plotinus' thought –but after all not so much–, one can say that the concept of truth finds here its own essence, which the Greeks themselves never truly reflected upon, according to Heidegger. For, truth is here a-letheia, i.e. that un-veiled-ness that manifests itself in an immediate appearing as what is, however not as an image for an external subject, but as an “image of itself,” as Bergson says<sup>30</sup>. The essence of this un-veiled-ness that a-

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<sup>28</sup> The silence of Nature and of Nous (cf. III 8.5 and V 8.7, 24-25) is to be understood as the manifestation, in a way, of this *immediateness*, as F. Tazzolio, *Logos et langage comme lien à l'origine*, p. 184 n. 32 notices: «L'abolition du langage s'accompagne bien évidemment de la suppression de la dualité sujet-objet, de la dualité du *noûs*, de l'extériorité, de la représentation.»

<sup>29</sup> Cf. III 8.4, 22-25.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. R. Ronchi, *op. cit.*, pp. 143-144, which refers to the first chapter of Bergson's *Matière et mémoire*, where: «la materia-immagine [...] è il trascendentale desoggettivizzato.»

letheia is, all the more is brought forth through this thought because it tries to grasp it skipping over what for human beings is an unavoidable step, i.e. discursive thought and its necessarily defining approach, as the working of a subject. Playing with the etymology of the word understanding, we could say that truth in its unbreakable solidarity with being and knowing is the *under*-standing: it stands *under* the appearing of things, being not separated from them, but as the stable stance of their necessary appearing and of their appearing as such. It is like a subterranean river sustaining all that rests on it, while being one with it and stable in its constant flow.

Thus, to the *absoluteness* of θεωρία as seeing and creative act, we must add the other fundamental characteristic of *immediateness*.

## 2b. Pistis

But the soul of each individual man is not the Νοῦς nor is it the universal soul on which Nature directly depends. Its distance from the latter becomes increasingly evident, the more the soul falls into individuation. For, whereas the World-Soul acts silently and smoothly through an unbroken vision, thus through Nature producing the phenomenal world; the individual soul, i.e. that soul that governs a given body which by its own constitution is detached from the totality, does not always operate through vision. In fact, its very ignorance regarding reality and its subsequent quest for truth are precisely the mark of the fact that the individual soul is outside of vision. It is broken, so to say, from the original absoluteness and immediateness that unfold through and from vision. This situation is chiefly that of the human soul, which in its phenomenological constitution *is* first and foremost discursive thought. The word ‘phenomenological’ is not used lightly. For, even though it would be absurd to claim that Plotinus is a phenomenologist in the way in which many 20<sup>th</sup> century’s thinkers are; nevertheless, it is the case that his approach to the investigation of the human being starts by looking at the essentially phenomenal steps of its unfolding. The injunction of the Delphic god ‘know thyself’ is thus approached by Plotinus through a careful look at how the human being actually unfolds in it dealing with reality and the question it poses. In answering the question regarding who we are, Plotinus gives as a first step a twofold answer: we are *always* sensitivity as well as discursive thought<sup>31</sup>. Which means that we are always the act that mostly absorbs us. Of these two moments the former, i.e. sensitive, has a certain primacy. For, we cannot stop feeling. We are always immersed in some kind of sensation, the consciousness and knowledge of which comes only after. Sensitivity represents the water, so to say, in which each one has to swim, while the

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<sup>31</sup> Cf. *Enn.* V 3.3, 14 [...] ψυχὴν δεῖ ἐν λογισμοῖς εἶναι; 35-36 ἢ αὐτοὶ μὲν οἱ λογιζόμενοι καὶ νοοῦμεν τὰ ἐν τῇ διανοίᾳ νοήματα αὐτοῖ· τοῦτο γὰρ ἡμεῖς; 40-41 ἀλλ’ αἴσθησις μὲν αἰεὶ ἡμέτερον συγκεχωρημένον -αἰεὶ γὰρ αἰσθανόμεθα κτλ.

