PHILOSOPHIA

Vol. 70, No. 2, August 2025

STUDIA UNIVERSITATIS BABEŞ-BOLYAI

PHILOSOPHIA

Beginning with 1/2017, *Studia UBB Philosophia* has been selected

for coverage in Clarivate Analytics products and services.

Studia UBB Philosophia will be indexed and abstracted

in *Emerging Sources Citation Index.*

S T U D I A
UNIVERSITATIS BABEŞ-BOLYAI
PHILOSOPHIA

2

CONTENT – SOMMAIRE – INHALT – CUPRINS

'*Oh My Friends, There is No Friend.*'
Philosophies of Friendship from Aristotle to Derrida

Sandro GORGONE[*]

ABSTRACT. The paper analyzes the crisis of friendship understood above all as the crisis of a theoretical paradigm that, starting from the Homeric exaltation of friendship, passing through the famous Platonic dialogue, the *Lysis*, Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Cicero's *De amicitia*, Montaigne's *De l'amitié*, and ending with Kant's reflections on human subject, has dominated western cultural tradition. This classical model of friendship, based on reciprocity, equality, mutual recognition and decisive for a certain conception of the political, goes into crisis at the end of the 19th century and then in the 20th century with the emergence of man's existential loneliness. Beginning with Nietzsche, and then in the philosophy of Derrida, a conception of friendship as inequality, asymmetry, disproportion emerges, which overcomes any illusion of being-together confusingly and turns to the possibility of a being-with-another that respects its irreducible difference. A concept of friendship thus takes shape, also present in some of Ernst Jünger's reflections, alongside the traditional one, linked to estrangement and insurmountable distance that makes the very idea of friendship extremely aporetic but at the same time opens up new forms of hospitality and relations with the other.

Keywords: reciprocity, equality, mutual recognition, asymmetry, irreducible difference, hospitality

The philosopher Giorgio Agamben stated that: "Friendship is so closely linked to the very definition of philosophy, that it can be said that without it philosophy would not be properly possible. The intimacy between friendship and philosophy is so profound that the latter includes the *philos*, the friend, in its very name and, as is often the case with any excessive proximity, runs the risk of missing out"[1].

---

[*] University of Messina, Italy. Email: sgorgone@unime.it
[1] G. Agamben, *L'amico*, Nottetempo, Milano 2007, p. 5.

Even the etymology of the term 'philosophy' refers, as is well known, to friendship: as Plato states, philosophers are not the wise, but the friends - or lovers - of wisdom, that is, those who spend their lives in the pursuit of truth, good and beauty.

If in the classical world this proximity and almost consubstantiality between philosophy and friendship was taken for granted, today the relationship between friendship and philosophy has fallen into disrepute and it is with a sort of embarrassment or bad conscience that those who make a profession of philosophy try to come to terms with this discomforting and, so to speak, clandestine object of their thought. This is probably due to a real crisis of friendship that can be read from both a sociological and a properly philosophical perspective.

Already in 1960, in his book *The four Loves. Affection, Friendship, Eros, Charity* of 1960, Clive Staples Lewis expressed the idea that friendship is not the main course of the banquet of life, but simply one among many side dishes: it is something that serves to fill the empty moments of our time[2]. Among young people, friendship is increasingly confused with belonging to the peer group, while among adults a feeling of pessimism prevails that borders on cynicism towards the possibility of free, altruistic and stable relationships.

But from a philosophical point of view, the crisis of friendship is to be understood above all as the crisis of a theoretical paradigm that, starting from the Homeric exaltation of friendship, passing through the famous Platonic dialogue, the *Lysis*, Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Cicero's *De amicitia*, Montaigne's *De l'amitié*, and ending with Kant's reflections on human subject, has dominated western cultural tradition. This paradigm links friendship to man's natural sociability, virtue, fraternity and, therefore, to a relationship of symmetry and reciprocal mirroring, whereby the friend is considered the *alter ego* in which one can admire the ideal image of oneself.

According to this paradigm, friendship is, as Kant argues, the union of two people bound together by an equal mutual relationship of love and respect, an ideal of sympathy and benevolence, a duty for men themselves. It is the absolute trust that two people show towards each other, communicating to each other all their most secret thoughts and feelings, a bond that comforts and ennobles the human soul in both prosperity and misfortune.

We will see that the crisis of this paradigm, which concerns friendship but also politics, is definitively fulfilled in Nietzsche's philosophy. But let us analyse in steps the way in which this paradigm asserts itself.

---

[2] See C.S. Lewis, *The four Loves. Affection, Friendship, Eros, Charity*, Collins, London 1960.

1. Classical Paradigm of Friendship

In the classical world, the term *philia* has a much broader semantic territory than that covered by our 'friendship' even though, of course, it includes it; it generically indicates any relationship based on various forms of affection and thus also includes the amorous dimension, intersecting the semantic field of eros. *Philia*, however, also designates a range of relationships both interpersonal of family proximity and a set of political, religious, economic associative ties. The concept of *philia* encompasses all forms of human cohabitation, business relations such as being comrades in war, working together such as the forms of life of marriage, the social formation of groups and the constitution of political parties, in short, the whole complex of human community life. The datum that most distinguishes the nature of Greek philia from modern friendship, therefore, is its pervasiveness both in the field of private relations and in the context of public relations. On *philia*, in fact, rested for the ancient Greeks the good governance of the city.

This experience of *philia*, rooted in the Greek polis, recalls crucial cultural aspects such as hospitality and other forms of solidarity and social openness that modern individualism has almost entirely stifled or relegated to the private sphere of 'good feelings'. Socrates had placed friendship at the centre of his life experience as a philosopher, attributing to it an indispensable moral role in human relations.

1.1. Plato's Lysis

Plato with the *Lisys* proposes for the first time the need to reflect in a focused manner on the causes and essence of *philia*. Without going into the complex plot of the dialogue, we can say that in the first step Plato proposes an interpretation of friendship based on goodness ("At last we know who the friends are […]: they are the good", 213E) and mutual love ("There can therefore be no friendship if there is no mutual love", 212D).

In a second, deeper perspective, however, Plato makes Socrates, the protagonist of this dialogue, state that only those who are neither good nor bad can become friends with the good, and this because of the presence of bad, to be understood as a lack of good. To clarify this, Plato uses the example of medical science: one is a doctor's friend because of one's illness. Socrates, therefore, states that the friends of wisdom are those who have the 'evil of ignorance' within them, but "have not yet become completely ignorant and still think themselves not to know what they don't know" (218 B). We find here, then, another version of the famous Socratic maxim: 'I know that I do not know'.

More generally, Socrates can state: "Both in respect of the soul and in respect of the body, and everywhere else, is that the neither bad nor good is friend of the good because of presence of bad' (218 C). And, further on, with radical socio-political connotations, we find this Socratic statement: "So then the neither bad nor good, because of the bad and inimical, is friend of the good for the sake of the good and friend" (219B1). Anticipating a perspective of political philosophical thought that modernity would largely develop from Hobbes to Schmitt, one could, therefore, say that friendship turns out to be a kind of almost necessary remedy for an evil; one is a friend and needs friends to defend oneself against the common threat of the enemy. Friendship is, therefore, an antidote, a kind of *pharmakon* for good living.

But, at the same time, being aroused by the need to overcome a lack, friendship takes on an erotic character: that is, it arises from a defect and from a desire (*epithymia*) to overcome it. It is also for this reason that Plato/Socrates can conclude, with a statement that will be taken up by many later authors, that friendship naturally doesn't turns to what is like us, but to what is similar (*oikeion, oikos*). There is, therefore, no friendship, neither between the equal nor between the opposite ones, but only between the similar ones. The term *oikeion* means that which is similar, familiar, convenient, but not equal. As we shall see, however, Cicero already forgets this Platonic lesson.

1.2. Friendship in Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics

At the beginning of his treatment of friendship, in Books VIII and IX of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle enunciates one of the most persistent and influential praises of friendship in all Western traditions. After declaring that friendship "is a virtue or at least is united with virtue" (1555a, 2), he states:

> No one would choose to live without friends, even if he had all the other good things. […] In poverty too, as in all other misfortunes, people think friends to be their only refuge. Also, friends are necessary to young people with a view to the avoidance of error, to old ones with a view to being taken care of and being given aid with the actions they have to leave unaccomplished because of their weakness, and to those in their prime with a view to doing noble actions – for when "two go together" they are better able both to understand and to act (1155a 3-6; 13-15)[3].

---

[3] Regarding friendship in Aristotle cf. Nathalie von Siemens, *Aristoteles über Freundschaft: Untersuchungen zur Nikomachischen Ethik VIII und IX*, Karl-Alber Freiburg-München 2007; E. Berti, *Il concetto di amicizia in Aristotele*, in *Il concetto di amicizia nella storia della cultura europea. Atti del 22. convegno internazionale di studi italo-tedeschi*, Merano 9-11 maggio 1994, Merano 1994; S. Stern-Gillet, *Aristotle's philosophy of friendship*, State University of New York Press, Albany 1995.

Aristotle also immediately asserts the political character of friendship, which, more than justice is decisive for good governance: "It also seems that friendship holds cities together and that legislators take it more seriously than justice" (1155a, 24). Indeed, legislators primarily aim to establish concord in society, which is a kind of 'political friendship'.

However, at the bottom of this social exaltation of the sentiment of friendship it is possible to find a utilitarian foundation. If friendship consists, in fact, more in loving than in being loved[4], there is a decisive egoistic trait in the Aristotelian conception of friendship that will be transmitted, in various forms, to many liberal political theories of modernity. By loving friends one loves, in effect, what is good for oneself: "in loving their friend they love what is good for themselves, since a good person, in becoming a friend, becomes a good for the person for whom he is a friend". In this context, Aristotle states belows the reciprocal and symmetrical character of the friendship relationship: "So each of the two both loves what is good for himself and makes an equal return in the good he wishes and in what is pleasant. For friendship is said to be equality" (1157b, 35).

According to Aristotle, therefore, the true form of friendship is the bond that the virtuous man forges with the virtuous man because of virtue itself. And virtue is that by which and in which man fully realises his nature and value as man, so that true friendship is precisely the bond of man with man according to man's own value. Aristotle, therefore, regards friendship as essential to the full realisation of man's nature and believes that on its possession depends happiness itself. Moreover, man, as a structurally political being, by his very nature, needs friends precisely to be able to receive and to do good.

Aristotle even goes so far as to determine the friendship feeling as a projection of the virtuous person's feelings towards himself: "The features fitted to friendships toward neighbors, and those definitive of the various sorts of friendship, seem to derive from the features of a person's friendship for himself" (1166a 1-2). It is not a question here of bending friendship to the logic of egoism understood as petty attachment to self. Considering the centrality of virtue in the classical and later Hellenistic conception of friendship, this projection unfolds, rather, as a just affective adaptation of the friendship relationship to the moral value that the virtuous subject knows it represents. The necessary conclusion is that the virtuous man, and conscious of being so, can only feel love towards himself. Loving others according to *philia*, therefore, can only be possible to the extent that others reflect himself in some way. Feelings of friendship, therefore, not only rest on, but confirm the 'dutiful'

---

[4] "But friendship seems to consist more in loving than in being loved" (1159b, 27).

feelings of affection and admiration that the virtuous person has for himself. The egoism of the virtuous man is nothing other than altruism understood as the deployment and transfer of love upon oneself. This concept of friendship is, as can easily be seen, completely distinct from what the Christian ethic would later codify as listening, selfless commitment to the other, and giving freely.

1.3. Cicero: The friend as alter ego

Cicero takes up and amplifies this approach to the philosophy of friendship and transmits it to humanist culture. Friendship, according to Cicero, is the supreme of earthly goods because in it is fulfilled the very moral and civil nature of man and can be fruitfully practiced in every situation of life: "you should place friendship above all other human concerns. For nothing else is in such harmony with nature, nor is anything else so helpful to us in both good times and bad."[5]. Cicero, after repeating the Platonic-Aristotelian conviction that friendship cannot exist except between good people, praises above all the confidence that exists in friendship according to which you can speak with your friend as with yourself. But what Cicero decisively adds to the ethical-political paradigm of Platonic-Aristotelian derivation is the idea that in the friend you see the image transfigured in an ideal sense of yourself from which emanate the strongest motivations to overcome difficulties and strive for continuous self-improvement. This sort of spectralisation of the friend constitutes, moreover, the remote origin of the crisis of the traditional paradigm of friendship on which we will focus shortly. Thus Cicero states: "Since friendship has so many and such great advantages, it exceeds other virtues by far, especially as it shines a bright light of hope into the future and does not suffer our spirits to stumble or fall. You see, whoever looks upon a true friend looks, in a sense, at an image of himself (*exemplar sui*)"[6]. In friendship a kind of ontological reversal takes place whereby absence becomes presence, poverty wealth and death life: "Even when friends are absent, they are still present. When you lack the necessities of life, with a friend you have more than enough. With such a friend, you are strong even when you are weak. And— though this is more difficult to say— when friends have died, yet they are still alive in you (*mortui vivunt*)"[7].

---

[5] M.T. Cicero, *Laelius de Amicitia* in *How to Be a Friend. An Ancient Guide to True Friendship*, trans. by P. Freeman, Princeton University Press, 2018, p. 35.

[6] Ibid., pp. 45; 47.

[7] Ibid., p. 47.

The friend thus becomes – and this gesture will be decisive for the entire humanist philosophical tradition – the alter ego, one's own exemplary image: "A friend is, quite simply, another self (*alter idem*)"[8]. Not, therefore, a mere mirroring, but an ideal projection in which all the aspirations and hopes of achieving a state of perfection and liberation from all natural (the precariousness and finiteness of existence) and moral (the fallacy and imperfection of our behavior) conditioning are gathered. In the friend as in my alter ego, I see what is best in me and I measure, therefore, the gap between my presence and my ideal possibility: in it is delineated that phantasmatic space of tension towards the future and towards the good that coincides, moreover, also with my own moral survival: beyond death, it will be the surviving friend who will bear witness for me and for my noblest aspiration to the Good. As Jacques Derrida observed, there is always survival and the work of mourning at stake in friendship: "*Philia* begins with the possibility of survival. Surviving – that is the other name of a mourning whose possibility is never to be awaited. For one does not survive without mourning. (…) Hence surviving is at once the essence, the origin and the possibility, the condition of possibility of friendship; it is the grieved act of loving. This time of surviving thus gives the time of friendship"[9].

In Cicero, however, beyond this affirmation of the relationship between friendship and survival, the egalitarian and symmetrical paradigm of friendship is definitively established. He emphasises, then, the congeniality that reigns in every authentic friendship: the true friend must necessarily have a character congenial to ours: "We also need to choose a friend who is honest, sociable, and sympathetic—that is, someone who is motivated by the same things as we are. All these things contribute to loyalty between people"[10]. On this congeniality is also based the possibility of trusting the friend: "For a character full of twists and turns cannot be loyal, nor can someone who is not moved by the same things and whose nature is fundamentally different from yours be either loyal or steadfast"[11].

Benevolence, love, concord, loyalty and security are, therefore, the beneficial effects of all true friendship.

1.4. Montaigne: the fusional friendship

We find a similar characterisation of friendship in Montaigne's 1580 text *De l'amitié*. Montaigne distances himself from the Platonic contiguity between eros and friendship and instead sets a clear distinction between them: while in the former

---

[8] Ibid., p. 139.
[9] J. Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, trans. By G. Collins, London-New York 1997, p. 14.
[10] M.T. Cicero, *Laelius de Amicitia*, p. 117.
[11] Ibid.

reigns a "mad desire in following that which flies-us"[12], in true friendship, on the other hand, there is "a generall and universall heate, and equally tempered, a constant and setled heate, all pleasure and smoothnes, that hath no pricking or stinging in it"[13]. Unlike erotic passion, friendship "is enjoyed according as it is desired, it is neither bredde, nor nourished, nor encreaseth but in jouissance, as being spirituall, and the mind being refined by use and custome"[14]. Montaigne then takes up the egalitarian and fusional paradigm that we have already seen in Cicero: "In the amitie I speake of, they [our minds] entermixe and confound themselves one in the other, with so universall a commixture, that they weare-out, and can no more finde the seame that hath conjoyned them together"[15].

