In my paper I aim to discuss the notion of discursive thinking – in relation to both the hypostasis Soul and the individual living beings – in III 8 by referring to other treatises as well. I will also refer to the notion of διάνοια in relation to λογισμός in Plotinus, with special attention to the relation between the thinking of the Soul and that of individual human souls. Although throughout the Enneads a continuity of the poietic activity is to be observed across the various hypostatic levels, I will focus on the question of how the Soul and the individual souls think and contemplate in their own peculiar way.

**Keywords**: Plotinus, Soul, Contemplation, Thinking, Reasoning

## I. Introduction

We can approach the broad issue of θεωρία, contemplation, from a double perspective, namely the ontological perspective and the epistemological one, although it should be noted that the two are not conceived as separated domains by Plotinus. Contemplation is coextensive with ποίησις: the contemplative creation that allows the very existence of the hypostases, which is to say generation through the effortless production of the Ideas and the Soul in Nous, and of Nature in the Soul\(^1\). This productive contemplation (a ποιητική θεωρία, as opposed to πρᾶξις) characterizes the ontological and epistemological condition of possibility of the hypostases and the transcendent part of what exists. As for individual souls, and specifically the rational part of our souls, the λογιστική, it is difficult for them, though not impossible, to achieve a state of contemplation, for they possess discursive thinking, logic, and language\(^2\).

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\(^2\) See for instance Wallis, *Neoplatonism*, p. 52: «The need to postulate an eternally active principle underlying the intermittent contemplation of human thought had been argued in Aristotle’s famous chapter on the Active Intelligence (De An. III.5; cf. Enn. V.9) and it is in Plotinus’ accounts of his Second Hypostasis that Aristotelian influence is most conspicuous. On the empirical side his distinction between Soul and Intelligence corresponds to that between discursive and intuitive thought. As Aquinas observes (ST Ia.14.7), thought may be described as “discursive” in two senses, either as involving...
According to Plotinus, contemplation is possible because it coincides with an activity of ποίησις (in eternity, not in time, given that time characterizes human reasoning and language) which is entirely λόγος in itself, and it never comes to be by means of πρᾶξις alone, although πρᾶξις too can be oriented towards contemplation. Therefore, we can admit – jokingly, as Plotinus stresses in the first chapter of Enn. III 8 – that Nature too, as Nature of the All and natural life, contemplates, insofar as we consider it λόγος and hence as a product and part of the Soul. This ideal condition for contemplation, therefore, is possible if and only if: a) creating and being coincide (ποίησις as Λόγος); b) the principle generates that which the principle itself already is, and has always been; c) λόγος is the subject and object of contemplation, and the origin is also the ultimate τέλος.

The fact of generating out of overabundance does not produce any internal change in the Nous and of course in the One. In transmitting its essence, the principle remains the same, generating part of itself. As the personification in III 8.4 makes clear, Nature as Λόγος generated by the Soul creates without effort and in a state of silence, in such a way that things simply stem from her. Nature was born of ‘parents’ who generated her without any actions, only in virtue of the fact that they were superior Logoi, μείζονες λόγοι (III 8.4, 12-13).

Although this is a coherent picture so far, the case of the Soul in III 8 is somewhat deceptive. We might wish to argue that in the case of Nature, and especially the ποίησις of Nature by the Soul, contemplation is much more complicated and obscure than in the case of the superior hypostases. The lower part of the Soul seems to have much in common with the individual human soul, to the point that – according to Deck and other scholars – it is not possible to affirm with certainty that, for instance, in III 8.5 and 6 Plotinus is still talking exclusively of the Soul rather than the World Soul or even the human rational soul, λογιστική. Some clues of this complexity are to be found in the adjectives used in 8.5, 3-4 to describe the character of the Soul, such as φιλομαθές and ζητητικόν. Both these adjectives, widely present in Plato, suggest the idea of an imperfect rather than perfect principle which is in need of intellectual fulfillment, a principle not possessing but seeking knowledge. Moreover, Plotinus describes this search for knowledge and truth as a labour, ὠδίς, something that reminds us – quite evidently – of Plato’s portrait of Socratic maieutics. However, Plotinus claims that this labour and desire for knowledge is not caused by her defectiveness, but rather by her fulness, τὸ πλῆρες.

reasoning from premisses to conclusion or as involving simple transition from one object to another. Human thought is clearly discursive in both of these senses».

1 Specifically on Enn. III. 8 and the question of how Nature contemplates, see C. WILDBERG, A world of thoughts: Plotinus on Nature and Contemplation, in R. CHIARADONNA - F. TRABATTINI (eds.), Physics and Philosophy of Nature in Greek Neoplatonism, Brill, Leiden 2009, who convincingly argues about the structure of the treatise as progressively answering to the question formulated in the first chapter about the ability of Nature to contemplate in her own way.


3 See Enn. III 8.5, 1-6: Ἀλλὰ περὶ μὲν φύσεως εἰπόντες ὃν τρόπον θεωρία ἡ γένεσις, ἐπὶ τὴν ψυχὴν τὴν πρὸ ταύτης ἐλλογέων λέγωμεν, ὡς ἡ ταύτης θεωρία καὶ τὸ φιλομαθεῖς καὶ τὸ ζητητικὸν καὶ ἡ εἰς ὡς ἐγνώκει όδις καὶ τὸ πλῆρες πεποίηκεν αὐτὴν θεωρήματα πάν γενομένην ἄλλα θεωρήματα ποιήσαι.
**Discursive Thinking in Plotinus, Enn. III, 8 [30]**