consciousness of it arises only later, once whatever is perceived through the senses is put under the lens of that part of the soul Plotinus calls dianoetic, to which discursive thought belongs. Thus, sensitivity links each individual to a totality, which is that of the whole. This totality, however, is only that of the sensible world, beyond which is there to be found that other totality, i.e. that of the noetic cosmos, of which the former is an image. It would be better not to call them ‘two totalities,’ as such an expression is clearly self contradictory and absurd: it is better to say that the noetic and the sensible world represent each a sphere of a totality, which is reality itself. In this expression, more accurate than the previous one, we must focus our attention on the fact that these two halves are part of one same reality, whereby one has necessarily to imply the other. Human being, then, is always immersed in a totality that encircles him from above, i.e. the noetic cosmos, and from below, i.e. the sensible world. In the middle of these two spheres we find the dianoetic faculty of the soul, in which the connection between them appears not anymore in its immediateness, but through the mediation of discursive thought, which incapable of grasping everything at once, as immediate absoluteness, has to build a chain of sequential propositions. These propositions, which can be also called representations, are not the result of the impression of the sensible world on the soul, as if this latter were a *tabula rasa*; rather, *qua* images they are the result of the recognition by the dianoetic faculty of the stamp of a given noetic form *in* a given sensible thing. In other words, the act of sense apprehension is already a *mediated* act, whereby a mediated dimension comes into play. This dimension is that of the dianoetic faculty, which works through discursive thought; through this faculty the sensations, in which any living thing possessing a body is constantly immersed, are organized into a certain meaningful order in agreement with those forms that the soul gathers from the noetic cosmos. But this mediating act is possible *only* because an immediate all-encompassing totality is already and always unfolding in its act.

However, this constant act of the dianoetic faculty, through which an image of the totality emerges, does not proceed smoothly and its results are always shaky. The individual soul aims through its dianoetic faculty at embracing the totality in its absoluteness and immediateness, but this is precisely what it fails at. The dianoetic faculty falls always short of the task it recognizes as its own. Thus, the individual experiences itself as cut off of the absoluteness and immediateness of totality. It experiences itself as *out*-standing. Plotinus refers to this state of the individual soul with the word ἔκστασις (*ekstasis*), to be understood in its literal meaning: standing *out*<sup>32</sup>. The individual soul stands out of the totality that the original vision unfolds and knows and because

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<sup>32</sup> The Nous is described as interior to itself, because it does not need to go outside of itself in the unfolding of πρᾶξις, a word that given its complexity in Plotinus’ thought I prefer to leave un-translated here; the soul, instead, is already *out* in its very being. Cf. V 3.6, 30-43; 3.7.

of this it falls into a state of ignorance, where ignorance equates to a fundamental and mostly unbreachable lack of that immediateness everything else in the totality enjoys. Thus, its being outside binds it necessarily to ignorance, real knowledge being self-knowledge, immediate and concomitant with the producing act of the Νοῦς. As a way to make this point clearer, we can take as a point of comparison animals, which are parts of those irrational beings (ἄλογα [*alogá*]) Plotinus has already recognized as participant in the original and creative act of vision. An animal, say a dog, does not stand out of the immediateness of the absolute totality: it just goes along with it. It is always immersed in it: for a dog the totality and each thing in it do not represent a problem. It is only for that particular animal endowed with λόγος (both in the sense of reason and in the sense of language) that the totality represents a problem, because it is only that being that stands out. In this sense, a dog is on the same level of a god, whose existence is one with that of the totality and does not need λόγος with its necessary corollary, i.e. *rationality* (λογισμός [*logismós*]), to go along with totality. The prerogatives of man, reason-language and rationality, are thought of by Plotinus not so much as the sign of his superior stance in comparison to all other beings, but rather as the mark of his ultimately problematic nature<sup>33</sup>. It is this trait of human life that is at the core of that idea so typical of Plotinus, i.e. the fall. At times expressed in the *Enneads* in a language reminiscent of myth, this image can be misleading in that it could lead one to think that Plotinus sees man as fallen from *another* world into this one. But this is not the case. For, as noted above, there are not two worlds, but rather two spheres forming *one* world; as a consequence the fall Plotinus so often speaks about is the state of detachment from the immediate absoluteness of the totality that man finds himself in.