Friends identify with each other, they immerse themselves in each other to such an extent that the will of one is lost in that of the other: "I may truely say, loose, reserving nothing unto us, that might properly be called our owne, nor that was either his, or mine"[16]. The pair of friends thus constitutes a kind of self-sufficient monad: This friendship "hath no other Idea than of it selfe and can have no reference but to it selfe"[17]: the souls of the two friends reveal themselves to each other right down to the very entrails in such a way that one relies spontaneously and without reservation on the other. Because of the total fusion of their wills, there is no longer any possibility of division or difference between the two friends and, therefore, their relationship is entirely gratuitous and free of any benefit, obligation, gratitude or thanks. In this context, Montaigne can quote Aristotle's sentence handed down by Diogenes Laërtius: "O my friends, there is no friend!". As Giorgio Agamben has remarked, this sentence, which Derrida places at the centre of his reflections on friendship, is in fact the result of a medieval transcription error, and the original, much less sibylline sentence says: "he who has (many) friends, has no friends at all" taking up similar statements in the Nicomachean Ethics. Montaigne interprets the Aristotelian quotation in the sense of the necessary exclusivity of such a relationship of 'perfect friendship' which is not, unlike common friendships, in any way divisible: "each man doth so wholy give himselfe unto his friend, that he hath nothing left-him to divide elsewhere: moreover he is grieved that he is double, triple, or quadruple, and hath not many soules, or sundry wils, that he might conferre them all upon this subject"[18].

---

[12] M. de Montaigne, *Of Freindship*, in *Essays*, trans. By J. Florio, HyperEssays.net, Book 1, Chapter 27, p. 3.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid., p. 5.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid., p. 7.

It is only within such a relationship of absolute unity and sharing that even the most unmentionable secrets can be revealed, because the friend is not others but is – as Cicero already said – 'myself'. This exclusive and indissoluble bond, almost sacred, does not, however, have any possible socio-political declination: it remains confined to the sphere of private relations because it cannot open up to a 'third' friend (the instance of thirdness on which, for example, in Levinas' philosophy the birth of law and every possible juridical comparison is rooted[19], is here completely excluded); in other words, no 'confraternity' can be founded on this type of bond. Authentic, perfect friendship excludes any sharing with the outside and any comparison, thus configuring itself as a kind of symbiotic relationship that rejects any form of gratuitousness and donation that is not an integral part of the fusion process.

1.5. The limits of classical friendship paradigm

Just a mention, now, of the Christian, evangelical conception of friendship which, despite the idea of gratuitous giving, is nevertheless not entirely foreign to the classical paradigm based on knowledge and revelation and on the fusional schema: Jesus says: "as I was one with the Father, I will be 'one' with you" (*John*, 14, 20). I will only quote the most important passage from John's gospel: "You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you" (*John* 15, 14-15).

We can, therefore, conclude this recognition of the Greek-Christian tradition of friendship by reaffirming that the classical paradigm that is affirmed is that of an egalitarian and symmetrical relationship based on knowledge, proportion and proximity, which dissolves all authentic difference and therefore also precludes the possibility of recognising an incomprehensible alterity to which, in any case, I am called to be responsible. Taking up the lexicon of E. Levinas' philosophy of alterity, Maurice Blanchot affirmed the ethical limits of this paradigm: "The *Greek* philia is reciprocity, exchange from Same to Same, never openness to the Other, discovery of Others (Autrui) as responsible for the Other, the recognition of the Other's pre-eminence, the awakening and sobering the Other who never leaves me alone, the enjoyment (without concupiscence, as Pascal put its) of the Other's Highness, which makes the Other always nearer the Good than me"[20].

---

[19] See E. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. by A. Lingis, The Hague, London-Nijhoff 1981.

[20] M. Blanchot, *For Freindship*, trans. By L. Ill, "Oxford Lieterary Review", 22, 1, 2000, pp. 25-38, hier p. 35.

In another text dedicated to friendship, then, Blanchot thus describes a paradoxical form of friendship in distance and difference that opposes the classical paradigm of friendship:

> We must give up trying to know those to whom we are linked by something essential; by this I mean we must greet them in the relation with the unknown in which they greet us as well, in our estrangement. Friendship, this relation without dependence, without episode […] passes by way of the recognition of the common strangeness that does not allow us to speak of our friends but only to speak to them, not to make of them a topic of conversations (or essays), but the movement of understanding in which, speaking to us, they reserve, even on the most familiar terms, an infinite distance, the fundamental separation on the basis of which what separates becomes relation[21].

For distance and separation to be preserved, it is necessary that a supreme 'discretion' reigns in friendship, that an infinite modesty preserves the space of difference that paradoxically brings friends together by separating them. Blanchot describes this discretion, which already prefigures the 'cleft of death', as follows: "Here discretion lies not in the simple refusal to put forward confidence (how vulgar this would be, even to think of it), but it is the interval, the pure interval that, from me to this other who is a friend, measures all that is between us, the interruption of being that never authorises me to use him or my knowledge of him (were to praise him), and that, far from preventing all communication, brings us together in the difference and sometimes in the silence of the speech"[22].

1.6. From Nietzsche to Derrida: Turn or crisis of friendship?

According to Derrida, it is precisely the need to break out of the fusion bond of perfect but exclusive friendship that dramatically determines, with the irruption of the third, the 'becoming-political' of friendship and with this, the very possibility of democracy opens up: "With this becoming-political, and with all the schemata that we will recognize therein – beginning with the most problematic of all, that of fraternity – the question of democracy thus opens, the question of the citizen or the subject as a countable singularity"[23]. The necessity of comparison and equality,

---

[21] M. Blanchot, *Friendship*, trans. by E. Rottenberg, Stanford Univ. Press, Stanford 1997, p. 291.

[22] Ibid.

[23] J. Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, trans. By G. Collins, Versus, London-New York 1997, p. 22. On the political significance of friendship in Derrida see A.J.P. Thomson, *Deconstruction and democracy: Derrida's Politics of friendship*, Continuum, London 2005; L. Collison, C. Ó Fathaigh, G. Tsagdis (ed.), *Derrida's Politics of Friendship: Amity and Enmity*, Edinburgh Univ. Press, Edinburgh 2021.

on the one hand, and the absolute devotion of exclusive friendship determines two irreconcilable instances in which democracy, which began as a 'community of friends' is destined to struggle without any possibility of reconciliation[24]: "There is no democracy without respect for irreducible singularity or alterity, but there is no democracy without the 'community of friends', without the calculation of majorities, without identifiable, stabilizable, representable subjects, all equal. These two laws are irreducible one to the other. Tragically irreconcilable and forever wounding"[25].

Far from configuring itself as the fulfilment of Greek *philia*, modern democracy, therefore, is intimately inhabited by the crisis of the classical-humanistic paradigm of friendship; we could say that democracy, the 'democracy to come' of which Derrida speaks, is profoundly marked by the solitude starting from which moderns experience friendship.

Nietzsche was one of the first thinkers who, against the reassuring faith, not only idealistic, in the progressive and painless 'socialisation' of man, had the courage to stare into the abysses that surround and isolate all existence. He also saw how supremely painful the moment is when the illusion, cultivated with extreme gentleness and generous care, of being fraternally and completely together with another man collapses. In a famous aphorism from *The Gay Science* we read:

> There was a time in our lives when we were so close that nothing seemed to obstruer our friendship and brotherhood, and only a small footbridge separated us. Just as you were about to step on it, I asked you: 'Do you want to cross the footbridge to me?' - But then you didn't want to any more; and when I asked again, you were silent. Since then, mountains and torrential rivers, and everything which separates and alienates, have been cast between us, and even if we wanted to reach each other, we couldn't anymore! But when you think of that little footbridge now, you have no words anymore - only sobs and bewilderment[26].

The most painful disillusionment is perhaps the loss of that which of all was the sweetest hope: friendship. An extreme closeness can be transformed in an instant and for no apparent reason into a sidereal distance that makes one estranged, nullifies all complicity and dashes all promises of sharing. Nietzsche is perhaps the

---

[24] This is the aporia that various authors, including Levinas and the later Bensussan, analysed as the irreconcilable opposition between law (equality before the law) and justice (absolute responsibility for each other). See E. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, cit. and G. Bensussan, *Éthique et expérience : Levinas politique*, Phacide, Strasbourg 2008.

[25] J. Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, p. 22.

[26] F. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, ed. by B. Williams, trans. by J. Nauckhoff, Cambridge Univ. Press, Cambridge 2001, § 16, pp. 41-42.

first to invert the Greco-Roman and properly philosophical tradition of the *philìa*, opening it up to a new, unprecedented conception of friendship as inequality, asymmetry, disproportion, which overcomes any illusion of being-together confusingly and turns to the possibility of a being-with-another that respects its irreducible difference.

However, as Jacques Derrida has effectively shown, this heterodox conception of friendship, which first emerged with Nietzsche, is not completely absent from the classical philosophical tradition; on the contrary, we could say that it inhabits its most secret folds. Even in Aristotle, in fact, next to the idea of friendship as reciprocity and equality[27], we find the idea of a possible friendship between unequals: a relationship that implies imbalance and superiority, which Aristotle sees exemplified in the relationship between father and son, or in the bond that connects the living to the dead, later taken up, as we have seen, by Cicero.

A concept of friendship thus emerges, alongside the traditional one, linked to dissymmetry, estrangement and insurmountable distance that makes the very idea of friendship extremely aporetic. And it is, perhaps, precisely the extreme distance that separates us from the dead, to whom we continue to be intimately linked, that shows how unusual, but at the same time unavoidable, is this enigmatic form of friendship that is based on an irrevocable separation.

But what is it possible to share in this strange, alienating and disturbing form of friendship? How do we consent with those who remain foreign and distant to us? What has become of the sweetness and joy that friendship, supreme among all earthly goods, promised us as ultimate comfort? Neither similarity, nor proximity, nor familiarity: our existential condition of disorientation and bewilderment is reflected in our relationships with others, in the new friends who remain irretrievably 'beyond the footbridge'. One by one, the sweet hopes fall, and the walls of our loneliness grow thicker and thicker; we are invaded by the yearning of Aeneas who in the Underworld tries in vain to embrace the shadow of his father: "'Let me clasp your hand, my father, do let me, and do not withdraw from my embrace'. As he spoke, he bathed his face with ample tears. Then three times he tried to put his arms round his father's neck; three times, grasped to no avail, the ghost escaped his hands, like light breezes and very similar to a swift dream" (Virgil, *Aeneid*, VI, 967-702).

Similarly, the friend becomes a specter that escapes our embrace.

But, perhaps, it is only from this desperate awareness that it is possible to open up to that other form of friendship that, unheard, like a gentle whisper, runs

---

[27] Equality that is first and foremost sexual, since, as Derrida well notes, the predominant model is that of a 'male-sexual' (i.e. male-homosexual) and fraternal friendship (of both Greek and Judeo-Christian derivation) that is born and nourished by an attraction [*aimance*] that is quite similar to the erotic one.

through our entire tradition, to that paradoxical possibility in which we are given to become friends in solitude, or perhaps, to use another Nietzschean expression, 'friends *of* solitude'.

While commenting on Nietzsche, Derrida writes: "We are first of all, as friends, the friends of solitude, and we are calling on you to share what cannot be shared: solitude. We are friend of an entirely different kind, inaccessible friends, friends who are alone because they are incomparable and without common measure, reciprocity or equality. Therefore, without a horizon of recognition, without a familial bond, without proximity, without *oikeiótes*"[28].

And further on, while insisting on the need for some form of community among these "sworn friends of solitude", Derrida writes: "Thus is announced the anchoritic community of those who love in separation. The invitation come to you from those who can *love only at a distance, in separation* [*qui n'aiment qu'à se séparer ou loin*]. […] Those who love only in cutting ties are the uncompromising friends of solitary singularity"[29]. Separation, estrangement, and estrangement paradoxically become the only method of recognition between solitaries: not in the way one soul approaches another, but in the way it distances itself from it, its secret affinity is recognised. In this sense, friendship reveals itself to be the sphere in which the apparent impossibility of the bond between separates can take place; it becomes at the same time the occasion in which the Nietzschean 'dangerous perhaps' can be realised, that perhaps which characterises the new philosophers, the philosophers of the future: "Perhaps friendship, if there is such a thing, must honour [*faire droit*] what appears impossible here"[30].

Friendship must, therefore, enable that which appears to be impossible, that impossible double bind, which enchains us in the very act of dissolving, of untying ourselves. But it is precisely this paradoxical injunction, which provokes us to what Zarathustra calls the 'love of the remote' [*Fernsten-Liebe*]; it preserves us from the identity-bound, all-encompassing closures of the confusing friendship praised by Cicero and Montaigne.

The other friendship, the 'good friendship', according to Derrida

> Supposes disproportion. It demands a certain rupture in reciprocity or equality, as well as the interruption of all fusion or confusion between you and me. By the same token it signifies a divorce with love, albeit self-love (…). 'Good friendship' is born of disproportion: when you esteem or respect the other more

---

[28] J. Derrrida, *Politics of Friendship*, p. 35.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Ibid., p. 36.

then yourself. (…) 'Good friendship' certainly supposes a certain air, a certain tinge of intimacy, but one 'without actual and genuine intimacy'. It commands that we abstain 'wisley', 'prudently' from all confusion, all permutation between the singularities of you and me. This is the announcement of the community without community of thinkers to come[31].

The Nietzschean friends of the deepest, most nocturnal and most meridian solitude, the free spirits heralding the philosophers to come, are, therefore, the members of a paradoxical 'community without a community' in which there is no bond of belonging and fidelity; there is neither similarity in the Greco-Hellenistic sense, nor proximity in the Christian sense. Derrida himself wonders whether, in this idea of friendship, one must renounce any relationship of familiarity and trust – the Platonic *oikeiotes*. These paradoxical friends, Derrida asserts, try to recognise each other *without* knowing each other. Their strange relationship no longer passes through the Socratic search for truth and goodness, through Dante's *virtute e canoscenza* that sustains the insane flight of Ulysses and his companions/brothers. The friends of loneliness recognise themselves insofar as they retreat from all common possession, from all sharing, because before that they have retreated from themselves to let the other come, who always precedes and anticipates me.

In this paradoxical form of friendship of loners, there is an equally paradoxical logic of the gift that admits of neither gratitude nor reciprocation; a gift that points towards non-reciprocity, towards asymmetry and disproportionality, and in which the hospitality offered or received can in no way be returned. And yet for Derrida, this logic of a boundless and incalculable gift does not lead to any alienation, does not entail a loss of identity, responsibility or freedom that would result in the 'madness' that perverts all common sense. Rather, it would grant the possibility of thinking of a justice beyond the principle of equivalence, i.e. beyond the law of the talion that Nietzsche's genealogy identifies as the origin of morality and right dominating Western culture. But what would it be, Derrida wonders, this unprecedented concept of justice that no longer calculate? "And would carry itself beyond proportion, beyond appropriation, thereby exceeding all reappropriation of the proper?"[32]. This 'dispossession' would indicate, for Derrida reading Nietzsche, *another* love, beyond all lust for possession, whose true name, whose 'right name' is friendship. Illuminating in this regard is the end of paragraph 14 of *the Gay Science*: "Here and there on earth there is probably a kind of continuation of love in which this greedy desire of two people for each other gives way to a new desire and greed, a shared higher

---

[31] Ibid., p. 62.
[32] Ibid., p. 64.

thirst for an ideal above them. But who knows such love? Who has experienced it? Its true name is friendship"[33].

So this friendship is a kind of love, but a love that loves more than love because it has completely overcome any claim of ownership over the other that is hidden even in the seemingly most disinterested form of love that is Christian charity, that is, love of neighbor. Finally, oblivion becomes necessary to this friendship: oblivion, in the Nietzschean sense, not as a synonym for neglect and lack of fidelity, but as a necessary openness to the future, the testimony of a paradoxical relationship that demands infinite and irremediable separation from the friend. Derrida writes: "Oblivion must. Friendship without memory itself, by fidelity, by the gentleness and rigor of fidelity, bondless friendship, out of friendship, out of friendship for the solitary one on the part of the solitary. Nietzsche already demands this 'community without community', this bondless bond. And death is the supreme ordeal of this unbinding without which no friendship has ever seen the light of day"[34].

This friendship with the friend always to come has, finally, for Derrida an essential relationship with another conception of democracy no longer based on the classical paradigm of the fraternal and phallogocentric relationship that he names, at the end of his book on friendship, as 'democracy to come':

> For democracy remains to come; this is its essence in so far as it remains: not only will it remain indefinitely perfectible, hence always insufficient and future, but, belonging to the time of the promise, it will always remain, in each of its future time, to come. [...] Is it possible to open up to the 'come' of a certain democracy which is no longer an insult to the friendship we have striven to think beyond the homo-fraternal and phallogocentric schema?
> When will we be ready for an experience of freedom and equality that is capable of respectfully experiencing that friendship, which would at last be just, just beyond the law, and measured up against its measurelessness?[35].