Enn. III 8.1 opens with a rhetorical remark, which will be formally overturned in 8.6, 16: «joking» (παίζοντες), we can well claim that everything engages in contemplation, both rational and irrational beings, ἔλλογα καὶ ἄλογα, which means that not only the natura naturans practises contemplation, but also the natura naturata, including beasts and vegetables. Plotinus wants to concede here that also that Nature which is not capable of representations, ἀφάνταστον, points to the highest principle and has θεωρία as its goal. With this tentative picture, further developed in 8.2 and 8.3, Plotinus aims to counter both the pantheistic view of nature of the Stoics, and the Gnostic interpretation of the material world we experience as the product of an evil demiurge. So it is true that we cannot approach this inquiry entirely seriously (ἐπιχειρεῖν σπουδάζειν) – because the natura naturata is actualized in matter which is deprivation – but it is also true that the natural world is a product of the Soul, and therefore part of the Λόγος, as Plotinus repeatedly states in III 8. Φύσις, conceived as natural life and the cosmos composed of individual living beings, is παραγόμενη, as opposed to the Λόγος, a principle which is ἀκίνητος, being prior and superior. But if we conceive φύσις as a whole, as a φύσις-εἶδος, we must admit that she is also a kind of ἀκίνητος λόγος (8.2, 20-22). III 8.3 introduces the crucial issue of πρᾶξις as opposed to θεωρία, that is, action (in movement and time) as opposed to contemplation. The act of ποιεῖν, in the case of Nature, coincides with her own existence, being at the same time θεωρία and θεωρήματα, contemplation and the object of contemplation, a distinction that we also find further on in III 8 and that is peculiar of Λόγος.

Chapter 4 opens with the personification of Nature speaking to an anonymous interlocutor who is enquiring about the creation of things in the world. Nature explains that her actions (as acts of ποίησις and not πρᾶξις) are performed in silence, and that things stem from her in an act of effortless creation, precisely in the same way as she was born from her ‘parents’, in silence and contemplation, her parents being superior rational reasons. Plotinus explains Nature’s words by saying that she is contemplation too not only because she was begotten within the Soul but moreover because she is Soul, and therefore part of a superior Λόγος. On the level of metaphysics, this is possibly the strongest answer to the Gnostic argument about creation. However, Plotinus is keen to claim that the contemplative vision of Nature is blurred and not clear as it is in the case of Intellect and the (highest) Soul. This vision of Nature is «somewhat blurred», ἀμυδρότερα, being only an imitation and image, εἴδωλον, of the clear contemplation of the hypostases. The adjective ἀμυδρός recalls perhaps the Timaeus’ description of Chora as the third kind of being: moreover, this parallel seems to work as long as Nature does not coincide either with matter or with the living beings that exist within it, exactly like shapes, immanent forms and bodies in the receptacle.

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6 The expressions are borrowed directly from Eriugena and later Spinoza, without any claim to attribute to Plotinus the pantheistic view they can also convey.

7 See Enn. III 8.3, 17-18: ‘Ἡ δὲ ἔχει, καὶ διὰ τούτο ὅτι ἔχει καὶ ποιεῖ. Τὸ οὖν εἶναι αὐτῆ καὶ ἔστι τούτῳ ἐστὶ τὸ ποιεῖν αὐτῆ καὶ ὡσον ἔστι τούτῳ ἐστὶ τὸ ποιοῦν. Ἐστι δὲ θεωρία καὶ θεώρημα, λόγος γάρ. («But nature possesses, and just because it possesses, it also makes. Making, for it, means being what it is, and its making power is coextensive with what it is. But is contemplation and object of contemplation, for it is a rational principle»). If not otherwise specified, translations are taken from Plotinus, Enneads III, transl. by A.H. Armstrong, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) - London 1967.

8 See Enn. III 8.4, 26-28.

9 See Tim., 48 a ff. This point would require a much longer discussion about the relations between the
Chapter 5 invites us to go from Nature back to the Soul who originated it, analyzing why and how the Soul is contemplation: however, from line 10 onwards, Plotinus explicitly introduces the distinction between a higher and a lower part of the Soul, although these are not conceived as two distinct ‘parts’ of soul, but rather as different degrees of intensity of contemplation. In the same way, action is not of a different species with respect to contemplation, but rather the most obscure kind of contemplative vision, as becomes clear from line 20 to the end of chapter 5, which ends with the image of the charioteer, ἡνίοχος, explicitly recalling Plato’s *Phaedrus*. The ‘parts’ of this winged soul appear not to be separated but to be rather unified by different stages of contemplation, from the perfect acquaintance of the charioteer to the blurred vision (but which is still vivid desire) of the two horses.

With chapter 6 we are back to the issue of action as πρᾶξις, as the desire for contemplation and knowledge, or the weakest form of ποίησις. The chapter is full of interesting clues that deserve attention, namely the notion of λόγος in relation to the soul, the presence of the Good in the soul as an object of contemplation, and the dichotomy between silence and uttered reasoning that characterizes the distinction between contemplation and discursive thinking. The Soul «at rest» is a powerful image of the contemplating hypostasis, and of the human soul attaining knowledge as well. The claims contained in chapters 1 to 6 are in a way summarized in chapter 7, which some scholars in the past believed to be an interpolation by Porphyry: in this chapter, we are once again invited to consider that all living beings somehow point to the object of supreme contemplation and knowledge, and that all living beings, aspiring to contemplation, experience a kind of labour, ὠδίς (as already observed in 8.5), not because of their emptiness but because of their containing part of the contemplation itself which is Λόγος. Chapter 7 ends with another Platonic image reminiscent of the *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium*; that of lovers as individuals striving to attain contemplation by means of love.