Opposite to the act of θεωρία stands that of discursive thought, proper to the dianoetic faculty: to the act of immediate adherence to the totality, an act by its own nature fragmentary and tentative, characterized by mediation. However, this latter is necessary to try and conquer that higher ground, that primeval unity with things, which the soul constitutionally is never entirely detached from. For, it is precisely through that restless act of constant mediation that the soul can embrace and possess, albeit not stably, the totality. Through the operation of discursive thought, which works dialectically, this act leads the soul to an apprehension of those forms that shape things and in which the soul itself share in its essence. As such, it operates as a persuasive faculty, convincing the soul of the possession it has of those realities. Whereas the Νοῦς has what it knows by necessity, because it *is* what it *knows*, the soul is in need of persuasion (πειθώ

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<sup>33</sup> In Hegelian terms, filtered through Kojève's interpretation, man is the power of negation, and the going back to animality at the end of history is the abolition of this negativity. Of course this conclusion is not uncontroversial in its extremism, as the dialogue between Kojève himself and Bataille shows, for which cf. G. Agamben, *L'uomo e l'animale*, Bollati Boringhieri, Turin, 2002, pp. 13-15.

[πειθῆ])<sup>34</sup>, because it is *not* what it knows *qua* dianoetic faculty. For, *qua* dianoetic the soul stands *out* of the immediate adherence to the totality, and it is only through the act of discursive thought, unfolding through dialectics, that this faculty can touch on the immediateness of the knowledge of totality and have a certain momentary possession of it. In this sense, this faculty is a persuasive activity, a πιστικὴ ἐνέργεια (*pistiké enérgeia*), as Plotinus calls it.

When the soul reaches this status, it finds itself in πίστις (*pístis*), whereby it deems itself “to have” truth, i.e. to embrace the totality in its simple essence. This word ‘πίστις’ is rather difficult to translate in English with just one word: it can mean both faith and confidence acquired through persuasion. It must be noted that the time in which Plotinus lived is the time in which this very word starts gaining an unprecedented relevance. On the one hand, it was and still is the word that most prominently characterizes the new religion, Christianity: to have faith is the fundamental and most important act of the adherent to Christianity precisely as a believer, as it is clear in Greek, where ‘to believe’ and ‘to have faith’ are ultimately the same word, πίστις < πιστεύω. In this connection what is skipped is the act of persuading typical of the working of the discursive thought; thus, what one believes in is beyond the realm of what the dianoetic faculty of the soul can glimpse at, being of a fundamentally different order. In short, discursive thought *qua* dialectics has no place in this conception of what πίστις is. On the other hand, this word is not only typical of Christianity, but also of those various movements and sects that go under the comprehensive title of *Gnosis*. The adherent to any of these sects professed himself to *know* (gnosis = knowledge) how things are regarding his origin as well as the origin of the world. However, he does not reach this knowledge through the dialectical operations of discursive thought, but by believing in what is revealed to him by certain prophets and in certain books. Moreover, the very word ‘πίστις’ appears in many Gnostic texts as a proper name of a divine entity, which is responsible for the creation and the coming into being of this world. There, this entity called Pistis-Sophia lays in between two worlds, on the one hand the world of light, on the other that of darkness, mingling with which it has created this world we live in. Reality is, thus, understood as separated at least in two domains, ultimately foreign to each other: the gnostic has to flee from this world and strive to reach the other one. The invocation of Pistis-Sophia appears, then, as an appeal to an extra-worldly entity, aiming at which the soul, prisoner in this worldly dimension, will be able to free itself from the bonds of human life and return to its place of origin. These two acceptations of the word ‘πίστις’ share the idea that it depends on an act of revelation of sort, skipping over the operation of dialectics; Gnosticism presents in addition to