This kind of friendship has to do, then, not with the neighbor but with the remote, with the permanently unsatisfied aspiration to overcome oneself, with the tension towards a self-giving beyond any goal and any reciprocation. This idea of friendship not only uncovers, as Derrida intuits, an unprecedented possibility of human coexistence by revealing the impossible of democracy (which alone makes it possible), but also grasps, perhaps, the essence always to come of man himself, that essence that Nietzsche tried to think of through the figure of the overman.

---

[33] F. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, cit., §14, p. 41.
[34] J. Derrrida, *Politics of Friendship*, p. 295.
[35] Ibid., p. 306.

In *Thus spoke Zarathustra*, in the chapter *On Love of the Neighbor* in this regard we read:

> I do not teach you the neighbor, but the friend. The friend shall be your festival of the earth and an anticipation of the overman.
> I teach you the friend and his overflowing heart. But one must understand how to be a sponge, if one wants to be loved by overflowing hearts.
> I teach you the friend in whom the world stands complete, a bowl of goodness – the creating friend who always has a complete world to bestow. Let the future and the farthest be the cause of your today: in your friend you shall love the overman as your cause.
> My brothers, I do not recommend love of the neighbor to you: I recommend love of the farthest to you[36].

2. Ernst Jünger and the friendship of loners

An emblematic example of this unprecedented and paradoxical form of friendship can be found in the writing of Ernst Jünger, especially in his famous war journals[37]. By nature a loner and taciturn, Jünger intuited, perhaps without being fully aware of it, the meaning of this extreme and enigmatic form of friendship. We can grasp this by transparently analysing the fraternal or friendship relationships that Jünger describes in his novels. Although they apparently follow the traits of the traditional model of friendship (male homosexuality, reciprocity of experiences and sensibilities), on closer inspection they deviate from it in a very significant way: there is never a confusing intimacy, nor a striving for equality; on the contrary, more often than not, such relationships configure the dissymmetry typical of the relationship between master and disciple, and the figure of a 'spiritual guide' is often present, leading the younger of the two friends through a series of formative experiences and initiatory trials. Jünger felt that at the bottom of every authentic friendship there is the profound sharing of solitude and the *impossible* desire to make a gift of it to the other, as well as the common suffering for the ineluctable separation from the crystalline beauty (of surface and depth) of this world; the friends of whom he writes could be defined as the 'immortal friends of absence', united by the solitary and common fidelity to the giving of the Eternal in time, to the revelation of the

---

[36] F. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra. A Book for All and None*, ed. by A. Del Caro and R.B. Pippin, trans. by A. Del Caro, Cambridge Univ. Press, Cambridge 2006, p. 45.

[37] See above all E. Jünger, *Storm of Steel*, trans. by. M. Hoffmann, Penguin, London 2004.

Imperishable among the transient forms of the earth: 'friends of the Eternal' in the time that flees and inexorably identifies and separates.

Extreme loneliness is, perhaps, the only way to access the transfiguration of transience and that paradoxical 'commonality' of the lonely which, now, is no longer simply the blind solidarity in the face of death (typical of soldiers at the front), but is the lucid awareness of those who resist ruin and in the darkness of despair perceive – almost a spectre of a lost (or never been) fraternity – the 'friendly' resonance of the heart of the lonely:

> The only comforting memory is of times during the war when suddenly the blaze of an explosion wrenched from the darkness the lone figure of a sentinel who must have long since remained hidden in the dark. During those countless, frightening nights on guard in the darkness, a treasure was accumulated that would be consumed later.
> Faith in the lonely ones arises from a longing for an unnamed brotherhood [*Die Glaube an die Einsamen entspringt der Sehnsucht nach einer namenlosen Brüderlichkeit*] and for a deeper spiritual relationship than is possible between men[38].

Jünger thinks that this anachoretic community of solitaries passes through historical epochs as an unchanging network of reference and orientation that it is the task of thought to make visible and describe as a landscape, perhaps the most fascinating, the only one in which man can recognise himself: "Among the thoughts that return to me periodically occupying my reflections is the idea of a landscape that would exist unchanging through the ages, and such that spiritual relationships would be visible. It should correspond to a way of understanding philosophers as one reads reports and descriptions of journeys"[39].

It is not born, this friendship, from mutual acquaintance or moral appreciation, nor – the last of the paradoxes – is it nourished by memory: the sentinel in the darkness, who no longer speaks like the one in the book of Isaiah[40], remains motionless in waiting in the face of ruin. But the more one delves into the abyss of anguish and loneliness, the more the gnostic sense of nostalgia for a remote and forgotten belonging to a land, a motherland [*Heimat*], beyond the Wall of time matures, and with it the faith of a common spiritual destiny of the lonely, of an astral friendship that in this world can only take place in separation, oblivion and distance.

---

[38] E. Jünger, *Das abendeuerliche Herz. Aufzeichnungen bei Tag und Nacht*, Zweite Fassung, in *Sämtliche Werke*, Band 11, Essays III, Klett-Cotta, Stuttgart 2015, p. 191 (my trans.).

[39] E. Jünger, *Das abendeuerliche Herz*, cit., pp. 266-267 (my trans.).

[40] "A voice comes to me from Seir, Watchman, how far gone is the night? how far gone is the night? / The watchman says, The morning has come, but night is still to come" *(Is.* 21, 11-12)

The understanding of such an unprecedented concept of friendship necessarily passes through the attempt to think together gift and abandonment, memory and oblivion. Significant in this regard are the words with which Blanchot concludes his memory of his friend Bataille: "Thought knows one does not remember: without memory, without thought, it already struggles in the invisible, where everything sinks back into indifference. This is thought's profound grief. It must accompany friendship into oblivion"[41].

Loneliness is an inevitable destiny, and each individual carries with him or her a world that with his or her death plunges without residue into nothingness. Only a sidereal gaze, can recognise the affinity of the friends of solitude who, in their earthly existence, are destined to remain strangers, if not to clash as enemies. This is how Nietzsche describes, in a very famous aphorism from *The Gay Science*, the fatal destiny of these argonauts of the spirit in which he sees the image of the 'new philosophers' devoted to the disaster (with this expression Blanchot links disaster to the stars) of friendship and representing, perhaps precisely through the tragic failure of their relationship, the extreme possibility of *philia*:

> *Star friendship*. - We were friends and have become estranged. But that was right (…). We are two ships, each of which has its own goal and course (…); maybe we will never meet again – or maybe we will, but will not recognize each other: the different seas and suns have changed us! That we had to become estranged is the law *above* us; through it we should come to have more respect for each other – and the thought of our former friendship should become more sacred! There is probably a tremendous invisible curve and stellar orbit in which our different ways and goals may be *included* as small stretches – let us rise to this thought! But our life is too short and our vision too meagre for us to be more than friends in the sense of that sublime possibility. – Let us then *believe* in our star friendship even if we must be earth enemies[42].

---

41 M. Blanchot, *Friendship*, cit., p. 292.
42 F. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, cit., §279, p. 159.

The Phenomenology of Rhythm in Early Mother-infant Interactions

David-Augustin MÂNDRUȚ[*] iD

ABSTRACT. This paper investigates the phenomenon of rhythm in the case of early mother-infant interactions. To accomplish this task, I will first draw on phenomenological and psychoanalytical sources that address the issue of rhythmicity. Therefore, Henri Maldiney's comprehensive interpretation of rhythm will represent a building block for my thesis, alongside theories from certain psychoanalytical authors, such as Donald Winnicott, Frances Tustin, and Daniel Stern. Marc Richir's theory of the exchange of gazes between mother and infant will be also presented, because in Richir's thematization, one could link the issue of rhythm with that of the sublime and the phenomenological awakening of the infant to the world. In his phenomenology, Marc Richir connects the issue of the sublime with that of the abyss. In contrast, Henri Maldiney states explicitly that rhythm is the structure that renders possible the encounter with chaos without falling forever. This will lead me to Frances Tustin's theory of the "rhythm of safety", under which I will be trying to demonstrate that rhythm is the essential feature of the infant's feeling of basic security. Nevertheless, Daniel Stern's theory of affect attunement and the dynamic forms of vitality will prove to be crucial for our argumentation, because these core concepts, which he proposed throughout his work reveal once again that rhythm is a pervasive feature of virtually every authentic intersubjective encounter.

Keywords: rhythm, intersubjectivity, sublime, basic trust, exchange of regards, affect attunement.

Introduction

Rhythm seems to be a pervasive feature of interhuman relatedness. Leaving aside for this moment the issue of bodily rhythms, such as the cardiac and respiratory ones, we can just think of daily face to face exchanges between people. Even when

---

[*] Faculty of History and Philosophy, Babeș-Bolyai University, 1, M. Kogalniceanu Str., 400084 Cluj-Napoca, Romania. Email: davidmandrut@gmail.com

engaging in dialogue and follow our turn as in the phenomenon of "turn-taking", we encounter rhythm. But now we can ask a broader question, namely if somehow the process of humanization[1] which takes place between mother and infant implies that those certain rhythms of interaction develop into wider structures, which accompany our daily face to face exchanges. We arrive thus at our central question, that is going to be posed in this paper, namely how do the early interactive patterns of interaction affect our later life as human beings. This paper corroborates theories from both psychoanalysis and phenomenology in order to prove that from the very beginning of our lives, "rhythms of dialogue"[2] start to become operative. Therefore, the present article will be divided into two broader sections, each of them containing arguments from the specific fields of inquiry. The first section tackles the phenomenology of rhythm as it is found in the philosophy of Henri Maldiney and Marc Richir. These theories, which set up our entire discussion have the peculiar role of anticipating the second division of our paper, namely the one concerned with the psychoanalytical conceptions that we are going to interrogate. For now, we can mention Donald Winnicott, Frances Tustin and Daniel Stern as our main sources of psychoanalytical accounts of rhythm. The sole purpose of this paper is the attempt to demonstrate that rhythm plays a crucial role for our being-in-the-world, starting from the very early interactions and following towards the period when we become grown-ups and engage into social relationships with other people. Our secondary aim, following the divisions of this paper is to show, philosophically, how rhythm establishes order between I and Thou in the early human relationships, and even a secure base towards the world. The phenomenological accounts which we are going to investigate focus on the question of the process of humanization, while the psychoanalytical ones concern themselves with the issue of mirroring, which develops into a secure base for existence.

Rhythm between chaos and order

Concerning what could be called the process of humanization, Maldiney's insightful text becomes very provocative when he states that aesthetics involves ethics[3]. Nonetheless, his inquiry aims towards the original Greek term which designates the ethical position of the subject. Therefore, one could notice how

---

[1] The phrase "process of humanization" was first employed by Marc Richir, in his attempt to describe the architectonical strata through which the infant passes in order to become symbolically instituted.

[2] This wording is borrowed from the monograph of Jaffe and Feldstein.

[3] The translations and paraphrases from French are mine.

Maldiney manages to echo the Wittgensteinian standpoint from the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus,* wherein the latter thematized the relationship between aesthetics and ethics as one of codependency[4]. Maldiney is even more precise when he considers the Heideggerian notion of dwelling in the world, which involves the communicative relation with ourselves, the world of things and with the others[5]. Furthermore, Maldiney recalls Hölderlin's wording that we should come into the *Open[6],* a statement by which both thinkers suggested that we should take an authentic stance towards our being in the world. Maldiney also stresses several times Hölderlin's other famous saying about humanity being a dialogue. Despite the importance of this phrase, we are not going to dwell on it right now, rather the issue of the *Open* and dialogical dwelling should be analyzed in a different context, and thus, be left to further research.

As the exegesis suggests, rhythm is the fundamental feature of our existence that enables us to set a "here" and a "there", in the phenomenological sense[7]. We are now going to notice how this process develops, by using Maldiney's metaphors of chaos and order. The French phenomenological author considers that the first response to the abyss is dizziness, just as in Kierkegaard's famous example from *The Concept of Anxiety[8].* While Kierkegaard associated this dizziness with freedom and anxiety, Maldiney holds that this dizziness is an inversion and a contamination of the close and the far. More exactly, using the Heideggerian terminology, Maldiney suggests that the sky and the earth are in a sort of reciprocal relation of balance. Furthermore, he explains that the human being is not the center anymore[9], nor is space the place. This form of dizziness is the auto-movement of chaos. Recalling the discussion between establishing the phenomenological "here" and the "there", the cosmogenic moment is precisely the instant in which a point becomes fixated into the chaos. This would be for Maldiney, the origin of the world. All this process would be exactly the work of rhythm, by which it marks the passage from chaos to order[10].

Rhythm should be further considered as a sort of emergence. A very puzzling statement is advanced forth by the French phenomenological author when he considers the relation between rhythm and the original faith (Husserl's *Urdoxa*)[11]. We

---

[4] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus,* London and New York, Routledge, 2002, p. 86.

[5] See for example Heidegger's being-in-the-world, a concept which for Maldiney becomes linked intimately to the issue of rhythm.

[6] Henri Maldiney, *Regard parole espace,* Paris, Les Editions du Cerf, 2012, p. 202.

[7] Yasuhiko Murakami, "The Rhythm of Reorganizing the World. Maldiney and the Theory of Crisis", *Studia UBB. Philosophia,* Vol. 66, 1, 2021, pp. 102-103.

[8] Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety,* Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1980, p. 61.

[9] This means that the human being temporality loses his absolute here or the zero point of orientation.

[10] Henri Maldiney, *Regard parole espace,* Paris, Les Editions du Cerf, 2012, pp. 205-206.

[11] Ibidem, p. 207.

must nonetheless remember that in the final pages of his chapter on *transpassibility*[12], Maldiney linked this notion to the issue of the original faith, indicating that the receptive (*transpassibility*) and responsive (*transpossibility*) capacities are grounded in this original faith[13]. Maldiney clarifies the issue further by stating that there exists a relation between rhythm and the original faith. This relation might also help in clarifying certain aspects involving the relation between receptivity and responsivity and their relation to rhythm. Nonetheless, this will not be the purpose of this study. Drawing a partial conclusion, rhythm would be responsible for the emergence of forms, and the example concerning the passage from chaos to order becomes now very telling[14]. Therefore, the very first encounter of infant and mother would be a rhythmical one, because it establishes a form. Therefore, paraphrasing Martin Buber, the first relation would be the rhythmical and dialogical event in which the *substantia humana* of the mother and the *substantia humana* of the infant come into contact, transforming the interhuman into a form[15]. Furthermore, Maldiney's thesis concerning the relation between rhythm and *Urdoxa* might echo certain psychoanalytical accounts on the issue of basic trust, such as that of Tustin.

The phenomenological author emphasizes that the time of the rhythm is a time a presence, and not a time of the universe[16]. Martin Buber's scattered remarks on time might throw light on Maldiney's statement. Buber considers that the presence of the other gives rise to the present time of the encounter[17], while in other works he considered the distinction between anthropological time, which is determined by the acts of the human being, and the cosmological time, which has to do with events that are outside of human control[18]. Whereas Buber was pointing towards the importance of the personal presence of the other, Maldiney uses the concept of presence in relation to Heidegger's thematization of *Dasein* as being-there.

Returning to the dialectics between chaos and order, form becomes the missing link concerning how rhythm establishes an ordered world. This is called by Maldiney the cosmogenic moment. Once again, Maldiney underlines that the time

---

[12] Transpassibility, or being open and receptive towards the unforeseeable, is the key feature that renders possible any coping with the (traumatic) event. Thus, trauma would shatter the trust in the world and therefore make transpassibility inoperative. The complex interrelation between the original faith in the world and transpassibility will be not analyzed further, rather it will be left for further research.

[13] Henri Maldiney, *Penser l'homme et la folie,* Grenoble, Jerome Millon, 1991, p. 270.

[14] Henri Maldiney, *Regard parole espace,* Paris, Les Editions du Cerf, 2012, p. 209.

[15] Martin Buber, *The Knowledge of Man,* New York, Harper & Row Publishers, 1965, p. 66.

[16] Henri Maldiney, *Regard parole espace,* Paris, Les Editions du Cerf, 2012, p. 217.

[17] Martin Buber, *I and Thou,* London, New Delhi, New York, Sydney, Bloomsbury, 2013, pp. 9-10.

[18] Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man,* London and New York, Routledge, 2002, p. 167.

of rhythm is the time of presence. In the case of rhythm, duration and instant, namely the infinite and the punctual, are one[19].

Form becomes now the rhythm of the material. The rhythm involved in this process implies a sort of ambivalence (aggressivity and sympathy) in the case of the encounter with the material. In this situation, we can remember Marc Richir's reading of Winnicott, wherein the Belgian phenomenologist stressed the importance of the rhythmical quality of destruction and survival (following Winnicott's chapter on "the use of an object" from *Playing and Reality*). Furthermore, Marc Richir discusses the passage from the biological rhythm of hunger and satisfaction to the human one of destruction and survival[20]. Once again, we could come back to Martin Buber's theory of the creative impulse[21], which involved both destructive and creative elements[22]. Nonetheless, in Buber's case, despite some scattered remarks from his texts pertaining to aesthetics, rhythm is absent.