Chapter 8 is crucial because the concepts of νόησις and νόημα are introduced in the picture; νόησις in particular stands as the human counterpart to productive θεωρία, something that begs a comparison with the Platonic position, not only in relation to the metaphor of the Line in the *Republic*, but also more generally with regard to the Platonic dismissal of the possibility of intellectual intuition on the part of the embodied soul. From chapters 9, 10 and 11 to the end of *Enn.* III 8, Plotinus switches from contemplation to the first cause and source of contemplation, from Intellect to the One, which is described for the first time with the famous and enduring images of spring, πηγή, at 8.10, 5, and of the rooted plant, φυτός ἐν ῥίζῃ, at 10, 10-12. The treatise ends with the description of Intellect as sight and the relationship between νοῦς, beauty, and the Good. Indeed, what was true of the Soul in 8.7 is also true of Intellect:

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12. See for instance *Enn.* III 5.1, 38-43; 5.3, 1 and ff., along with the allegorical interpretation of Aphrodite and Zeus in 5.8; KALLIGAS, The Enneads of Plotinus, p. 636, refers especially to Plato, *Phaedr.*, 250 d3 - 251 a1.
contemplation means the contemplation of a superior entity for the sake of the Good. And the Good cannot be elsewhere than in Λόγος and, ultimately, (in) the One.

II. What is and what is not ‘discursive’ in Enn. III 8

Contemplation, θεωρία, is the poietic activity which constitutes the very essence and condition of existence of both Intellect and Soul. However, as already noted, the very beginning and the central chapters of the treatise want us to recognize that Nature too is capable of θεωρία. The very existence of Nature, we might wish to argue, does not add or subtract anything from the perfection of the Intellect or the Soul: however, we do have the possibility to contemplate as human beings and part of the activity of the Soul. One of the main differences, or perhaps the greatest, between the mode of contemplating (and producing) of the Intellect and that of the Soul lies in the quality of their thinking. As the vast majority of scholars have stressed, we can only attribute non-discursive thinking to Nous, meaning an intuitive apprehension of itself and the One. This non-discursive thinking distinguishes itself as «non-inferential, occurring all at once, all together of its objects», veridical and certain, and also never in need of its object of contemplation, but always possessing it. It is debatable whether this non-discursive thinking of Nous, as it is conceived by Plotinus, is directly dependent on the Platonic conception of a non-propositional contemplation which can be experienced by the human soul in the afterlife, or whether it is more indebted to the Aristotelian characterization of θεωρία in Nicomachean Ethics, 10, 7-8 or to the notion of active intellect in De anima III 5. According to many scholars, the Soul’s thinking is different compared to the continuous activity of Intellect. Indeed, the Soul is characterized by discursive thinking, which seems to occur intermittently and thus not in a continuous fashion, and which is also defined by internal plurality (it is debatable, for instance, whether the Soul presents a perfect unity of knower and known, as is the case with the Intellect). Scholars hold different opinions with regard to the quality of this discursive thinking and they also disagree as to whether or not the discursive and propositional thinking of individual souls is akin to the discursive thinking of the Soul, responsible for living Nature.

I will try to formulate some hypotheses on these distinctions in the third section. For now I only wish to highlight and discuss some relevant passages in III 8 that might help us to better frame the problem. Ch. 1, 1-7 informs us that – even if we admit that all living beings can engage in contemplation – we have to clearly distinguish between a knowledge that is acquired ἀληθῶς, in truth and with no mediation, and a knowledge that can be obtained through the mediation of imitation (mimesis) and images (eikona). Nature contributes to the double activity of the higher principles: this happens even at the lowest levels of the natural world: even ἄλογα living beings contemplate, despite the fact that the natural world is regarded to be ἀφάνταστον.

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13 Following the practice adopted by the majority of scholars, I use the expression ‘Soul’ in capital letters to indicate the hypostasis Soul; I specify World Soul or Soul of the All when speaking of a different species of Soul that is cosmic and which derives from the Timaeus and the Middle Platonist tradition; finally, I use ‘souls’ in the plural to refer to individual souls.


15 See Enn. III 8.1, 22-24: πῶς ἡ φύσις, ἣν ἀφάνταστον φασί καὶ ἄλογον εἶναι, θεωρίαν τε ἐν αὐτῇ
of generating, even the lowest entities of the natural world have a λόγος, albeit a weak and dim one, which makes them participate of the activity of the Soul. Ch. 3 introduces the issue of πράξις, which is crucial for the distinction between the discursive thinking of the Soul and the discursive thinking of human individual souls: contemplation is contemplation insofar as it is reason and form, but never practical deliberative action. Contemplation stems from the contemplative being effortlessly and will plays no part. However, Nature is not contemplative in the same sense as the active ποίησις of the Soul, but rather in the sense that is part of the latter and is the object of contemplation, and therefore does not engage in creative contemplation. This passage is particularly tricky and requires further examination. The lines that follow are equally difficult because of the two different meanings of λόγος, a noun that Plotinus uses ambiguously in relation to metaphysical principles, forms, and thought, although not a discursive species of thought, as seems clear from lines 12-16. In these lines Plotinus explains that Nature possesses a sort of contemplation but not the kind of veridical contemplation of a Λόγος which comes from the possession, once again, of λόγος, precisely because only metaphysical principles that possess their object of enquiry and contemplation in themselves contemplate by means of λόγος. In the first case Λόγος means ‘principle’ (meaning the metaphysical entities which contemplate by means of themselves, as long as they are Λόγοι, i.e. Intellect, Forms, and Soul); in the second case, the noun means ‘intellective reason, thought, thinking’, or something close to this. What we have here, then, is an example of the meaning of λόγος as non-discursive and non-propositional thinking, in a rather anti-Platonic sense.