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<sup>34</sup> *Enn.* V 3.6, 8-10: Ἄρ' οὖν τοιοῦτον ὁ λόγος ἔδειξεν, οἷον καὶ ἐνέργειαν πιστικὴν ἔχειν; Ἡ ἀνάγκη μὲν οὕτως, πειθῶ δὲ οὐκ ἔχει· καὶ γὰρ ἡ μὲν ἀνάγκη ἐν νῶ, ἡ δὲ πειθῶ ἐν ψυχῇ.

this a connotation of the word, whereby it invites to reject this world in favor of another world, a trait that Christianity, at least in its orthodox form, lacks<sup>35</sup>. Πίστις is there the faith in the existence of another world, the attainment of which, once reached, will be eternal. The understanding Plotinus has of this word is rather far, as it is clear, from both these positions.

Πίστις as persuasion is, therefore, one of the fundamental traits of discursive thought. Against the constant flux of things, through which things themselves seem to disappear and to escape our grasp, discursive thought reassures us that we in fact possess them, because we are one with them through the communion with the world of ideas. Looked at from a modern perspective, at least from that perspective that has marked philosophy since the last two centuries, this position is one, whereby things are ultimately skipped over, because their foundational ground is looked for in another dimension. This is indeed the position of metaphysics: an approach based on the supposition that things do not fully possess being, because they are transient, passing, as they do, from nothingness into being and again into nothingness. To answer this supposition the hypothesis is brought forth that the real and ultimate consistency of things, their being grounded, is to be found at another level. This supposition is the foundation of a position, namely that position that Rocco Ronchi calls contingency. Things are at their core just contingency. This position is, according to Bergson as well as Severino, a *persuasion*. As such it is a characteristic trait of human beings in their dealing with reality. Plotinus, in his turn, does acknowledge that contingency is a typical trait of the human being, in so far as his condition is marked by discursive thought. Through it we cannot but grasp the totality as the reconstructed sequence of severed events, each beginning and ending and this is because discursive thought is precisely that faculty that cannot grasp totality at once but has to scan everything through a sequence. Contingency is thus linked to the necessarily sequential motion of discursive thought. However, it is also through it and necessarily through it that as human beings we can regain the wholeness of that totality. We can imagine the way Plotinus presents discursive thought as a ladder: through it we can go down –to use Plotinian spatial images– to the fragmentation of the totality in its sequence, but through it we can also go up to the restoration of our unity with that totality. A unity that as adherence takes place of course outside of discursive thought, pretty much like we are not anymore on the ladder once we are sitting on top of the wall we wanted to climb. The task of discursive thought is, then, that of bringing us back into harmony with the totality, precisely through its power of persuasion. This shows that the problems raised by contemporary philosophers with regards to the need for a switch of paradigm in our fundamental approach to things are already perceived and somehow

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<sup>35</sup> Cf. the interpretation of the Apocalypse by E. Corsini, *Apocalisse prima e dopo*, SEI, Turin, 1980.

thematized by Plotinus: also in his thought we find an understanding of the titanic aspect of the task of a radical philosophy, whereby the human being has to try and overcome his own condition, if he wants to gain a true access to the reality of things.

## Conclusion

As we have noted, Hans Jonas understands Plotinus' philosophy as a form of sublimated ontologization, whereby the dynamic relatedness of *Dasein* with its world is stifled in the binary subject-object dialectics. This stifling appears most clearly through the concept of *contemplation*: for, it is there that the *Dasein*, having understood itself as a self-identical subject, reduces the contingency of reality and its foundational relatedness to it to an object of vision. In this way, Jonas says, *Dasein* implements an understanding of itself and of reality as simply present in an unchanging state.