The exchange of regards

Advancing towards Marc Richir's discussion of the exchange of regards, we will analyze his theory in conjunction with some passages from Husserl's theory of affective awakening, in which the latter employs the notion of rhythm.

Marc Richir attempts to highlight the role played by the sublime[23] in the exchange of regards (between mother and infant). Therefore, he commences with Winnicott's analysis of the first theoretical breast-feed. In the case of this phenomenon, the infant who is breastfed will soon turn her[24] gaze towards the mother's face. Winnicott already underlined the importance of the mother's expression which somehow creates an atmosphere for the infant, even depending on her smiling at the baby. Richir employs different notions to explain his theory, hence he discusses the instant of the sublime, or the sublime affections in an original attempt to thematize the exchange of regards[25]. Briefly put, the infant who was just

---

[19] Henri Maldiney, *Regard parole espace,* Paris, Les Editions du Cerf, 2012, p. 218.

[20] Marc Richir, *Phantasia, imagination, affectivité,* Grenoble, Jerome Millon, 2004, p. 513.

[21] Buber distinguished between the instinct to creativity and the instinct to communion. Both are equally important, depending on the situation in which the human being found himself. Therefore, in his solitary moments, the human being might choose to create, while in the life of the community, he might choose to help others.

[22] Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man,* London and New York, Routledge, 2002, p. 100.

[23] Marc Richir advanced the idea that the infant who experiences the "moment" of the sublime will be able to experience both the beautiful and the sublime as in Kant's sense.

[24] I am using the pronoun "her" to designate the infant, for the sake of brevity.

[25] Marc Richir, *Fragments phénoménologiques sur le langage,* Grenoble, Jerome Millon, 2008, p. 88.

breastfed encounters the mother's visage, which besides giving her something back (a part of her true self), also fixes her gaze. As simple as it seems, this phenomenon has tremendous consequences, because by fixing the infant's gaze, the mother introduces two absolute "here", namely hers and the baby's. Now we are already encountering the first spatial relation which is established between the infant and her mother. We could ask ourselves how does rhythm take place in this equation? In his analysis on active and passive synthesis, Husserl suggests that a rhythm might awaken another rhythm, in our case, the mother's rhythmical gaze awakens the infant's gaze and somehow gives her a rhythm too[26]. Furthermore, by virtue of this interaction involving an exchange of regards, the mother and her infant co-created a rhythm of relating. Returning to Maldiney's thematization, we could as well consider that this exchange of regards introduces order into chaos, by virtue of the establishment of the two absolute "here". For both mother and infant, this rhythmical exchange of gazes is utterly playful, because diverse interactions might be deployed in this play space, for instance the game of peek-a-boo and the smiling back to each other.

I will not consider the situation in which this exchange of regards is not a satisfactory one, rather I will move towards the theories of the psychoanalytical authors, which will once again strengthen our argumentation. As stated in the introduction, Donald Winnicott's holding will be considered, alongside Frances Tustin's rhythm of safety and Daniel Stern's affect attunement. All three situations of early mother-infant interactions seem to be paramount for the issue of human rhythmicity.

The rhythmical holding

Winnicott did not advance a theory of rhythm as such, but rather he discussed this issue in the case of his notion of holding environment, which was related to the primary maternal preoccupation[27]. Initially, the holding environment represents the good-enough care which is received by the infant from her mother. We can just think of many interactions, such as rocking the infant, which is an example of attunement. In the case of rocking, by virtue of the harmonious movements, the mother regulates the infant's mood. One can already notice how rhythm becomes operative in this particular situation. Furthermore, in a short paragraph from his posthumous book entitled *Human Nature,* Winnicott stresses the importance of the rhythm of breathing

---

[26] Edmund Husserl, *Analyses concerning Passive and Active Synthesis: Lectures on Transcendental Logic,* Dordrecht/Boston/London, Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2001, p. 229.

[27] D. W. Winnicott, *Through Paediatrics to Psycho-Analysis,* London and New York, Routledge, 1958, p. 302.

in the case of the very first contact between mother and infant. Therefore, he states that the infant attunes to the mother's breathing rhythm just after birth. From there on, the two of them establish contact, and even get to play with this sort of rhythm. The key term that Winnicott employs is that of regulation. Therefore, the mother who has just given birth needs to establish the contact with her baby by means of rhythm, but also by touch. This is a unique sort of cooperation between the two of them, perhaps even the very first, which will establish a long lifetime partnership[28]. We might as well consider that this specific form of attunement and regulation anticipates what Daniel Stern would designate as "affect attunement". Affect attunement occurs of course later in the infant's development, as we are going to see when we will analyze rhythm in the case of Stern's paradigm. Now that we have established that the first contact between mother and infant is a tangible and rhythmical one, let us proceed towards a phenomenological theory of the holding environment.

In their paper on basic trust, Fazakas and Gozé noticed how due to the introjection of the initial holding environment, the transcendental soil starts to function. Let me explain this situation by using the theory provided by the two authors. Fazakas of Gozé attempted to describe how basic trust is acquired by the infant. Therefore, using Winnicott's empirical research and Richir's framework of transcendental phenomenology, they proposed that the maternal holding is introjected by the infant, and thanks to this process, the infant acquires the transcendental soil. We must nonetheless notice that both the holding environment and the transcendental soil are tangible and rhythmical elements[29]. Furthermore, the authors considered introjection (and projection) as transitional phenomena, because they facilitate the to-and-fro passage from outside to the inside and vice-versa. Now we could wonder why Maldiney was discussing introjection and projection as one and the same thing. He did not even consider them a couple, rather, he advanced the term "intro-projection".

As Fazakas and Gozé's paper proves, the initial stage of the infant is one of dependence (the holding environment), which is followed by the state of independence (the transcendental soil). Their argument was also an attempt to demonstrate that we, as human beings, were always held, and we are still held (by the transcendental soil). Thus, this would be the origin of basic trust, namely the mother's good-enough holding. We must nonetheless remember that the holding is always tangible and rhythmical. These two features will be of particular use, when we are going to investigate Tustin's theory of the "rhythm of safety". For now, we have to remember that the

---

[28] D. W. Winnicott, *Human Nature,* London and New York, Routledge, 1988, p. 146.
[29] Istvan Fazakas & Tudi Gozé, "The Promise of the World: Towards a Transcendental History of Trust", *Husserl Studies,* 36, 2020, p. 185.

rhythmical (and tangible) small interactions between mother of infant give rise to something co-created, which establishes the infant's well-being. Using Tustin's theory, we will see that this very thing is actually the rhythm of safety.

The rhythm of safety

In her chapter on the "rhythm of safety", Frances Tustin recalls the sayings of one of her patients, who could not bear the awareness of bodily separation from her mother[30]. The fact that there could be a bodily separation between her patient and the patient's mother would have felt like a catastrophe[31]. Tustin's patient felt that her body was always at risk, because of the possibility that her body would come to an end[32]. Tustin now recalls Winnicott's phrase of the "environmental mother" and even the notion of the "earth mother". These phrases were employed, so that she could demonstrate that for a human being to feel safe (to have a sense of being), there is the need for another human being's presence[33]. From now one, Tustin introduces the concept of the "rhythm of safety".

The term rhythm was employed from the example of an infant being breastfed at the beginning of her life. At first, the baby's rhythm of sucking was not coordinated or synchronized with the mother's rhythm of milk coming from the breast. Nevertheless, by virtue of repeated interactions, the infant and the mother adapted to each other. This is the point where Tustin suggests that due to this coordination, a new rhythm was created between mother and infant. Tustin further recalls Brazelton's phrase entitled the "reciprocity envelope", which bears certain similarities to her own notion[34].

The rhythm of safety can thus even mean an interactive reciprocal relationship between mother and infant. By virtue of the rhythm of safety, the infant acknowledges that she is a separate and different being from the mother. The rhythm of safety becomes now a shared experience. As Fazakas and Gozé did acknowledge, following Winnicott, these interactions are also tangible, sensuous and physical[35].

---

[30] Frances Tustin, *Autistic Barriers in Neurotic Patients,* London, Karnac Books, 1986, p. 270
[31] Ibidem, p. 270.
[32] Ibidem, p. 271.
[33] Ibidem, p. 271.
[34] Ibidem, pp. 272-273.
[35] Ibidem, p. 274.

Perhaps one of Tustin's greatest contributions consist in how she advanced the idea that the rhythm of safety is responsible for separating the "me" elements from the "not-me" ones. We could also recall Winnicott's rhythm or pace of separation, from *Playing and Reality[36].* By separating the "me" and the "not-me" features, the infant acknowledges that she is a different and a separate being from the mother, without any sort of traumatic experience. We will once again notice the importance of rhythm when we are going to analyze Stern's affect attunement. Rhythm implies the idea that separation is not sudden[37], thus the infant has enough time (provided by the rhythm), to acknowledge her separateness. Moreover, by virtue of these repeated interactions, the infant will not acknowledge that she is a separate being as in a shocking experience, because as Erik Erikson put it, basic trust (the rhythm of safety), is gained through the dialectics between the mother's presence and absence[38]. Because separation is not sudden, rather it involves the passage the time, the infant's going-on-being in not menaced[39]. This means that the infant's ipseity is not shattered.

Concerning the integrity of going-on-being, rhythm could be the key feature which is lacking in Winnicott's theory of the "fear of breakdown". Therefore, the fear of breakdown might also be conceived as a sort of sudden break in the infant's rhythm of existence. If the mother does not attune to her infant, at the beginning, in a close to 100% manner, there is the risk that the traumatic event might invade the infant's purity of experience[40]. This once again reveals the tremendous importance of the mother's bodily presence for the well-being of the infant.

The rhythmical attunement

We will now consider rhythm in relation to the problem of sharing affective states, a phenomenon pertaining to what Stern has called the infant's "subjective self"[41]. This complex process of sharing affective states in a sort of intersubjective relatedness was called by Daniel Stern "affect attunement". This particular sort of attunement is the building block of intersubjective relatedness, because it involves the mirroring function and empathic responsiveness. Stern even designates this

---

[36] D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality,* London and New York, Routledge, 2009, p. 150.

[37] As Maldiney explained many times, what makes the traumatic event to seem like a catastrophe is exactly its suddenness.

[38] Erik H. Erikson, *Childhood and Society,* London, Vintage Books, 1995, pp. 222-223.

[39] Frances Tustin, *Autistic Barriers in Neurotic Patients,* London, Karnac Books, 1986, p. 276.

[40] D. W. Winnicott, *Psycho-Analytic Explorations,* London and New York, Routledge, 1989, p. 147.

[41] In the case of Daniel Stern's theory of the senses of self, the emergent and the core self precede the subjective one, which is followed by the verbal sense of self.

phenomenon under the title of interaffectivity. The child psychologist will soon enumerate rhythm among the key features of affect attunement. We will then find out that if attunement were to take place, the mother has to match the infant's rhythm. Stern even suggests that the parent must be able to read the infant's overt behavior and match it with an inner feeling. Nonetheless, the parent must behave cross-modally, also matching the infant's dynamic forms of vitality[42].

Attunement usually gives the sense of being a sort of imitation, instead of this, it is a cross-modal match. This means that the mother's gesture with which she responds to the infant, must be different from her child's. For example, the infant gesticulates with her hand, and the mother vocally confirms this gesture[43]. We soon receive a definition of this phenomenon:

> "Affect attunement becomes the performance of behaviors that express the quality of feeling of a shared affect state without imitating the exact behavioral expression of the inner state[44]."

Returning to the issue of the match between affects, Stern enumerates some key features which must be matched, if attunement were to take place. He thus mentions the absolute intensity of the behavior, the intensity contour, the temporal beat, the rhythm, duration and shape[45]. Once can already notice that these six key features point out to the musical embeddedness of our behaviors. Even though rhythm was the least thematized element among these components, it deserves further clarification in light of our previous discussion.

Affect attunement largely involves the feature of rhythm. By virtue of this rhythmical relatedness, as it was seen in the cases of the exchange of regards and of the maternal holding, the infant differentiates between self and other, or more precisely, between "here" and "there" (the two absolute "here"). This differentiation is simultaneous with the infant's awakening to her surrounding world, which also involves awakening to others. In this way, empathy is addressed. Marc Richir also discussed the "moment" of the sublime in the case of this awakening, which was made possible by the exchange of regards. Rhythm becomes thus the way in which a space between I and Thou is established. Moreover, the rhythm of the interactions between mother and infant builds up the infant's sense of trust in the world.

---

[42] Daniel N. Stern, *The Interpersonal World of the Infant,* London, Karnac Books, 1985, pp. 138-139.
[43] Ibidem, pp. 141-142.
[44] Ibidem, p. 142.
[45] Ibidem, p. 146.

Therefore, instead of discussing this issue in terms of introjection and projection, we could also consider that the infant's well-being is co-created due to the interactions with the mother.

By maintaining a secure rhythm of existence, the mother introduces the infant to the world in small doses. This process also builds up to the infant's own personal pattern of existence, and here we could recall transitional phenomena. Feeling the rhythm of safety, the infant might start to vocalize or even to babble. These phenomena have to be met by the mother, so that the infant might develop artistic capabilities[46]. As Winnicott pointed out, these differences between infants are due to the very early life experiences with the mother. Therefore, rhythmical relatedness contributes to the infant's discovery of her own pattern of existence, and even her own style. We could even claim that rhythm is the necessary condition for exploring the world, because by virtue of it, order is set up against chaos, creating definite forms, as in Maldiney's terms. We have already connected rhythm with the issue of basic trust, underlining that if the very early mother-infant interactions prove to be good-enough, then the infant's basic trust is established. The works of rhythmical relatedness becomes thus the very way from dependence to independence, in Winnicott's words.

By way of conclusion

To conclude, it could be argued once again that rhythm is a key element that establishes the existential communication with the world from the very beginning. The role of the mother would be exactly that of keeping her infant in tune with the world by virtue of her primary maternal preoccupation, which involves different sorts of behaviors. We have already mentioned the problem of holding and the introduction of the world in small doses. Moreover, in the case of early mother-infant interactions, rhythm sets up our basic trust between self and other, and even with the world as such. As we have seen in Daniel Stern's example, rhythm becomes even a key feature in the case of early regulation and mirroring of affectivity, hence it could be argued that be are born into rhythm. Furthermore, being in tune with others is again made possible by rhythm. Rhythm allows for synchronization between I and Thou, and it maintains us in this web of relations, which is called world. Here Maldiney's notion of form and order could be recalled. Nonetheless, from a philosophical standpoint, rhythm becomes a very important feature in the process of humanization, as we have seen during our analysis of Maldiney and Richir.

---

[46] D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality,* London and New York, Routledge, 2009, p. 135.

REFERENCES

Buber, Martin, *Between Man and Man,* London and New York, Routledge, 2002.

Buber, Martin, *I and Thou,* London, New Delhi, New York, Sydney, Bloomsbury, 2013.

Buber, Martin, *The Knowledge of Man,* New York, Harper & Row Publishers, 1965.

Erikson, Erik H., *Childhood and Society,* London, Vintage Books, 1995.

Fazakas, Istvan & Gozé, Tudi, "The Promise of the World: Towards a Transcendental History of Trust", *Husserl Studies,* 36, 2020, pp. 169-189.

Husserl, Edmund, *Analyses concerning Passive and Active Synthesis: Lectures on Transcendental Logic,* Dordrecht/Boston/London, Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2001.

Kierkegaard, Søren, *The Concept of Anxiety,* Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1980.

Maldiney, Henri, *Penser l'homme et la folie,* Grenoble, Jerome Millon, 1991.

Maldiney, Henri, *Regard parole espace,* Paris, Les Editions du Cerf, 2012.

Murakami, Yasuhiko, "The Rhythm of Reorganizing the World. Maldiney and the Theory of Crisis", *Studia UBB. Philosophia,* Vol. 66, 1, 2021, pp. 99-115.

Richir, Marc, *Fragments phénoménologiques sur le langage,* Grenoble, Jerome Millon, 2008.

Richir, Marc, *Phantasia, imagination, affectivité,* Grenoble, Jerome Millon, 2004.

Stern, Daniel N., *The Interpersonal World of the Infant,* London, Karnac Books, 1985.

Tustin, Frances, *Autistic Barriers in Neurotic Patients,* London, Karnac Books, 1986.