See Enn. III 8.3, 12-16: Πῶς δὲ αὕτη ἔχει θεωρίαν; τὴν μὲν δὴ ἐκ λόγου οὐκ ἔχει. Λέγω δὲ ἐκ λόγου τὸ σκοπεῖσθαι περὶ τῶν ἐν αὐτῇ, διὰ τὸ συν ζῷοι τὶς σῶσαι καὶ λόγος καὶ δύναμις ποιώναι; ἄρ’ ὅτι τὸ σκοπεῖσθαι ἐστὶ τὸ μήπω ἔχειν. See for instance Plotinus, Ennead III (Armstrong): “This is a good example of the variety of meaning which the word λόγος can have in Plotinus. The logical subject of the sentence is λόγος in the special sense which it often bears in the Enneads, combining the ideas of intelligence, intelligibility and formative activity, which I translate by “rational principle” or “rational formative principle”; it is a λόγος in this sense which does not have contemplation ἐκ λόγου in the ordinary
Ch. 4 makes it clear that Nature can contemplate because she is the offspring of the Soul, and introduces the concepts of tranquillity and silence as characteristics of metaphysical contemplation, opposed to the movement and restlessness of research and desire. This contemplation is also ἄψοφος: Nature as the offspring of the Soul – and therefore Λόγος, albeit a fainter kind of Λόγος – abides in silence; she does not utter any sound and certainly does not possess any language. This idea is reasserted in 8.6 and 7. The last lines of Ch. 4 are particularly interesting for the use of εἴδωλον, a variant of μίμησις and εἰκόνα we have already found in Ch. 1: the Platonic influence is particularly strong in these few lines, and the very end of the chapter is possibly a reference to Plato’s Republic. From Ch. 5 onwards, Plotinus’ inquiry focuses on the Soul: because of her being eager to know – since she is said to be φιλομαθής and ζητητική – and because of the labour she suffers by being pregnant, ὦδη καὶ τὸ πλῆρες, she is pure vision and generates a fruit of this contemplative vision, θεώρημα. These few lines are clearly allusive of the Platonic language of Socratic maieutics, but they also introduce the notion of θεώρημα as the object of the Soul’s vision. The noun is interesting for a number of reasons and is connected to νόημα further on in the treatise (III 8.8).

Ch. 6 takes up and further explores the concept of πρᾶξις and its relation with contemplation and the object of contemplation. Human beings (or different types of individual souls) cannot grasp objects of knowledge by acquaintance, but can only approach things through reasoning and language. However, this tension towards contemplation aims to grasp the Good and, given that the Good is in λόγος, individual souls turn to the Soul that has generated and contains them. At line 16, Plotinus invites us to speak seriously – ἤδη γὰρ σπουδαστέον – by overturning the παίζειν with which he opened the treatise, because the inquiry will soon focus on the highest hypostases. The second part of Ch. 7 is possibly the most important passage of all: Plotinus equates reasoning and arguments with actions; he also points out that sensations too, in a very obscure and complicated way, aim at contemplation at the very start of our journey towards the principles, which are both our origin and ultimate goal, τέλος ἅπασιν ἡ ἀρχή. The language of this section (lines 7-28) is extremely interesting for the sake of the present inquiry: on the one hand, we have the practical activity of reason, which is identified with πρᾶξις, διάνοια and μίμησις; on the other hand, we have the perfect contemplation of the meta-

sense of “reasoning”, “discursive thinking”». On the relation between λόγος and form, see CHIARA DONNA, Sostanza movimento analogia, pp. 117-145.

20 See ENN. III 8.4, 43-48: «For who, if he is able to contemplate what is truly real will deliberately go after its image (εἴδωλον)? The duller children too, are evidence of this, who are incapable of learning and contemplative studies and turn to crafts and manual work».


22 See for instance DECK, Nature, contemplation and the One, pp. 25 ff: «The mention of theorema in these passages is worthy of attention. From its etymology, theorema could mean object of contemplation, or work of contemplation. (We recall that for Plotinas contemplation has a work, a product). Similarly, the co-ordinate noema could mean either work of knowledge or object of knowledge. The close parallel between this passage and V, 3, 5 seems to indicate that the Nous’s theorema is the same as the θεώρημα and νοητόν mentioned there, and so should be taken as “object of knowledge”».

23 Given the strong influence of Plato’s Timaeus on the treatises on the Soul, Plotinus could well be referring to individual divine souls, such as those of the planets. One might possibly interpret the reference to «wandering» at line 3, περιπλανώμενοι, in this sense, although I do not think that this is an acceptable hypothesis, insofar as I consider πρᾶξις to be a characteristic of human souls alone.
physical Λόγος which is described as θεωρία and the production of an εἶδος. The mention of εἶδος here, the first occurrence in the treatise, suggests a significant change of tone and perspective, linked to the reference to seriousness at line 16 of Ch. 624. Ch. 8 opens with a transition from Soul to Nous, which is characterized, as already said, by the full coincidence between knower and thing known. This means that there is no sensory or linguistic distance between the subject and the object of knowledge, and therefore that contemplation occurs in the most complete way in λόγος. Lines 15 and following are especially meaningful for the presence of the notion of νόησις: all living beings, from the very bottom of creation to the Soul and the Intellect are some sort of «thoughts» or «thinking activities», νοήσεις, albeit faint and fallible. Despite their distance from the hypostases, they are nonetheless νοήσεις on account of the fact of being λόγοι. This leads us back to the ambiguous meaning of λόγος and the relation between λόγος as principle and the intellectual and discursive thinking of individual souls. A deflationary reading of this passage might be as follows: as far as we are part of the transcendent Λόγος, we are also λόγοι and the only way to approach these entities in order to know them is to operate in the way rational thoughts and intellectual activity do. However, this reading fails to explain why, being alive and being λόγοι at the same time, we are also νοήσεις and not – as we are said to be in Ch. 7.11 – διανοήσεις, or simply parts of the Soul that need πράξεις to attain knowledge of the principles and the Good.