However, our analysis of the word *θεωρία* has showed that through it Plotinus aims at bringing forth something that goes far beyond the semantic field of the word "vision" as we commonly use it. That word marks in Plotinus the unfolding of an act, which through its dynamism qua *act* is the foundation of reality as such. This act is not marked yet by the subject-object division, which instead finds in it its base. Plotinus does acknowledge the level of that binary division as something real and unavoidable, almost inescapable, for human beings. However, he perceives the existence of a level that comes before that division and stands as its necessary base. Thus, his philosophy is to be seen as an endeavor to go beyond the level of the subject-object dialectics to reach another level that already stands always behind it. In this sense, Plotinus' thought can be seen as part of the lineage, maybe the first of it, of those thinkers that Rocco Ronchi has called the *canone minore*. In it we find figures such as Bergson and James, Whitehead and Gentile, Lacan and Deleuze. They are all brought together by the attempt to go beyond a comprehension of reality centered on an anthropocentrism characterized by the intentionality of subjective consciousness towards a horizon for the comprehension of the unfolding of the foundational unity, immediate and absolute in itself. This is what Ronchi calls *immanenza assoluta*. Like them, Plotinus recognizes the binary subject-object dialectics as a datum, with all its limitations, but understands and highlights the need for human reason to go beyond and behind it, if it wants to grasp reality in its totality. This is the ultimate sense of the desire for unification (*ἔνωσις*) in his philosophy.

Thus, taking into consideration the two words, θεωρία and πίστις, and the dialectical tension in their necessary relation has not only provided us with the ground to answer the question we had started from, but also to see a much deeper implication of what that question asks.

If Gnosticism is to be seen, as Jonas suggests, as an existential position whereby man responds to the urgency of anxiety with a withdrawal from the world, and the awaiting of the coming of another world, then Plotinus cannot be deemed a Gnostic. This is not because in his thought we cannot detect that same feeling of anxiety at work: on the contrary, it is the very engine of his entire spiritual adventure. The reason why we can deny that Plotinus is a Gnostic is that he understands and deals with that most human *Stimmung* in a way that is radically different from the Gnostic one. For him there is no question of refusing this world in view of another one to come: the human being has *only* this world and what Plotinus says regarding the fallen-ness of the human soul is not to be taken at face value. Rather, it represents an almost allegorical way of expression, whereby the philosopher expresses through images what he could not fully express through concepts. Plotinus is well aware that there is only one totality and that we have fallen out of the absolute immediateness of it: this state of fallen-ness is the human condition. A fallen-ness, that is, which first and foremost is a fallen-ness into a condition, not into a dimension out of a previous dimension. This condition is that of the division between subject and object.

But with this, it becomes clear that an answer that wants to meet the full import of that question ends up uncovering a much deeper level, which perhaps that very question had not even fathomed. For, that question ultimately asks regarding the position the human being must take in front of reality and in front of other human beings in order to reach the highest of his own being: as such it is an overtly ethical question. The accusation labeled against Plotinus is fundamentally the same as that labeled by Jonas against Heidegger. Both philosophers are responsible for taking a position that equates to a withdrawal from the world, a refusal to take responsibility for things and above all for human beings. However, Plotinus' thought interrogates the very condition of that man from whom a position of responsibility is expected. Out of that condition a position has appeared, the position of metaphysics. This position is not only historical, but is first and foremost human: that is to say, it is a necessary position, in so far as the subject-object dialectics is inherent to the human state. In its historical unfolding, this position has increasingly identified the human phenomenon with its faculty of rationalization, with his discursive thought and its categories and mechanisms. Can something else be built starting from this position, something that be not the further unfolding of what we have already seen unfolding for the past two millennia and that by now has wrapped the entire earth? Plotinus suggests, I submit, that the human being needs to go beyond and above himself. He has to

attempt constantly the crossing of the bridge at the end of which there is the trans-human, which stands behind him as his true foundation.