Winnicott, D. W., *Human Nature,* London and New York, Routledge, 1988.

Winnicott, D. W., *Playing and Reality,* London and New York, Routledge, 2009.

Winnicott, D. W., *Psycho-Analytic Explorations,* London and New York, Routledge, 1989,

Winnicott, D. W., *Through Paediatrics to Psycho-Analysis,* London and New York, Routledge, 1958.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus,* London and New York, Routledge, 2002.

Counterfactuals, Modal Knowledge, and Understanding[*]

Mihai RUSU[**] iD

ABSTRACT. In this essay, I attempt to diagnose and show the importance of a structural problem that affects Williamson's counterfactual epistemology of modality. First, I provide a general, even if somewhat heuristical, description of the requirements that a realist epistemology of modality must fulfil. The requirements are analyzed and used for interpreting various controversial choices that Williamson and other philosophers make when theorizing modal knowledge. I then proceed to explain why a more thorough examination of the integration of Williamson's view of understanding and of his restrictive epistemology of modality leads to the uncovering of a tension that jeopardizes Williamson's robust realist tenets. I argue that a similar problem (or perhaps different problems with similar underlying reasons) befalls other realist accounts and show why various extant solutions are insufficient. The paper concludes with a reappraisal of the tasks that modal epistemologists have hitherto ignored or treated only collaterally, which may also be interpreted as a critical analysis of the limits of older and newer conceptions of metaphysical modality.

Keywords: modal epistemology, realism, metaphysical modality, philosophy of language, understanding, counterfactuals

---

[**] Department of Philosophy, Faculty of History and Philosophy, Babeș-Bolyai University, 1, Mihail Kogălniceanu Str., 400084 Cluj-Napoca, Romania. Email: rusu.mihai@ubbcluj.ro

1. Introduction

The counterfactual epistemology of Williamson (2007) has been one of the most hotly debated contemporary accounts in modal epistemology. Despite the ample attention this theory has received, I contend that one fundamental problem of Williamson's epistemology has not been discussed conclusively in the literature. Besides diagnosing the problem in its specific articulation in Williamson's work, I aim to show that this difficulty is the symptom of a more general deficiency that affects many realist accounts of modalities. The crux of my argument against Williamson's counterfactual-based account is the following: the way in which modal knowledge is explicated must quite plausibly align with the way modal expressions are used in linguistic exchanges. However, the minimal constraints Williamson imposes on meaning seem to be at odds with the very strict conditions that Williamson's analysis applies to the way we develop counterfactual scenarios. In order to deliver the wanted logical equivalence between metaphysical modality and certain counterfactual conditionals, Williamson has to maintain that we preserve a set of constitutive truths in every counterfactual scenario we imagine, a constraint that seems too strong, therefore implausible, especially against the background of his view on meaning and understanding. As we will see, similar and equally implausible constraints were proposed in related imagination-based theories of modal knowledge.

In what follows, I will briefly describe Williamson's view on the connection between counterfactuals and metaphysical modality. Then, I will discuss the main requirements that an adequate realist epistemology of modality must fulfil, and I will put into perspective some of the criticisms that Williamson's theory and other accounts have received. I will proceed with a description of Williamson's view of understanding, which I will subsequently apply to modal expressions. Section 6 contains the full explication of the tension that appears when we attempt to integrate Williamson's perspective from the philosophy of language with his very demanding epistemology of metaphysical necessity. An investigation of other realist accounts encounters similar quandaries. The final part will attempt a reappraisal of this difficulty from the perspective of important tasks and solutions that have been hitherto overlooked or minimized in modal epistemology.

2. Williamson's account of modal knowledge

Williamson aims to give an account of our knowledge of modality that is grounded in our ordinary cognitive capacities. The main thesis of this account is that our capacity to handle metaphysical modality (that is, to form modal knowledge) is a

byproduct of our natural ability to develop and entertain counterfactual suppositions (Williamson 2007, 162). Williamson argues that the following relations hold between metaphysical modalities and counterfactual conditionals:

$$(N) \;\Box A \equiv (\neg A \;\Box\!\!\rightarrow \bot)$$
$$(P) \;\Diamond A \equiv \neg\, (A \;\Box\!\!\rightarrow\bot)$$

In Williamson's own words, "we assert $\Box A$ when our counterfactual development of the supposition ¬A robustly yields a contradiction" and "we assert $\Diamond A$ when our counterfactual development of the supposition A does not robustly yield a contradiction." (Williamson 2007, 163) While the relation between modalities and counterfactuals is given in terms of an equivalence, in the order of explanation counterfactuals are prior, as Williamson holds that "the epistemology of metaphysically modal thinking is tantamount to a special case of the epistemology of counterfactual thinking." (Williamson 2007, 158).

3. What should a realist about modality want from modal epistemology? Counterfactuals and realism about metaphysical modality

I take *ontological realism about modality* to be any view according to which modal truth is objective, i.e. there are modal facts (or a modal reality) that are mind-independent.[1] Naturally, it would not make much sense if one were to uphold such a view without also believing that we have knowledge of at least some such modal truths. Realism about modality should and does extend from metaphysics to epistemology. In this sense, Williamson is an ontological realist about modality.

In what follows, I will propose a list of requirements that an epistemology of metaphysical modality must fulfil in order to provide an acceptable account of modal knowledge from a realist standpoint. The list may be incomplete, or the requirements may overlap to some extent, yet every desideratum exhibits a different reason for formulating and structuring modal epistemology in a certain way. These requirements should clarify why some accounts are successful, but I think the requirements are even more useful for explaining the failure of certain accounts or at least the dissatisfaction that might arise when confronted with certain attempts to explain modal knowledge. So, here are the requirements for a serious modal epistemology:

---

[1] For more distinctions along these lines, see McLeod (2005).

i. Modal epistemology should explain our knowledge of a distinctive type of metaphysical modality (not reducible in any sense to other types: logical, conceptual, natural, etc.). The famous examples of necessary *a posteriori* truths from Kripke (1980) appear to provide us such *putative* cases.

ii. Modal epistemology should justify knowledge of metaphysical necessity, which is a distinct task from accounting for knowledge of metaphysical possibility.

iii. Modal epistemology should account for our knowledge of sufficiently many (typical) modal claims.

iv. Modal epistemology should clarify at least some cases of extraordinary modal claims, including necessary *a posteriori* truths.

v. A certain *robustness* should be attributed to modal statements/notions: one wants modal truth *explained but not explained away*.

As said above, I believe that the list contains the reasons for the success, but more importantly, for the failure of some theories. I will now elaborate on these requirements and illustrate how we can use them to assess the merits or shortcomings of epistemological theories about modality.

Requirement *i.* is needed in order to account for a type of modality that is not grounded in anything that may be regarded as ultimately conceptual or theoretical. Kripke's cases of necessary *a posteriori* truths (the identity of Hesperus and Phosphorus, various purportedly essential property attributions, such as origin or composition) are widely considered as successful examples of such a distinctive type of modality, that is called "metaphysical (sometimes real or absolute) modality." Epistemological theories may assign too much weight to *i.*, therefore engendering a certain type of circularity of justification. That is, they take examples of metaphysical modality such as Kripke's as being established beyond controversy or criticism, but these cases remain putative, both metaphysically and epistemologically. Theories are subsequently formulated in order to accommodate these purported metaphysical truths that we are also supposed to have knowledge of.

A circularity charge has also been leveled by Boghossian (2011, 490, n.1) against Williamson's account. This circularity (if it exists) is connected to a need to fulfil something more than requirement *i.* The most daunting challenge for an epistemology of modality remains accounting for our knowledge of (metaphysical) necessity. Apparently, the fact that possibility and necessity are interdefinable (e.g., "it is necessary that *p*" is definable as "it is not possible that not-*p*") should make matters easier, but this does not happen. The temptation is to think that once we have an epistemology of possibility, we should also have an epistemology of necessity, due to the interdefinability of the two notions. And, of course, an epistemology of possibility seems like a rather simple task, as we have an uncontroversial and knowable

stock of possible truths to start from: actually true statements. However, accounting for metaphysical necessity is a different and much more strenuous task than accounting for metaphysical possibility.[2] Although its radical conclusion might be ultimately resisted, Kant's famous dictum from the *Prolegomena*, §14 encapsulates this significant challenge for an epistemology of metaphysical necessity: "Now experience teaches me what there is and how it is, but never that it necessarily must be so and not otherwise. Therefore it can never teach me the nature of things in themselves." (Kant [1783] 2004, 46) One does not have to agree with Kant that we cannot find in experience a source of justification for our knowledge of metaphysical necessity, but what seems harder to reject is the point that there is no direct experience or confirmation of necessity in experience. Therefore, the main issue for a modal epistemological account is to find an adequate explanation of our purported knowledge of metaphysical necessity while taking experience as a starting point (where needed, of course; e.g., for essential property attribution, such as origin or composition).

Imagination-based modal epistemology is typically the most burdened in this respect, as we seem able to entertain in an apparently coherent way counterexamples to various truths that philosophers deem metaphysically necessary. One can, *pace* Kripke, imagine a table made of wood being made of plastic, or of a different type of wood, or of different chunks of wood and so on, at least when one does not know what the table is made of. This lack of limitations of our imagination creates a different type of circularity in modal epistemology. Imagination-based accounts have an inborn tendency to become error theories[3], their main purpose being not to describe and explain modal knowledge, but rather to explain away modal illusions, that is, the reasons why some (but not all) of our imaginings should not count as counterexamples to purportedly necessary truths. The trouble is that this theoretical enforcement of restrictions to our imagination is made in order to salvage certain intuitions or a certain established view but appears ultimately ineffective and artificial, as I will attempt to show later. Recently, the issue of finding appropriate constraints for modal knowledge has been dubbed by Vaidya and Wallner (2021) the *Problem of Modal Epistemic Friction* (PMEF). Vaidya and Wallner claim that modal epistemological theories will typically appeal to a set of constraints (such as fixed background knowledge, essences, *a priori* principles, etc.) in order to account for the way in which we acquire knowledge. The main aim of this paper is to argue that Williamson's sources of friction are untenable when connected to other views he holds about the way (modal)

---

[2] See Van Inwagen (1998, 74) for a similar point.
[3] See Kung (2016, 21).

language works. Subsequently, I will attempt a diagnosis of the deeper causes of this issue which seems to be encountered by other imagination-based realist theories of modal knowledge as well.

The same type of circularity discussed in the previous paragraph is imputed to Williamson's epistemology. While Williamson's account is not solely imagination-based, it runs into the same trouble that imagination-based epistemology faces. No contradiction is apparent in counterfactual scenarios that contain impossible situations. For example, there is no contradiction if we suppose that the Queen was the daughter of Ernest Hemingway and then build a counterfactual scenario accordingly, or that gold has a different atomic number from the one it actually has, and so on. Williamson's view of the nature of imagination is that it typically proceeds as "realistically" as it can and thus it may exploit all our background knowledge (Williamson 2007, 143). Still, this is not enough in order to yield a contradiction. Williamson's solution to this quandary is encapsulated in the following passage:

> If we know enough chemistry, our counterfactual development of the supposition that gold is [not] the element with atomic number 79 will generate a contradiction. The reason is not simply that we know that gold is the element with atomic number 79, for we can and must vary some items of our knowledge under counterfactual suppositions. Rather, part of the general way we develop counterfactual suppositions is to hold such constitutive facts fixed. (Williamson 2007, 164)

Circularity would arise for the counterfactual epistemology of Williamson because, apparently, one has to know already what is metaphysically necessary in order to know what to hold fixed across counterfactual scenarios. Williamson (2011, 505-506) has replied by claiming that his is not a reductive account, which means that it cannot be circular in the sense that modalities would actually be reduced to themselves by way of counterfactuals.[4] I think that Williamson's reply is successful, at least from a technical standpoint, but I will try to formulate a different type of critique that is effective even if we take Williamson's account to be non-reductive.

Requirements *iii.* and *iv.* will not be discussed in detail, as I hope they are clear and intuitive. Of course, we want most of what we consider typical modal truths to be accounted for in our theory. For instance, we want something like me being in Rome today, even though I am not actually there, to be a possible truth that is also knowable. Perspectives may vary on what we regard as typical modal truth and theories may again give rise to circularity, but there is no need to dwell

---

4 Deng (2016) elaborates convincingly on the availability and force of such a reply on the part of Williamson.

on this further. As for requirement *iv.*, I submit that the modal epistemologist should want to account not only for the typical, but also for the extraordinary. Van Inwagen (1998) gives some examples of such extraordinary modal claims (the possibility of immaterial beings, of transparent iron, etc.). I contend that Kripke's examples of necessary *a posteriori* truths are also extraordinary in the sense that they need theoretical elaboration, much in the same way that the (im)possibility of a zombie or of a disembodied mind does. Modal epistemologies fail here by accepting implausible modal claims or by discarding plausible ones. This is caused by a more subtle, but ever-present pitfall of modal epistemology, that of accepting implausible restrictions or incorporating too much content in the theory in order to accommodate our intuitions or objectives.

Finally, requirement *v.* may be seen as a controversial addition to the list. Even if one believes that the concept of metaphysical modality lacks robustness, one can still be a realist about this type of modality, believing as well that it represents something objective in our world. However, there would not be much use in maintaining such a view. If metaphysical modality is reducible to other notions, then its philosophical importance seems rather thin, and the debates surrounding it pointless. Counterfactual epistemologies of modality may assume this lack of robustness of traditional modal concepts, as Kment (2014) does, or may attempt to work their way around it, much like Williamson does. An emphasis on the non-reductive nature of Williamson's account works as a rejection not only of circularity charges, but also of possible counter-arguments concerning the lack of robustness of modal notions. To be fair though, the gist of many of the critiques that have been formulated against Williamson is not that his modal concepts are deficient, but rather that knowledge of metaphysical modality is already needed in order to entertain epistemically efficient counterfactual scenarios. If it is not metaphysical modality that grounds itself *via* counterfactuals, then it is constitutive knowledge which does the job, as Roca-Royes (2011) and Tahko (2012) argue. But then we do not need the mediation of counterfactuals, as constitutive knowledge already has the modal consequences we are in search of. As said above, my critique of Williamson's account will follow a different line.

4. Williamson on understanding

Before proposing his counterfactual epistemology of modality, Williamson (2007, 85-98) argues in his lectures against the view that mere linguistic competence, i.e. understanding of a statement, is apt to provide insight into the truth of that statement. As we will see, Williamson's requirements on understanding are minimal.

In order to understand Williamson's view better, I will discuss here only a fragment of his lengthy and intricate case from *The Philosophy of Philosophy*, that is, his Peter and Stephen examples that purport to show that the understanding-assent link breaks down even in the case of analytic statements. Williamson considers an example of an uncontroversial logical truth:

(1) Every vixen is a vixen.

Peter and Stephen hold views of quantification that are different from the standard one. Peter believes that the universal quantifier is existence-committing, so for (1) to be true, there has to exist at least one vixen. Stephen, in his turn, believes that borderline cases constitute truth-value gaps, so (1) cannot be true if "vixen" is a vague notion (Williamson 2007, 86-88). Yet, Williamson argues that Peter and Stephen's deviant beliefs do not make them understand quantificational expressions differently from the community of English-language speakers. Their "every" has the same meaning as what we mean by "every." Peter and Stephen are part of the linguistic community and engage in fruitful linguistic interactions with other speakers. Even if their views on quantifiers are incorrect, they have learnt words like "every" in the same way most of the members of the linguistic community have. As Williamson puts it,

> The argument that Peter and Stephen mean what we mean by their words exemplifies two interlocking themes: Quine's epistemological holism, on which the epistemological status of a belief constitutively depends on its position in the believer's whole system of beliefs, and Putnam and Burge's semantic externalism (...), on which the content of a belief constitutively depends on the believer's position in a society of believers. Epistemological holism explains how unorthodoxy on one point can be compensated for by orthodoxy on many others, so that overall Peter and Stephen's usage of the key terms is not beyond the pale of social acceptability; since they remain participants in the relevant linguistic practice, semantic externalism then explains how they can still use the terms with their normal public senses. But neither epistemological holism nor semantic externalism figured as *premises* of the argument. Rather, the argument appealed to features of the relevant systems of belief that make epistemological holism plausible, and to features of our ascription of beliefs that make semantic externalism plausible. (Williamson 2007, 91)

This fragment shows the main features and sources of Williamson's minimal view of understanding. Of course, there is much to be discussed regarding understanding, linguistic competence, and their relations to the views or theories we have about language. This type of discussion is, for instance, present nowadays in the debate surrounding the experimental philosophy of language. One important thread in the critique of the importance of some experimental results for philosophy of language has been precisely this: it does not matter what theories about language (reference, in particular) speakers prefer. Language use is not connected to implicit or explicit assent to a certain theory about language or to having certain metalinguistic intuitions.[5] Now, I do not intend to seek an adjudication of these controversies in this paper. Nevertheless, the point I will make as follows seems to show that matters are not as simple as Williamson's holistic social externalism makes them look. The reason is rather straightforward: an underdetermination of meaning may lead to an underdetermination of fundamental notions and the theories we build with/for them.