Chs. 9 to 11 introduce the One as the very first principle above the Intellect, which cannot be the first because of the intrinsic epistemic plurality it experiences, being One-many and having, as θεωρήματα or objects of contemplation, both the One and itself. Being One-many, the Intellect is said to be the origin of number as well: the reference to number and plurality (albeit a very basic form of plurality that does not involve distance) is interesting for our main topic, given the fact that number, along with time, is one of the essential qualities of language, at least for a Platonic reader who must bear in mind the anti-Parmenidean analysis contained in the Sophist. Despite the radical difference between living beings and the One, we can still perceive the latter, being part of the Λόγος which is Soul and Intellect, and hence, ultimately, the first offspring of the One25. In this chain of progressively fainter communication, whose steps are marked by an increasing distance between the subject and the object of knowledge, the constant presence of the One as the Good gives meaning to the whole ποίησις.

24 I will not deal with the problem of the authenticity of Enn. III 8.7 in the present paper (the hypothesis – that the paternity of the chapter should be ascribed to Porphyry – is mentioned by different commentators but hardly taken into serious consideration by contemporary scholars), although it is worth mentioning that the notion of εἶδος appears here for the second time and is not repeated anywhere else in the treatise: therefore, one might argue that Ch. 7 is by a different hand and that the presence of εἶδος is a clue of this alternative authorship. I personally believe that any hypothesis of this sort is hardly tenable because of the uniformity of style and language between Ch. 7 and the other treatises. On the meaning of εἶδος, see also the interpretation of these lines offered by Wildberg, A world of thoughts: Plotinus on Nature and Contemplation, p. 137.

25 See Enn. III 8.9, 22-24: Πρὸς ὅν δεῖ σημῆναι, ὅπως οἶδον τε, τῷ ἐν ἡμῖν ὁμοίῳ φήσομεν. ἔστι γὰρ τι παρ᾽ ἡμῖν οὔτῳ· ή οὔς ἐστιν, ὅποι μὴ ἔστιν, οἷς ἐστι μετέχειν οὔτῳ («We shall say to the person to whom we have to explain how this is possible, that it is by the likeness in ourselves. For there is something of it in us too; or rather there is nowhere where it is not, in the things which can participate in it»).
III. On πρᾶξις, διάνοια, λογισμός

As happens throughout the *Enneads*, Plotinus’ Platonic exegesis here operates on – at least – two different levels. On the one hand, we can detect the Platonic background of the discussion at issue (in the case of III 8, epistemology and the relation between the intellectual faculties and principles). On the other hand, we can occasionally appreciate explicit references to Platonic passages spread across the chapters, references that often add vivid images and metaphors to the whole narrative. This is the case with III 8 as well, in which explicit reference is made to some of Plato’s dialogues in order to describe the soul’s quest for perfect knowledge and contemplation. Curiously enough, these images expand the picture of both the Soul and the human individual soul as in need of fulfillment by means of contemplation of the Intellect and the One. Furthermore, they reinforce the impression that the third hypostasis, or at least its lowest part which is responsible for the generation of Nature, has much in common with our soul, being committed to natural life, becoming and, most of all, time. This is the case with the passages contained in 8.5 that I have already mentioned in the first and second sections of the paper, namely 8.5, 1-7 and 8.5, 34-37. In the first passage, at the very opening of the chapter, the Soul is said to be in labour because of her plenitude, which causes her to generate and to give life to Nature, transmitting λόγος to her: the reference to the Socratic maieutics described in Plato’s *Theaetetus* is quite obvious, although the Soul does not need to be tested in order to see whether or not she contains true opinions or at least shadows of knowledge; as opposed to human souls, she is always pregnant with true thoughts and she does not desire to be fulfilled by something which she does not yet possess. On the contrary, she desires truth because she is truth and Λόγος. However, she is not as perfectly simple as the One and the plurality in her is not perfectly unified as in the case of the Intellect: that is why Plotinus refers to the image of the charioteer from the *Phaedrus* at 8.5, 34-37; although the Soul has parts, we cannot say that the horses (thymos and epithymia) behave uncritically, as the human soul often does. As Plotinus says, the charioteer communicates what he has contemplated to the horses and they, by instinct and not by compulsion, are naturally led to the highest vision. The tension towards contemplation and fulfillment is vividly portrayed at the end of III 8.7 through the image of the lovers, who are reckoned among those who seek knowledge – possibly a reference to Plato’s *Symposium*, and Aristophanes’ speech in particular. To my mind, all these examples clearly show that Plotinus consciously sought to refer to Plato’s well-known passages in order to put forward the idea of a Soul that is both a metaphysical principle and a plural and mixed entity of which the World Soul and human individual souls are the images. In this respect, the Soul may be interpreted as the εἴδος of all the other souls that participate of it, as in Plato’s account of μέθεξις.

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26 See *Enn*. III 8.5, 34-35: Διὸ ὁ ἡνίοχος τοῖς ἵπποις δίδωσιν ὧν εἶδεν, οἱ δὲ λαμβόντες δηλονότι ὄρισσαντο ὧν ὄν εἴδον.


28 See D. Callau, *Plotinus on the Soul*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2015, pp. 16 ff. (especially with reference to *Enn*. IV 9 on the unity of the souls): «I shall argue that Plotinus introduced the hypostasis Soul in order to account for the unity of all individual souls, and secondly because he believed that it was necessary in order to account for the creation and maintenance of the sensible world». 
As I mentioned in the first section and repeated later on in the paper, what proves ambiguous is not only the issue of the composition and faculties of the soul: the lexical ambiguity that marks this treatise – and many others – also applies to all the relevant keywords of Plotinian metaphysics, such as λόγος and θεωρία. Λόγος can mean at least three things in III 8: a rational principle, the intellective content of this principle, and the seminal reason which in-forms matter. Both the principle and its intellective content are of course thoughts, albeit not thoughts in the same sense as the Soul and human souls, but rather veridical and non-discoursive thoughts. However, Soul, Nature and individual souls (the last being the offspring of the Soul), are also Λόγοι and constitutive parts of the divine contemplation. This makes it especially difficult to translate Plotinus’ language, since a single keyword can refer to a range of different meanings, as is the case in the aforementioned passage III 8.3, 12-16. The highest metaphysical entity that is said to be thought, the Intellect, is also said to be the highest form of Λόγος. However, its intellective activity cannot possess any feature which usually characterises a λογιστική faculty as conceived by Plato, given that Intellect – and this is reasonably clear in the Enneads – does not possess any discursive thinking or reasoning, because its thinking – as already noted – is non-inferential, occurring all at once, all together of its objects, veridical and certain, and also never in need of its object of contemplation, but always possessing it29. How are we to conceive this peculiar account of λόγος? A provisional answer might be that Plotinus can refer to the Intellect as Λόγος since the Intellect is not absolutely simple as the One but, being One-many, it contains a very elementary form of plurality, and plurality, along with time (which however does not affect the Intellect but only the Soul) is essential to thought, logic, and language. Surely, Plotinus must have been aware of the ambiguity. Elsewhere in the Enneads, for instance at V 1.7, he states that the Soul is Λόγος and that her thinking, being discursive, is thinking in terms of λόγοι30.

Although θεωρία is the topic of III 8 and Plotinus would not appear to be concerned with providing a clear definition of this concept – one possible reason for this being that he was quite sure that his pupils would immediately grasp the focus of the discussion – we are far from a comprehensive understanding of contemplation both as ποίησις and knowledge. Enn. V and VI inform us in what sense the Intellect contemplates and how the double activity works in the case of the highest hypostasis, but things are far more complex when it comes to the Soul. What is engaging in contemplation in Enn. III 8, and how? And why does Plotinus not provide a comprehensive definition of θεωρία? These are challenging questions for which only partial answers can be found31. Many scholars have stressed the Aristotelian origin of the opposition between the contemplative life and practical/political life, refer-
ring to Aristotle’s account of virtues in the *Nicomachean Ethics*: this standard view of the origin of Plotinian θεωρία fits well with the emphasis he places on the difference between πρᾶξις and ποίησις in III 8, but the picture must be integrated both with reference to the prime mover and the Aristotelian definition of active intellect, and especially with reference to Plato’s *Republic*. While it is reasonable to think that Plotinus takes inspiration from his peculiar reading of the Line, we still haven’t explained why he preferred the noun θεωρία to, e.g., the noun νοήσις found in Plato’s *Republic*, and why he uses νοήσις in a sort of deflationary way in III 8.8. The ambiguous use of Platonic language – especially when it comes to defining the faculties of the soul and to describing the achievement of knowledge – makes it very difficult to understand the role of the Soul and to clarify in what sense the thinking of the Soul, being discursive, differs both from the thinking of the Intellect and that of human souls, or even the World Soul.

The contemplative activity of the Soul is described as a poietic activity, and not a πρᾶξις, which is peculiar to human souls (or possibly to different types of individual souls, i.e., celestial bodies). However, both Soul and souls are said to contemplate through a peculiar way of thinking, as opposed to the immediate apprehension of the Intellect. Some scholars have argued that, despite the fact that the poietic activity of Intellect is different from that of Soul, they both contemplate and create with no need for discursive thinking such as διάνοια. More recently, others scholars have stressed the Soul’s use of διάνοια, and therefore the presence of discursive thinking in her activity of contemplation. In his recent and remarkable essay, Damian Caluori claims that the Soul does possess διάνοια – discursive thinking – but that she does not at all think by means of what he calls «discursive reasoning», i.e. through the use of λογισμός. The distinction is tricky and needs to be clarified. Caluori argues that

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32 This is the case, for instance, with *ibi*, pp. 45-46: «The Nous is productive, and its producing is intelligent, but it does not produce by deliberating or by discursive reasoning. Similarly, the World Soul produces “according to ideas”, but without any “deliberation brought in from outside itself”, without “waiting to examine” (IV, 3, 10, 15), and, like the Nous, without λογισμός (IV, 4, 10). In governing its world, it does not employ διάνοια, discursive reasoning, nor does it have to correct anything (II, 9, 2): it produces in a uniform and consistent way, not by accident, but because it knows what is to be, and orders its inferiors according to the pattern it has in itself».

33 This is the case with *Emilsson, Plotinus on Intellect*, p. 183: «We have seen that inferential thought or reasoning (λογισμός, συλλογισμός, bouleusis) is temporal. The converse, however, apparently doesn’t hold: there seems to be room for a kind of thought that is successive and temporal and is indeed called discursive (διάνοια) but is yet not inferential and is thus free from the uncertainty and search which, according to Plotinus, is typical of inferential thinking. That this is so is evident from the treatise III.7, “On eternity and Time”, especially chapters 11 and 12. The origin of succession, of a temporal “before” and “after”, says Plotinus, lies in the World-Soul’s successive thinking (διάνοια) of the contents of Intellect».