5. What about modal expressions?

The first question that must be posed is the following: are there examples analogous to Peter and Stephen in the case of modal expressions? There most certainly are. First, there are Willard, David, an older Hilary and others, who hold philosophically unorthodox views regarding modalities.[6] Then, we should also note that everyday uses of modal expressions are not carefully distinguished or unitary, and if, as Williamson (2007, 94) himself notices, division of linguistic labor cannot save the day in Peter- and Stephen-like cases, then for similar reasons it cannot do much for modalities either.

My strategy here is to assess the impact Williamson's view of understanding has on the status of modal notions that the same Williamson aims to defend robustly. So, let's apply Williamson's own lessons to modality. Modalities are, of course, designed by expressions in language. According to Williamson's view, one does not need the "correct" beliefs about modality in order to use modal expressions correctly. But remember now that the constraints on counterfactual suppositions that we purportedly need for obtaining metaphysical necessity are, according to Williamson, general. Constitutive facts (such as chemical composition, natural laws,

---

[5] Martí (2009) criticizes Machery et al. (2004)'s experiment on these grounds.
[6] Unorthodox when compared to the dominant realist perspective in post-Kripkean analytic philosophy.

etc.) are held fixed across *all* scenarios in *all* cases by all or most moderately knowledgeable members of the linguistic community. But how do we know that these constraints are in fact general, that there is a uniform or almost uniform counterfactual development practice in the linguistic community? If these constraints are not general, then counterfactuals will not suffice to provide an explanation of our knowledge of metaphysical modality, not by Williamson's lights, at least.

5.1. Which counterfactual practice is dominant?

If modalities arise one way or another from counterfactual practice (it is not clear in Williamson's account how that happens precisely[7]), then it is of the utmost importance what type of counterfactual practice is dominant. If we follow Williamson's account, the dominant way of setting up counterfactual suppositions should also determine the meaning of our modal expressions.

Roca-Royes (2011) has attempted an answer to this question by comparing two epistemologies of counterfactuals: Williamson's (W) and EC, which proceeds much like Williamson's account, but does not require that we hold constitutive facts fixed across all scenarios. According to Roca-Royes (2011, 551), EC is efficient as an epistemology of counterfactuals and is more plausible from a naturalistic perspective. I will not focus on Roca-Royes' arguments here, but her paper shows at least that there may be different accounts of counterfactual practice that explain it efficiently without acquiescing to Williamson's more radical tenets. What Roca-Royes does not do, however, is provide a definitive answer to the question which counterfactual practice is dominant.

Whichever answer is the right one, it should be rather clear that we cannot proceed only by doing armchair philosophy at this point. Counterfactual development practices should be investigated, both for laymen and experts, and criteria should be proposed for deciding which methods of building counterfactual scenarios are preeminent when these practices diverge for different groups (experts vs. non-experts, different classes of experts, etc.). Plausibly, not all types of notions should be treated in the same way; modal notions are nevertheless a case where a clear-cut (empirically-informed) answer concerning our use is not readily available, as it might be the case for quantificational expressions. Neither Williamson nor Roca-Royes provides sufficient reasons for deciding their account is better.

---

[7] Jenkins (2008) focuses on this criticism of Williamson.

The temptation here would be simply to reply that much like the users of language who hold deviant views of quantification without thereby using quantifier expressions with different meanings from the rest of the linguistic community, the users of modal expressions that engage in less/minimally restricted counterfactual suppositions will nevertheless mean what the rest of the community means by typical modal expressions. This might be correct, but the reply doesn't answer my concern. My main point here is (again) that there is no decisive proof that counterfactuals are restricted by constitutive knowledge in the way Williamson claims. To drive the point forward, I gather that we should maintain a distinction between *background knowledge* and *constitutive knowledge*. While it is only plausible to assume that any counterfactual supposition must be developed in accordance with some background knowledge, also assuming that a part of that background knowledge should be invariable constitutive knowledge seems to be an extra step which needs further justification. More simply put, not all background knowledge we hold fixed in a certain counterfactual scenario needs to be constitutive, and not all constitutive knowledge (even when acknowledged as such) must be held fixed in every counterfactual scenario. We need extensive (theoretical and empirical) justification in order to accept the claim that the actual situation conforms to Williamson's view.

6. The tension

There is, in my view, a deeper cause of the dissatisfaction one may feel when confronted with the counterfactual epistemology of modality. An underlying tension must be resolved, and not only in Williamson's case: that between an objectivist (realist) view of metaphysical modality and a view that makes meaning (or understanding) universally dependent on social practices. My aim is not to show that this tension is unsolvable, but rather to characterize this difficulty more thoroughly. So, what happens when we apply the moral of the Peter and Stephen cases to modal concepts? If the meaning of metaphysical modal terms is dependent on linguistic practices, then it is also dependent on the capacity of the community to develop the 'right' kind of modal concept, that is, the one that represents modal reality, i.e. the real modal properties of objects, and not something that our mind or our cognitive faculties impose on/add to the world. While it might be ultimately inconsequential to our view of the world which is the actual use of a quantifier or of a conditional expression[8], not the same can be said about modal expressions.

---

[8] This might be inferred retrospectively, after realizing that the differences among plausible competing views on quantification will not be reflected by any serious disagreement in the actual use of quantificational expressions.

But the question is: does any discussion about correctness make sense? Whatever social externalism teaches us, it is that the right concept is the one that can be drawn from use. So, in our case, if Roca-Royes' minimalist counterfactuals are dominant, then the right kind of metaphysical necessity is whatever necessity we can form out of this type of counterfactuals.

6.1. Similar problems for imagination-based accounts and modal rationalism

In order to make my point clearer, I will proceed with a brief detour into other accounts and their own troubles, which I take to be related to the one Williamson's account faces. For instance, imagination-based accounts are typically affected by what I call *the Problem of Excessive Content.* It is obvious that the imagination often goes beyond the lines drawn by the purportedly essential properties of things and thus provides an unsatisfactory guide to modality for realists. The solution is then to restrain the imagination in accordance with some criteria that, unsurprisingly, end up in providing us with precisely what we need in order to justify some previous modal intuitions. If necessity of origin or of composition must be accommodated, Kripke proposes we do that simply by positing that we cannot imagine something that violates these intuitions: "[G]iven that [the lectern] is in fact not made of ice, is in fact made of wood, one cannot imagine that under certain circumstances, it could have been made of ice." (Kripke 1971, 153). This is not the only passage where Kripke appears to propose such a radical solution, but the constraint seems either ineffective (because of its *ad hoc* character, most plausibly) or too strong.[9] If the restriction works, which is doubtful, then it goes against orthodox Kripkean intuitions about necessary *a posteriori* truths, by seemingly transforming every necessary truth into an *a priori* one. To see this better, we can examine Jackson's criticism of the idea that there are metaphysical impossibilities that are nevertheless conceptually possible:

> Many who hold that the constitution of an object is an essential property of it argue that some particular object's not being made of wood, in the case where it is in fact made of wood, is metaphysically impossible. Suppose they are right. Should we then say that a possible world where this very table – the one I am now writing on, which is made of wood – is not made of wood is an example of a world that is conceptually possible but metaphysically impossible? No. For what makes the table, in the claimed conceptually

---

9   See Kung (2016) for a similar view.

possible world where it is not made of wood, this very table? If a table's constitution is an essential property of it, part of the answer must be its being made of wood. But then the world said to be conceptually possible is no such thing. A table made of wood not being made of wood is conceptually impossible. (Jackson 2010, 92)

Jackson does not push his idea to its ultimate conclusion, but if there are no metaphysical impossibilities that are conceptually possible, and we take – as it is traditionally done – conceptual possibility/necessity to mean *a priori* possibility/ necessity, then a metaphysical impossibility must be an *a priori* impossibility, and a metaphysical necessity must be an *a priori* necessity. This seems the natural consequence of such a restriction on the imagination. I see no other way to restrict the imagination effectively in the way proposed by Kripke than to "transform" every constitutive knowledge into *a priori* knowledge. If the restriction proposed by Kripke is indeed general (as it appears to be) and if Jackson is correct in showing that restricting the imagination by way of essential properties makes metaphysical impossibilities conceptual impossibilities as well, there seems to be no escape from admitting that what appear to be *a posteriori* necessities turn out to be *a priori* (at least if their modal status is adequately recognized).[10] Many philosophers would probably still baulk at such an argument. However, it is not essential for my point here that the constitutive knowledge is/becomes a priori, but rather that the restriction *restricts* too much by assigning too much force to our recognition of necessary truths. This attribution is not only excessive but also seems implausible in relation to the way imagination actually works.

Perhaps imagination is too fickle, and the problem can be solved by appealing to a more 'serious' faculty, all the while recognizing, but also limiting the role of the *a priori.* The modal rationalism of Peacocke (1999) is another philosophical doctrine inspired by Kripke's suggestions that aims to provide an answer to the predicaments of modal epistemology. We will define *modal rationalism* as the view that modal knowledge is underpinned by *a priori* principles. According to modal rationalists, our modal intuitions about necessity of origin, necessity of composition, etc. are encapsulated in *a priori* principles that determine the content of modal concepts. But a modal rationalist such as Peacocke also wants to be a realist about modality, which means that the principles must align with modal facts (as opposed to a certain

---

[10] I have discussed this problem and its effect on Soames' interpretation of Kripke's *a posteriori* necessities in Rusu (2011). That discussion could be amended and extended. It is debatable if other seemingly conceptual possibilities beside the ones afforded by an object's essential properties do indeed exist (or are in fact about duplicates of the targeted object), but this issue would be beyond the scope of this paper.

conceptual scheme). Now, what the critiques of modal rationalism proposed by Wright (2002) and Roca-Royes (2010) show is that if modal notions are defined by the principles associated with them, every change in the principles determines a different modal notion, i.e. a different type of modal truth. Nevertheless, if one is a realist, there must be one correct modal notion, but then the question I put forth at the beginning of this chapter reappears in a different guise. How do we know that the most frequent modal doctrine (i.e., conjunction of principles about modality) is the *correct* one?

6.2. The difficulty reappraised

Does the same problem appear in the case of the counterfactual epistemology of Williamson? Yes, if modal notions are defined or just produced by our counterfactual practices. According to Williamson, constitutive knowledge makes us stop whenever we entertain a metaphysical impossibility in a counterfactual development. Contradiction appears simply because the imaginer confronts the scenario with the stock of constitutive truths she must carry from one scenario to another. Then it is paramount what type of properties are deemed constitutive: each different doctrine of the constitutive will define a difference in counterfactual practice and a different modal concept.

Finally, we return to the role understanding plays in the argument. Williamson's constraints on understanding are, as we have seen, minimal. Williamson's constraints on counterfactual suppositions are at the same time maximal, or else they cannot bring about modal knowledge (of necessity, in particular). But in order to understand modal expressions (i.e., use them properly), by Williamson's lights, one need not adhere to the strong epistemological constraints (or to the same constraints). This means that different notions of metaphysical necessity may coexist, along with different counterfactual practices, and the fact that the right modal notion (the one that conforms to modal reality) is dominant may be felicitous or, simply, our modal notion may not be the right one.

Division of linguistic labor will not save the day, and the reasons are given by Williamson himself. Metaphysical modal notions are philosophical, which means that if division of linguistic labor is appealed to, as Putnam (1975) famously does, laymen should defer to philosophers, at least partially for expertise on modalities. But, as the extended and very complex debates in the literature attest, expert philosophers disagree on these issues, some of them quite radically. Which of the experts' opinions should we choose? Of course, there is no definite answer to this question. Moreover, we should point out another complication. If counterfactual

practices differ inside the community, then we must also establish which practice takes precedence in establishing the modal properties of objects. Scientists and philosophers may disagree over what must be held fixed in the counterfactual scenarios, much as experts from the same field may also disagree about the same issue.

7. Conclusion

The main aim of this paper was to diagnose a deeper ailment that is, in my view, responsible for the insufficiency of counterfactual epistemology as a realist account of modal knowledge. If we attempt to integrate the perspectives of the philosophy of language and epistemology, in the spirit of Peacocke (1999)'s Integration Challenge, we see that Williamson's view of understanding and his construal of the nature and role of counterfactuals in providing a naturalistic grounding for modal notions are incompatible. One is too weak, and the other is too strong. What is the take-home message and what are the perspectives for a successful realist epistemology of modality? Of course, Williamson's account is not the only realist alternative in current literature and not all theories are bound to run into the problems evinced here.

One of Williamson's aims is to flesh out an account that is not solely imagination-based, because imagination is notoriously hard to accommodate for the realist as an absolute source of modal truth. The content of theories and intuitions and various forms of reasoning are appealed to and used in counterfactual suppositions. The trouble is that this use seems much harder to unify and systematize when we go beyond Williamson's sketch and try to fill in the details. I believe, however, that Williamson is right on this very general issue: narrative justification seems to be the norm for modal epistemology, but we should want a more specific account which tells us what type of evidence is to be accepted, in which contexts and for what type of claims. Modal narratives may differ profoundly in relation to the specifics of the content (that is the problem of the multiple and irreducible sources of modal truth that we must recognize and characterize adequately). Nevertheless, if there is no metaphysical necessity that is not conceptual, logical, biological, physical, etc., then doubts about the importance of the metaphysical notion are justified.

A robust modal epistemology should include an epistemology of modal discovery, modal error and modal disagreement, in order to account for the factual nature of modal statements. If our modal statements are about facts that are independent of our minds, then it is only plausible that we encounter surprises,

errors and disagreements regarding this portion of reality, much as we do regarding other parts of reality. All these phenomena should be explained, and we should be provided with methods or at least guidelines for mending errors and settling disagreements. This type of inquiry is currently treated very sparsely and collaterally in the literature.

Generally, more needs to be done to study actual practices and norms for fruitful linguistic exchanges using modal expressions, and also how our modal thinking is shaped and used. In Williamson's case, it should be determined which counterfactual practices are dominant and how they are conducive to modal knowledge. One aspect that must be more thoroughly discussed is philosophical expertise. Perhaps there is an expertise defense available after all and laymen's modal thinking and discourse may be deemed unimportant/inconsistent/unsystematic. Maybe we should focus after all on experts' (but which experts?) use of modal notions.[11] This cannot be done, however, if stricter criteria are not imposed on the understanding of certain classes of notions, such as philosophical ones (as metaphysical modalities appear to be). More than thirty years ago, Yablo (1993) expressed a similar view. It still remains to be seen if this type of epistemic optimism is warranted.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Paul Boghossian. 2011. "Williamson on the a priori and the analytic." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 82 (2): 488–497. DOI: 10.1111/j.1933-1592.2010.00395.x.

Duen-Min Deng. 2016. "On the Alleged Knowledge of Metaphysical Modality." *Philosophia* 44 (2): 479-495. DOI: 10.1007/s11406-016-9699-6.

Alexandru Dragomir. 2021. "Intellectual Virtues and The Epistemology of Modality: Tracking the Relevance of Intellectual Character Traits in Modal Epistemology." *Annals of the University of Bucharest – Philosophy Series* 70 (2): 124-143.

Frank Jackson. 2010. *Language, Names, and Information*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

Carrie S. Jenkins. 2008. "Modal Knowledge, Counterfactual Knowledge and the Role of Experience". *Philosophical Quarterly* 58 (233): 693–701.
DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-9213.2008.579.x.

---

[11] Kilov and Hendy (2022) have recently argued based on experimental results that philosophers are not truly modal experts. For a more comprehensive view regarding the intellectual virtues/abilities a modal expert should have (including the ability to imagine possibilities), see Dragomir (2021).

Immanuel Kant. [1783] 2004. *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics That Will Be Able to Come Forward as Science (with Selections from the Critique of Pure Reason)*. Translated and edited by Gary Hatfield. Revised edition. Cambridge University Press.

Daniel Kilov & Caroline Hendy. 2022. "Pundits and Possibilities: Philosophers Are Not Modal Experts." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 75 (1): 824-843. DOI: 10.1080/00048402.2022.2058034

Boris Kment. 2014. *Modality and Explanatory Reasoning*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Saul A. Kripke. 1971. "Identity and necessity." In *Identity and Individuation*, edited by Milton Karl Munitz, 135-164. New York: New York University Press.