34 See *Caluori, Plotinus and the Soul*, pp. 9-10: «One interesting result of this discussion will be that Plotinus considers reasoning (λογισμός) as belonging to the faculty of presentation. It is thus important to distinguish reasoning from the proper discursive or propositional thinking of the soul: while discursive thinking and reasoning appear to be the same because of their sharing a propositional structure, reasoning is a cognitive process in time based on presentations (phantasiai). The proper thinking of the soul in the intelligible world, by contrast, is not at all like this. It is neither based on presentations nor is it a process in time. Plotinus thus distinguishes, I argue, at least three ways of thinking that each has a specific role: discursive reasoning, the propositional thought of the soul in the intelligible world (that I shall call discursive thinking) and the non-propositional thought of the Intellect». 
the discursive thinking of the Soul is propositional, yet not inferential and analytical. It makes use of neither mathematical nor logical arguments, and it is always true, although it is not immediate like the contemplation of the Intellect. He also argues that Plotinus uses almost exclusively the word λογισμός as distinguished from διάνοια and offers some good examples of this use in different treatises. Caluori has a point in claiming that διάνοια and λογισμός have a different meaning for Plotinus (although this is true for Plato and Aristotle as well), and one of the most interesting points is that he grounds the notion of λογισμός on the faculty of representation, φαντάστικον, which reflects strong Stoic influences. Passages all over the Enneads do indeed go in favour of Caluori’s reading, such as III 2[1], 8-3 («This universe has come into existence, not as the result of a process of reasoning [λογισμῷ] that it ought to exist but because it was necessary that there should be a second nature; for that true All was not of a kind to be the last of realities. For it was the first, and had much power, indeed all power; and this is the power to produce something else without seeking to produce it»); III 2[1], 3, 1-6 («And it is not proper for anyone to speak ill of even this universe as not being beautiful or the best of all things which have body; nor to blame the cause of its existence when, first of all, it exists of necessity and not as the result of any process of reasoning [λογισμῷ γενομένου], but of a better nature naturally producing a likeness of itself»); III 2[1], 14, 1-7 («The ordering of the universe, then, corresponds with Intellect in such a way that it exists without rational planning [ἄνευ λογισμοῦ], but exists so that if anyone could plan rationally as well as possible [δύναι το λογισμῷ χρῆσθαι], he would wonder at it because planning could not have found out another way to make it [ἄλλως εὗρε λογισμῷ ποιῆσαι]; something of this is observed even in individual natures, which come into being continually more conformed to Intellect than they could be by an ordering which depended on rational planning [τις τά λογισμῷ διάταξιν]»); V 8, 4, 36 («and this life is wisdom, a wisdom that cannot be achieved by reasoning [λογισμοῖς], which is always complete with no empty spaces that require rational inquiry») and many others.

Despite the significant evidence marshalled by Caluori, it is difficult to claim that every single occurrence of διάνοια and λογισμός in the Enneads respects this partition, and therefore that the distinction between the two notions is a rigid one. For instance, in III 1.1-7 we read that when the ancient wise men of Egypt (possibly a reference to Plato’s Phaedrus and Timaeus) wanted to give a scientific demonstration,
they used to draw figures and carve them in temples instead of writing; that is why the thought that is «above», perfect contemplation, does not need διάνοιας οὐδὲ βουλεύσεως. In V 8.9, 1-3 (it is worth recalling that V 8 is the second treatise in the sequence of treatises that Porphyry arranged as III 8, V 8, V 5 and II 9), we read that, with some effort, we can grasp the unity of the true things τῇ διάνοιᾳ, and not by reasoning, λογισμῷ. However, one might well point out that, whereas the Soul possess διάνοια but not λογισμός – for she does not really need this kind of reasoning – the human soul can potentially possess a derived form of διάνοια of which λογισμός is the species. I think that we can reasonably apply this distinction to the difference between ποίησις and πράξις too, given that human beings are part of the contemplative creation of the Soul, and therefore in some way ‘contemplate’ too, but their θεωρήματα do not come to be effortlessly and directly as in the case of Intellect and Soul; and this is why they need a practical activity which is a sort of faint ποίησις but functions more or less as the λογισμός does. Being μιμήσεις, as we read in III 8.7, 8 ff., we can approximate the truth with both διανοήσεις and αἰσθήσεις, but we do not formulate and recognize statements that are always true and we need previsions, hypotheses, calculation and especially language.

Other remarkable instances of the semantic ambiguity of διάνοια (and the related διανοεῖσθαι and διανόησις) and λογισμός are as following. For διάνοια, I find extremely interesting I [1].2, 25-27, where Plotinus denies that Soul experiences both discursive thinking and perceptions:

Καὶ μὴν οὐδὲ αἰσθήσεται οὐδὲ διάνοια οὐδὲ δόξα περὶ αὐτό· αἴσθησις γὰρ παραδοχὴ εἴδους ἢ καὶ πάθους σώματος, διάνοια δὲ καὶ δόξα ἐπ’ αἰσθήσεις.

Furthermore it will have no sensations and reasoning (διάνοια) and opinion will have no connection with it; for sensation is the reception of a form or of an affection of a body, and reasoning and opinion are based on sensation.

In this significant passage Plotinus seems to endorse a sensistic theory of knowledge; but we can also read the passage with a Platonic eye: for instance, we can claim that a kind of intellectual reasoning like διάνοια cannot transcend the domain of the senses because it needs perceptual data in order to be processed. This recalls III 8.7, 1-5, where γνώσις is mentioned along with δόξα. Let us consider also IV 4.8, 31-33, where Plotinus claims that by means of διάνοια, and not just λογισμός, we are able to grasp reality as a whole («It is also well known that when our reason grasps what is being done as a whole [τῆς διανοούσης ἐχούσης τὸ πραττόμενον], and has confidence that it will be completely carried out in this particular way, it will no longer attend the details as they occur»).

As for λογισμός, which is indeed a narrower concept than διάνοια in Plotinus’ mind, consider for instance the important passage V 1.3, 13-16, which – I believe – states very clearly that Soul possesses a form of λογισμός too:

οὔσα οὖν ἀπὸ νοῦ νοερά ἐστι, καὶ ἐν λογισμοῖς ὁ νοῦς αὐτῆς καὶ ἡ τελείωσις ἀπ’ αὐτοῦ πάλιν ὁ νοῦς πατρός εὐθρέμαντος, ὅν οὐ τέλειον ὡς πρὸς αὐτὸν ἐγέννησεν.