Saul A. Kripke. 1980. *Naming and Necessity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Peter Kung. 2016. "You Really Do Imagine It: Against Error Theories of Imagination." *Noûs* 50 (1): 90-120. DOI: 10.1111/nous.12060.

Edouard Machery, Ron Mallon, Shaun Nichols and Stephen Stich. 2004. "Semantics, Cross-Cultural Style." *Cognition* 92 (3): B1-B12. DOI: 10.1016/j.cognition.2003.10.003.

Genoveva Martí. 2009. "Against Semantic Multi-culturalism." *Analysis* 69 (1): 42-48. DOI: 10.1093/analys/ann007.

Stephen McLeod. 2005. "Modal Epistemology." *Philosophical Books* 46 (3): 235-245. DOI: 10.1111/j.1468-0149.2005.00371.x.

Christopher Peacocke. 1999. *Being Known.* Oxford: Clarendon.

Hilary Putnam. 1975. "The meaning of 'meaning.'" *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science* 7: 131-193.

Sonia Roca-Royes. 2010. "Modal Epistemology, Modal Concepts and the Integration Challenge." *Dialectica* 64 (3): 335-361. DOI: 10.1111/j.1746-8361.2010.01236.x.

Sonia Roca-Royes. 2011. "Modal Knowledge and Counterfactual Knowledge." *Logique et Analyse* 54 (216): 537-552.

Mihai Rusu. 2011. "Essentialism, reference and the necessary a posteriori." *Filosofia Unisinos* 12 (3): 197-218. DOI: 10.4013/fsu.2011.123.01.

Tuomas E. Tahko. 2012. "Counterfactuals and modal epistemology." *Grazer Philosophische Studien* 86 (1): 93–115. DOI: 10.1163/9789401209182_007.

Anand Jayprakash Vaidya & Michael Wallner. 2021. "The epistemology of modality and the problem of modal epistemic friction." *Synthese* 198 (Suppl 8): 1909-1935. DOI: 10.1007/s11229-018-1860-2.

Peter Van Inwagen. 1998. "Modal epistemology." *Philosophical Studies* 92 (1): 67-84. DOI: 10.1023/A:1017159501073.

Timothy Williamson. 2007. *The Philosophy of Philosophy*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

Timothy Williamson. 2011. "Reply to Boghossian." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 82(2): 498–506. DOI: 10.1111/j.1933-1592.2010.00400.x.

Crispin Wright. 2002. "On Knowing What is Necessary: Three Limitations of Peacocke's Account." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 64 (3): 655-662. DOI: 10.1111/j.1933-1592.2002.tb00170.x.

Stephen Yablo. 1993. "Is conceivability a guide to possibility?" *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 53 (1): 1-42. DOI: 10.2307/2108052.

L'anthropologie tripartite d'Origène

Valerry WILSON[*]

ABSTRACT. Origen's Tripartite Anthropology. Beginning with the definition of the human being as composed of body, soul, and spirit, this study aims to highlight Christian anthropology through the lens of Origen's thought. As a reader of the Holy Scriptures, the Alexandrian tried to shed light on the tripartite nature of the human being as a distinctive mark of Christianity. In doing so, he positions himself in contrast to the Platonic perspective. Whereas bipartite anthropology focuses attention on the body-soul relationship through the soul's life-giving function, in the tripartite approach, the human *pneuma* plays a decisive role. It is the essential and vital element that accounts for the individual and personal dimension of the human being, created by God and redeemed by Christ, the incarnate Word, whose dual nature (human and divine) becomes the principle through which the unified dimension of the human person is redefined.

Keywords: body, soul, spirit, humanity, ontology, logos, human nature.

On distingue l'humain chez Origène par sa particularité d'être composé d'un corps, d'une âme et d'un esprit. Le caractère transcendant de ce composé réside dans le *pneuma* qui n'est pas à confondre avec le voῦς préexistant[1]. Le *pneuma* n'est pas à confondre non plus avec la partie supérieure de l'âme[2]. Hans Urs von

---

[*] L'abbé Valerry WILSON est curé de paroisse, docteur en Philosophie (Université Catholique de Lyon) et docteur en Théologie patristique (Université de Lorraine). Il est chargé de cours à l'Institut Catholique d'Études Supérieures de La Roche sur Yon (France). Email : valerrywilson@gmail.com

[1] Henri CROUZEL, *Théologie de l'image de Dieu chez Origène*, Éditions Aubier Montaigne, 1955, p. 132 : « Avant sa venue dans le corps actuel, l'âme existait déjà : elle était alors le voῦς et non ψυχή. Elle vivait tout entière selon l'esprit (πνεῦμα), et elle était absolument de même nature que les anges. Mais elle est tombée de sa ferveur, elle est refroidie, et ainsi de voῦς elle est devenue ψυχή (mot rattaché par Origène à ψυχος, froid) ».

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 43 : « Cette partie supérieure de l'âme constitue l'essentiel de l'homme, qui est avant tout un être intellectuel ».

Balthasar définit le *pneuma* comme étant « le lieu des Idées »[3], ce qui régit l'intérieur de l'homme[4], l'« élément proprement divin » mais personnel[5] en nous, l'élément relié au surnaturel et qui reçoit directement la grâce de Dieu[6]. Le *pneuma* est donc le constituant divin qui siège dans l'âme. C'est le domaine de Dieu en nous et qui est distinct du voῦς. C'est lui qui permet la participation du voῦς à la nature divine[7]. Il est clair que chez Origène, le *pneuma* porte la vie qui tient son principe de l'Esprit de Dieu. Il est l'élément central de la vie surnaturelle. Aucune relation à la vie divine ne peut s'établir sans le *pneuma* humain. Quant au voῦς, il est établi entre le *pneuma* et l'âme et sert de liaison entre le premier et la seconde.

La perspective anthropologique qui nous intéresse dans cette étude cherche à comprendre l'être humain non sous la forme du dualisme platonicien ou plotinien, mais dans le sens de la trichotomie anthropologique. En d'autres termes, nous cherchons à démontrer que l'intérêt d'Origène pour l'anthropologie est de l'ordre de la composition ontologique. S'il est vrai que la marque du péché originel reste prégnante sur chacune des composées de l'être humain en projetant sur elle une transformation conséquente (logique) à la manière d'une tension double entre les « œuvres de la chair » et les « œuvres de l'esprit », comme l'enseigne saint Paul, les descriptions que nous avons de l'homme relèvent d'un antagonisme de la chair avec le *pneuma*, ou d'une dialectique corps/*pneuma*. Mais la situation de l'homme dans le monde nous oblige à faire un détour par une anthropologie dynamique qui se rattache à une dimension plutôt ontologique permettant de redéfinir le composé humain.

Si Anaxagore a conféré au voῦς préexistant une puissance illimitée (Anaxagore, *Fragment,* XII), cause motrice qu'il désigne aussi par l'Intellect, Platon, pour sa part, l'assimile au « pilote de l'âme, ψυχῆς κυβερνήτης »[8], il le relie à l'Intelligence et aux

---

[3] Hans Urs von BALTHASAR, *Parole et Mystère chez Origène*, Genève, Éditions Ad Solem, 1998, p. 21.

[4] Voir ORIGÈNE, *Homélies sur Lévitique*, V, 2, texte, introduction, traduction et notes par Marcel Borret, Paris, Éditions du Cerf, SC 286, 1981, p. 215.

[5] Hans Urs von BALTHASAR, *Parole et Mystère chez Origène*, *op. cit.*, p. 39, note 35.

[6] Jacques DUPUIS, *« L'esprit de l'homme ». Étude sur l'anthropologie religieuse d'Origène*, Éditions Desclée de Brouwer, coll. « Museum Lessianum section théologique n. 62 », 1967, p. 12.

[7] Henri CROUZEL, *Théologie de l'image de Dieu chez Origène*, *op. cit.*, p. 165-175.

[8] PLATON, *Phèdre* 247 c-d, dans *Œuvres complètes II*, traduction nouvelle et notes par Léon Robin avec la collaboration de M. J. Moreau, Éditions Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1950, p. 36 : « La réalité, te dis-je, qui, réellement, est sans couleur, sans forme, intangible ; objet de contemplation pour le pilote seul de l'âme, pour l'intellect ; à laquelle se rapporte la famille du savoir authentique, c'est ce lien qu'elle occupe. Aussi la pensée d'un Dieu, en tant que nourrie d'intellection et de savoir sans mélange, et, de même, la pensée de toute âme à qui il importe de recevoir ce qui lui convient, lorsque avec le temps elle a eu la vision du réel, cette pensée s'en réjouit ; la contemplation du vrai la nourrit et lui apporte le bien-être, jusqu'au moment où la révolution circulaire l'aura ramenée au même point ».

facultés au point que Sylvain Delcomminette en vient à écrire : « Toute âme a un cocher, mais tout cocher n'est pas suffisamment fort pour suivre les instructions de ce pilote qu'est l'intelligence »[9]. Léon Robin l'assimile à son tour à la pensée qui régit l'univers tout entier[10]. Aristote aussi explique le voῦς, l'intellect, comme étant la « pensée » ou même parfois la « pensée de la pensée » au sens d'intellect divin à qui il confère une identité propre[11].

Mais la tendance pour une anthropologie à composition trichotomique de l'être humain reste une ligne continue dans la doctrine d'Origène. Il faut alors se demander : en quoi consiste-t-elle réellement ? Y a-t-il un lien entre le tripartisme philosophique (*sôma*, *psyché*, voῦς) et le composé trichotomique chez Origène (*sôma*, *psyché* et *pneuma*) ? Comment peut-on expliquer chacune de ces composantes de l'humain ? Quelles sont les prérogatives du *pneuma* et du voῦς ?

1- La σῶμα, la ψυχή et le πνεῦμα : approche biblique

Origène, à la suite de saint Irénée de Lyon, emploie un vocabulaire précis pour exprimer la manière dont l'être humain a été fait. Sa perspective ontologique conçoit l'être humain comme relevant d'une fabrication minutieusement réalisée par Dieu lui-même. En utilisant le concept de la composition ontologique, Origène insiste sur les trois éléments constitutifs de l'homme comme en témoignent les trois passages suivants :

> 1- De même que l'homme (ἄνθρωπος) est composé (συνέστηκεν) de corps (ἐκ σώματος), d'âme (καὶ Ψυχή) et d'esprit (καὶ πνεῦματος), de même l'Écriture que Dieu a donnée dans sa providence pour le salut des hommes[12].

[9] Sylvain DELCOMMINETTE, « Qu'est-ce que l'intelligence selon Platon ? », dans *Revue des Études grecques*, vol. 127, n. 1, 2014, p. 55-73, ici, p. 57, note 3.

[10] Léon ROBIN, *La Pensée hellénique des origines à Épicure. Questions de méthode, de critique et d'histoire*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1942, p. 282, note 2 : « Réfléchissant qu'il y a plus de beauté dans ce qui possède la pensée (voῦς), que dans ce qui en est privé, et qu'il ne peut y avoir de pensée en dehors d'une âme (χωρὶς ψυχῆς), Dieu a mis cette pensée dans une âme et l'âme dans un corps, et en les composant ainsi, il a construit l'univers ».

[11] ARISTOTE, *De anima*, III, 4, 430 a 2-5.

[12] ORIGÈNE, *Traité des Principes*, IV, 2, 4, introduction, texte critique de la version de Rufin, traduction par Henri Crouzel et Manlio Simonetti, Paris, Éditions du Cerf, SC 268, 1980, p. 312-313 ; *ibid*., *Traité des Principes*, IV, 2, 4, , SC 268, p. 212 : « *Sicut ergo homo constare dicitur ex corpore et anima et spiritu, ita etiam sancta scriptura, quae ad hominum salutem diuina largitione concessa est* ».

> 2- Je crois, s'il y a en nous, hommes, qui sommes composés d'une âme et d'un corps et aussi d'un esprit de vie (*spiritu uitali*), quelque chose d'autre qui possède un stimulant qui lui est propre et un mouvement nous poussant au mal[13].
>
> 3- Selon l'Écriture sainte, il y a deux sortes de croissances : la croissance physique où le vouloir humain n'intervient pas, et la croissance spirituelle assurée par l'effort humain. C'est la seconde croissance, la croissance spirituelle, que mentionne maintenant l'évangéliste : « L'enfant croissait et se fortifiait en esprit ». C'est bien ce qu'il affirme : « Il croissait en esprit », et l'esprit en lui n'en restait jamais à la mesure qu'il venait d'atteindre, mais il croissait sans cesse et, l'esprit s'accroissant à chaque heure et à chaque instant, l'âme aussi progressait ; et non seulement l'âme, mais aussi la pensée et l'intelligence suivaient les progrès de l'esprit[14].

Force est de constater qu'Origène rattache l'activité de l'esprit à celle qui consiste à conférer la vraie vie pour ne pas dire la vie surnaturelle au corps et à l'âme. De fait, l'esprit semble l'emporter sur le corps et l'âme. C'est donc l'esprit qui fait de l'être humain un être vivant orienté vers le surnaturel et destiné à jouer un rôle important pour le salut.

La trichotomie anthropologique est justifiée par Origène avec la convocation de divers passages bibliques ; c'est la constance même de son argumentation qui cherche à relier l'homme à son Créateur. Ainsi, Origène se veut encore plus explicite. Dans une intervention, Maxime reprend les propos d'Origène qui, lui, s'appuie sur l'apôtre Paul : « Origène dit : "Que l'homme soit un être composé, nous le savons par les saintes Écritures. L'apôtre dit, en effet : *Que Dieu vous sanctifie l'esprit, l'âme, le corps* [τὸ πνεῦμα καί ἡ ψυχή καί τὸ σῶμα] et cette parole : *Qu'il vous sanctifie tout entier et que tout votre être, - l'esprit, l'âme, le corps, - soit gardé irréprochable pour l'avènement de Notre Seigneur Jésus-Christ* »[15]. Ici, sa perspective est paulinienne puisqu'il convoque l'argument de saint Paul en 1 *Thessaloniciens* 5, 23. Il est question ici, non de l'Esprit Saint mais de l'esprit de l'homme, le *pneuma* humain qui fait partie intégrante de la composition humaine. Origène distingue, comme l'Apôtre Paul, de manière assez claire le *Pneuma* divin du *pneuma* humain puisque le second participe au premier et lui rend honneur (Rm 8, 16). Le πνεῦμα humain « n'est pas le Saint-Esprit, mais une partie du composé humain, comme l'enseigne

---

[13] *Ibid.*, *Traité des Principes*, III, 4, 1, SC 268, p. 200-201.

[14] *Ibid.*, *Homélies sur S. Luc*, XI, 1, texte latin et fragments grecs, introduction, traduction et notes par Henri Crouzel *et al.*, Paris, Éditions du Cerf, 1962, p. 189.

[15] *Ibid.*, *Entretien* d'Origène *avec Héraclide*, 6, introduction, texte, traduction et notes par Jean Scherer, Paris, Éditions du Cerf, SC 67, 1960, p. 68-71.

le même apôtre quand il dit : "L'Esprit rend témoignage à notre esprit [τὸ Πνεῦμα συμμαρτυρεῖ τῷ πνεύματι ἡμῶν] »[16]. Il est donc clair que la mission du *pneuma* humain est d'être tournée vers le *Pneuma* divin pour l'écouter et pour rendre temoignage ; il est ce qui habite en l'homme comme l'écrit saint Paul : « Qui donc, parmi les hommes, sait ce qu'il y a dans l'homme, sinon l'esprit de l'homme qui est en lui ? De même, personne ne connaît ce qu'il y a en Dieu, sinon l'Esprit de Dieu » (1 Co 2, 11). Il n'est pas à confondre avec la *psyché* comme le témoigne Origène : « De même qu'il est très différent d'être fils et d'être esclave, de même il y a une très grande différence entre les esprits en service et l'Esprit saint dont Paul dit qu'il possède les prémices avec ses semblables ».[17]

Le νοῦς, lui, est la partie supérieure de l'âme mais n'est pas le *pneuma*. Origène affecte à chacun des composés une tâche particulière quand il écrit : « Si en effet l'homme animal ne perçoit pas ce qui concerne l'Esprit de Dieu et si, parce qu'il est animal, il ne peut recevoir la compréhension d'une nature supérieure, c'est-à-dire divine, c'est pour cela que Paul, voulant nous enseigner plus clairement quelle est la faculté qui nous permet de comprendre les réalités de l'Esprit, les réalités spirituelles, unit et associe à un esprit saint plutôt l'intelligence que l'âme. À mon avis il le montre, lorsqu'il dit : *Je prierai par l'esprit, je prierai aussi par l'intelligence ; je psalmodierai par l'esprit, je psalmodierai aussi par l'intelligence*. Il ne dit pas : je prierai par l'âme, mais : par l'esprit et l'intelligence ; et non plus : je psalmodierai par l'âme, mais : par l'esprit et l'intelligence »[18]. Il est clair que l'esprit est montré proche de l'intelligence. Il réalise les mêmes choses que l'intelligence. Il prie et psalmodie, c'est-à-dire qu'il élève l'homme vers la nature spirituelle. Cette affirmation d'Origène est soutenue encore par saint Paul : « Que vais-je donc faire ? Je vais prier selon l'inspiration, mais prier aussi avec l'intelligence, je vais chanter selon l'inspiration, mais chanter aussi avec l'intelligence » (1 Co 14, 15). Il est donc clair que le corps est affecté aux réalités sensibles, l'âme le meut et l'esprit prie : il élève le corps et l'âme vers les réalités spirituelles.