Since, then, its existence derives from Intellect, Soul is intellectual, and its intellect is in discursive reasoning [ἐν λογισμοῖς ὁ νοῦς αὐτῆς] and its perfection comes from Intellect, like a father who brings to maturity a son whom he begat imperfect in comparison with himself.
In this passage Plotinus claims that the intellective essence of the Soul is made of λογισμοί. Moreover, the psychic essence is said to be composed by λογισμοί because its origin is in Intellect. I find this claim especially strong and meaningful for our survey. Similarly, let us consider also the close connection between νοῦς and λογισμός in IV 3.19, 25-27, which once again clashes with Caluori’s interpretation, according to which λογισμός is a human discursive reasoning grounded on the representational faculty:

λογισμός δὲ καὶ νοῦς; οὐκέτα ταύτα σώματι διδοῦν αὐτά· καὶ τὸ ἐργον αὐτῶν ὡς δί ὀργάνου τελεῖται τοιοῦ σώματος

But what about reasoning and intellect? These no longer give themselves to the body; for their work is not done through the instrument of the body.

Let us conclude by returning to III 8 and taking a closer look to some crucial passages I have mentioned earlier. In 8.3 we find the very first account of πράξεις as opposed to ποίησις. The practical activity of the human soul (and possibly of the World Soul as well) is said to proceed not by λόγος – given that the thinking which works ἐκ λόγου contains the object of its knowledge within itself – although Plotinus does not specify, at least in this chapter, what is opposed to the knowledge ἐκ λόγου. In these few lines the term λόγος means both rational principle and reason, albeit not reason in the sense of διάνοια. Plotinus does not specify in what way Nature, which is said to be ἀποτέλεσμα θεωρίας, contemplates and thinks. Although this is a pivotal passage in III 8, Plotinus avoids making sharp distinctions in his lexical choices. We do not find the distinction between discursive thinking (which should correspond to knowledge ἐκ λόγου) and discursive reasoning which, according to Caluori’s view, characterizes the epistemological difference between the hypostatic realms and the product of the creative hypostases, such as the individual souls. Let us now move on to the important chapter 7. The first few lines of 8.7, inform us that everything which is living and part of the rational principle is a θεώρημα: in this realm, some things can be contemplated via perception, αἰσθήσει, in a very obscure way, other things via knowledge, γνώσει, and other things still via opinion, δόξῃ. This, I think, once again shows the lexical variety with which Plotinus describes rational human thinking: the word γνώσις here might well be a substitute for διάνοια, λογισμός or even νόησις, as seems clear from 8.8, 12 ff.:

Τὸ γὰρ ἐν ἄλλῳ ζῶν δι´ἐκεῖνο, οὐχ αὐτοζῶν. Εἰ οὖν ζήσεταί τι θεώρημα καὶ νόημα, δεῖ αὐτοζωὴν εἶναι ὡς αὐτοῦ· ἀλλ’ἡ μὲν φυτικὴ νόησις, ἡ δὲ αἰσθητική, ἡ δὲ ψυχική.

For that which is in something else is alive because of that other, not in its own right. If, then, an object of contemplation and thought is to have life, it must be life in its own right, not the life of

39 On this point see also R. Chiaramoneda, Dualismo metafisico e teoria dell’azione in Plotino, in E. Canone (a cura di), Anima-corpo alla luce dell’etica. Antichi e moderni, Leo Olschki, Firenze 2015, especially pp. 130-131.

growth or sense perception or that which belongs to the rest of the soul. For the other lives are thoughts in a way, but one is a growth-thought, one is a sense-thought, and one a soul-thought.

In this very complicated passage, Plotinus claims that there is a vegetative νόησις, a perceptual νόησις and a sensitive one, because all living beings that are part of Nature must be included in λόγος. In III 8.8, 12 ff., for instance, νόησις stands for the human equivalent of divine θεωρία, and likewise its object, νόημα, stands for θεώρημα. As the Soul is a composite entity and lies at the origin of Nature, which contains all the instantiations of the divine Λόγος that possess both διάνοια – that, generally speaking, is conceived as the discursive and rational faculty which allows us to recognize an object as a particular object – and λογισμός, the third hypostasis shares with human souls the epistemological gap between a θεώρημα and the perfect apprehension of it. We are entirely thoughts, yet complex and articulate ones, exactly as our individual souls, which are characterized by a multiplicity of faculties. According to the passages mentioned above, I believe that Plotinus is not interested in establishing rigid lexical distinctions when it comes to identifying living beings as thoughts or the faculties of our rational soul as compared to the intellective activity of Soul. Although we can admit with a moderate degree of certainty that individual souls – while being part of the poietic activity – think in an ‘active’ way, meaning that they operate within the domain of πρᾶξις and do not contemplate in the way the hypostases do, we can also state that Plotinus does not wish to question the contemplative unity of the cosmos.

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41 See Enn. III 8.8, 12 ff.: Εἰ οὖν ζήσηται τι θεωρήμα καὶ νόημα, δεῖ αὐτοξείωθην εἶναι σῦ φυτικὴν οὐδὲ αἰσθητικὴν οὐδὲ ψυχικὴν τὴν ἄλλην. Νοήσεις μὲν γὰρ ποιεῖ καὶ ἄλλες ἄλλες ἡ μὲν φυτικὴ νόησις, ἡ δὲ αἰσθητικὴ, ἡ δὲ ψυχικὴ. Πῶς οὖν νοήσεις; Ότι λόγοι. («If then, an object of contemplation and thought is to have life, it must be life in its own right, not the life of growth or sense perception or that which belongs to the rest of the soul. For the other lives are thoughts in a way, but one is a growth-thought, one a sense-thought, and one a soul-thought. How, then, are they thoughts? Because they are rational principles»). On this passage see also Kalligas, The Enneads of Plotinus, p. 636.