---

[16] *Ibid.*, *Entretien* d'Origène *avec Héraclide*, 6, SC 67, p. 71. Voir aussi *Commentaire sur l'Épître aux Romains*, VII, 1, 1, texte critique établi par C. P. Hammond Bammel, introduction par Michel Fédou, traduction et notes par Luc Brésard et Michel Fédou, Paris, Éditions du Cerf, SC 543, 2011, p. 243-245 : « Il dit donc dans le présent chapitre : *En effet, tous ceux qui sont conduits par l'Esprit de Dieu sont fils de Dieu* ; il parle bien sûr, ici, de l'Esprit même de Dieu, Et de nouveau, dans ce qui suit : *Car*, dit-il, *vous n'avez pas reçu un esprit d'esclavage pour retomber dans la crainte* ; il montre en cela que l'esprit d'esclavage est autre que celui qu'il a appelé plus haut l'Esprit de Dieu » ; voir aussi *Commentaire sur l'Épître aux Romains,* VII, 1, 3, SC 543, p. 247-249.

[17] *Ibid.*, *Commentaire sur l'Épître aux Romains*, VII, 3, 2, SC 543, p. 279.

[18] *Ibid.*, *Traité des Principes*, II, 8, 2, introduction, texte critique de la version d Rufin, traduction par Henri Crouzel et Manlio Simonetti, Paris, Éditions du Cerf, 1978, SC 252, p. 341-343.

La perspective d'une anthropologie trichotomique perdure chez Origène à travers les trois péricopes qui suivent. Elles mettent l'accent sur la place de l'esprit dans l'orientation vers Dieu, vers la vertu en vue du salut :

> 1- Si on comprend la prostitution de la chair, de l'âme, de l'esprit, et voit quelqu'un s'y prostituer, on verra Jérusalem se prostituer trois fois. Mais quand on est trois fois chaste, on mérite d'entendre de l'Apôtre : « Mais que Dieu de paix vous sanctifie totalement, et que tout être - esprit, âme et corps -, soit gardé irréprochable pour l'avènement de notre Seigneur Jésus-Christ »[19].
>
> 2- Lors donc que l'âme ne semble pas être comptée avec ce qui est selon la chair, ni avec ce qui est destiné Fils de Dieu dans la puissance selon l'Esprit de sanctification, je pense que l'Apôtre se comporte à son habitude, en ce passage aussi, sachant que l'âme est toujours au milieu, entre l'Esprit et la chair : ou bien elle se joint à la chair et devient une avec la chair, ou bien elle s'associe à l'Esprit et devient une avec l'Esprit ; de ce fait, si l'âme est avec la chair, les hommes deviennent charnels, mais si elle est avec l'esprit, les hommes deviennent spirituels[20].
>
> 3- Celui-ci [l'Esprit de Dieu] diffère sans nul doute, soit de cet esprit d'esclavage qui est donné pour la crainte, soit de celui qui rend témoignage avec l'invocation du Père[21].

Ces passages confirment le postulat selon lequel l'évocation du *pneuma* dans le langage origénien fait appel nécessairement à la relation de l'être humain avec Dieu. Le Christ Jésus le sanctifie intégralement, corps, âme et esprit, puisqu'il est « la beauté incarnée de Dieu »[22]. La trichotomie fait appel au salut du genre humain. On peut noter une relation de proximité assez intense entre le *pneuma* et le νοῦς, puisque l'âme se met sous la coupe de l'esprit pour son salut, car selon Origène, « l'image de Dieu subsiste au fond de l'âme, cachée par celle du Terrestre : il faut enlever la seconde pour que la première apparaisse »[23]. C'est l'appel à la conversion pour la purification de l'âme en vue de son progrès spirituel qui rend possible sa

---

[19] *Ibid.*, *Homélies sur Ézéchiel*, VII, 10, texte latin, introduction, traduction et notes par Marcel Borret, Paris, Éditions du Cerf, SC 352, 1989, p. 274-275 : « *Si intelligas fornicationem carnis et animae et spiritus, et videas aliquem in his fornicari, videbis tripliciter fornicantem Hierusalem. Qui vero tripliciter castus est, iste ab Apostolo meretur audire* ; Deus autem pacis sanctificet vos per omnia, et integrum spiritum vestrum et animam et corpus sine querela in adventu Domini nostri Iesu Christi servet ».

[20] *Ibid.*, *Commentaire sur l'Épître aux Romains*, I, VII, 4, SC 532, p. 183.

[21] *Ibid.*, *Commentaire sur l'Épître aux Romains*, VII, I, 1, SC 543, p. 245.

[22] Christoph SCHÖNBORN, *La création de l'homme comme Bonne Nouvelle. L'homme et le Christ, à l'image de Dieu*, Éditions Parole et Silence, 2017, p. 19.

[23] Henri CROUZEL, *Théologie de l'image de Dieu chez Origène*, *op. cit.*, p. 211.

rédemption. C'est la restauration du selon-l'image qui est l'œuvre du Verbe incarné. De fait, « le Christ seul donne à l'homme le moyen de se défaire des images diaboliques et bestiales, pour retrouver en lui sa participation à l'image de Dieu »[24].

2- Une interprétation typologique du chiffre trois

Le composé de l'être humain (corps, âme, esprit) trouve donc son point névralgique dans l'exégèse d'Origène dont la pensée tente de se rapprocher au mieux des Saintes Écritures. Ainsi, l'exégète d'Alexandrie fait un rapprochement entre son anthropologie et toute division tripartite dans la Bible. Concrètement, lorsqu'on parle de trois mesures de farine en Mt 13, 33 ou Lc 13, 21, Origène y voit le *pneuma*, l'âme et corps. En effet, il va encore plus loin en suggérant que ces trois mesures de farine pourraient renvoyer à la connaissance du Père, du Fils et du Saint-Esprit[25].

Le chiffre trois du composé humain renvoie à la dépendance spirituelle de l'être qui est fabriqué avec son Créateur. En d'autres termes, l'être humain ne peut être accompli que lorsqu'il se réfère à celui qui l'a modelé. Il ne peut s'identifier lui-même en dehors de l'élan divin qui l'habite et le fait vivre. Il y a là une tension des trois composantes dans l'unité de l'identité humaine. De la multiplicité à l'unité intrinsèque de l'être humain Origène voit l'œuvre du génie divin. Dans Mt 24, 40-41, il est question de l'avènement du Fils de l'homme de manière surprenante, tandis que deux hommes se trouveraient dans un champ, ou deux femmes en train de moudre du grain. Le Fils de l'homme rejoint les deux hommes ou les deux femmes et on retrouve le chiffre trois.

L'avantage de l'anthropologie trichotomique est qu'elle est dynamique et permet de clarifier la spécificité de chacune des composantes. Toutefois, chez Origène, sous l'influence probable du platonisme, on peut retrouver assez facilement une anthropologie dichotomique (corps-âme) comme le prouvent les trois passages suivants :

> Il semble, en effet, en quelque sorte contre nature pour un corps humain de vivre dans la mer et pour cela, à cause de cette anomalie, il reçoit les mouvements de l'intelligence de façon déréglée et désordonnée […]. C'est aussi le cas de ceux qui, se trouvant sur la terre ferme, sont oppressés par les fièvres : il est certain en effet que si, sous l'action de la fièvre, l'intelligence

---

[24] *Idem*.
[25] ORIGÈNE, *Fragm. in Luc*, 205 ; *Schol. in Luc*, 13, 21.

accomplit un peu moins normalement son office, ce n'est pas la faute du lieu, mais c'est la maladie qui en est cause, car alors le corps troublé et bouleversé ne rend plus à l'intelligence les services accoutumés selon les règles connues et naturelles, puisque nous, les hommes, nous sommes des êtres vivants composés d'un assemblage de corps et d'âme ; et c'est ainsi qu'il nous a été possible d'habiter sur la terre[26].

Dans ce texte du *Traité des Principes* I, 1, 6, Origène assimile l'œuvre de l'âme avec celle de l'intelligence ou mieux, dans cette anthropologie bipartite, il remarque la diminution de l'activité de l'âme sous le poids de la maladie. L'absence totale de l'esprit n'est-elle pas à percevoir comme une manière de dédouaner ce dernier de ce qui ne peut affecter que le corps et l'âme ? On peut aussi remarquer que l'homme composé de corps et d'âme est perçu ici simplement par rapport à sa vie terrestre.

> Celse n'a pas vu la différence qu'il y a entre les expressions « à l'image de Dieu » et « son image » : L'image de Dieu est « le premier-né de toute créature » le Logos en personne, la Vérité en personne, et encore la Sagesse en personne, « image de sa bonté » ; tandis que l'homme a été créé « à l'image de Dieu », et en outre tout homme dont le Christ « est la tête » est image et gloire de Dieu. Il n'a même pas su en quelle partie de l'homme s'exprime un caractère « à l'image de Dieu » : c'est dans l'âme qui n'a pas et ou qui n'a plus « le vieil homme avec ses agissements » et, du fait qu'elle ne les a point, possède la qualité d'être « à l'image » du Créateur. […] Mais pourrait-on croire que, dans la partie inférieure du composé humain, je veux dire dans le corps, existe ce qui est « à l'image de Dieu » et que, comme Celse l'a compris, le corps est « à son image » ?[27]

Par contre, dans ce passage du *Contre Celse* VI, 63, nous voyons Origène présenter le corps comme l'élément inférieur du composé humain, aspect dépréciatif par rapport à l'âme en qui s'exprime la marque de l'image de Dieu. Origène fait œuvre de platonicien et répond à Celse qui est également un platonicien. Toutefois, dans la suite de son raisonnement, il indique clairement que l'image de Dieu se réalise dans l'homme intérieur, même s'il concède finalement que le corps est aussi appelé au salut. On peut remarquer dans ce cas que n'est nullement évoqué l'esprit, ce qui confirme la thèse du platonisme d'Origène dans sa tendance bipartite.

---

[26] *Traité des Principes*, I, 1, 6, SC 252, p. 103.
[27] *Contre Celse*, VI, 63, introduction, texte critique, traduction et notes par Marcel Borret, Paris, Éditions du Cerf, SC 147, 1969, p. 335-337.

> L'homme, donc, c'est-à-dire l'âme usant du corps, appelée « l'homme intérieur » [ὁ ἔσω ἄνθρωπος], et aussi « l'âme » [Ψυχή], ne va pas répondre ce qu'écrit Celse, mais ce qu'enseigne l'homme de Dieu. Le chrétien ne saurait tenir un propos de la chair ; il a appris à mortifier « par l'Esprit les actions du corps », et à porter « toujours dans son corps la mort de Jésus », et il a reçu cet ordre : « Mortifiez vos membres terrestres ». Il connaît le sens de la parole : « Mon esprit ne demeurera pas toujours dans ces hommes, car ils sont chair », il sait que "ceux qui sont dans la chair ne peuvent plaire à Dieu", il fait tout pour n'être plus aucunement dans la chair mais seulement dans l'esprit [τῷ πνεύματι][28].

Enfin, ce texte du *Contre Celse* VII, 38 oppose encore plus nettement le corps et l'âme en définissant l'homme comme un corps mû par une âme, tout en renvoyant non plus l'homme, mais le chrétien à la mortification des œuvres du corps par l'Esprit. Autrement dit, l'esprit humain reçoit une orientation de l'Esprit qui lui permet de plaire à Dieu : c'est cela vivre dans l'esprit ou être un « homme intérieur » (ὁ ἔσω ἄνθρωπος). Nous voyons poindre chez Origène deux anthropologies qui tendent à se contredire : l'une tripartite et l'autre dichotomique. Pourquoi l'Alexandrin affirme tantôt que l'homme est composé de *pneuma*, *psyché* et corps, et tantôt qu'il est fait d'un corps et d'une âme ? Est-ce un oubli, une négligence de vue ou une confusion de sa part ?

3- Essai de compréhension du bipartisme

L'anthropologie bipartite stipule que l'être humain est composé d'une âme et d'un corps dans la logique d'une vie réduite ou limitée au terrestre[29] alors que la dimension pneumatique l'inscrit dans une perspective divine et personnalisée. Elle réduit l'humain à la sphère terrestre et c'est un tel assemblage qui rend possible notre vie sur terre[30]. Pour Origène, c'est donc la présence de l'âme qui confère au corps l'énergie dont elle a besoin pour une vie digne et raisonnable sur terre, car « l'âme ou l'intelligence a été formée d'une manière adaptée et appropriée à son activité, qui est de penser et de comprendre chaque chose et d'être mue par les

---

[28] *Ibid.*, *Contre Celse*, VII, 38, SC 150, p. 100-103.
[29] Jacques DUPUIS, *« L'esprit de l'homme ». Étude sur l'anthropologie religieuse d'Origène*, *op. cit.*, p. 67 : « La dichtotomie âme-corps considère l'être humain selon qu'il possède cette vie indifférente qui l'insère au monde sensible ».
[30] ORIGÈNE, *Traité des Principes*, I, 1, 6, SC 252, p. 103.

mouvements de la vie »[31]. Le cœur de cette vie terrestre est l'âme humaine. La vie dans le monde visible est celle que détient l'âme et qui reste en proie aux tentations. C'est elle qui sera jugée et le jugement est perçu comme le bilan de sa vie : « En outre l'âme, qui possède une substance et une vie qui lui sont propres, lorsqu'elle aura quitté ce monde, recevra un sort conforme à ses mérites : ou elle obtiendra l'héritage de la vie éternelle et de la béatitude, si ses actions le lui valent, ou bien elle sera abandonnée au feu éternel et aux supplices, si les péchés commis par ses méfaits l'y entraînent »[32]. On peut alors dire que l'anthropologie bipartite responsabilise l'âme par rapport à sa gouvernance du corps et ses choix puisqu'en lui agit la raison. L'âme se porte garante de l'unité du corps et de son agir rationnel[33]. Grâce à elle, le corps forme un tout harmonieux et logique comme l'univers car, « comme notre corps formé de membres nombreux est un et maintenu par une âme unique, de même à mon avis il faut concevoir l'univers comme un animal immense et énorme, gouverné par la Puissance et Raison de Dieu comme une âme unique »[34].

On peut définir la fonction de l'âme par rapport au corps en trois fonctions essentielles : vivifier, habiter et mouvoir. En effet, la première fonction de l'âme est de donner vie au corps en s'y introduisant. Sans l'âme, le corps reste une substance amorphe. Il ne peut se définir indépendamment de l'âme et sa vie dépend de la présence de celle-ci en son sein. Deux passages témoignent du bipartisme anthropologique d'Origène :

> 1- Par nos âmes le corps matériel est vivifié, alors qu'il est assurément en opposition et en inimitié avec l'esprit – que nous sommes attirés et poussés vers les maux qui sont agréables au corps ; ou bien encore, troisième solution, suivant l'opinion de quelques Grecs, est-ce que notre âme, une par sa substance, est composée de plusieurs éléments, une partie dite rationnelle et une partie irrationnelle, cette partie dite irrationnelle se divisant de nouveau en deux tendances, la convoitise et la colère[35] ;
> 2- En effet, comme l'âme vivifie et meut le corps incapable naturellement de tirer de lui-même un mouvement vital, le Logos lui aussi, par les motions au bien et l'action qu'il imprime au corps entier, meut l'Église et chacun de ses membres qui ne fait rien indépendamment du Logos[36].

---

[31] *Ibid*., *Traité des Principes*, I, 1, 7, SC 252, p. 105.

[32] *Ibid*., *Traité des Principes*, Préface d'Origène, 5, SC 252, p. 83.

[33] Valerry WILSON, « La volonté libre de l'âme dans le Περὶ Ἀρχῶν d'Origène », dans *Théophilyon. Revue des Facultés catholiques de Théologie et de Philosophie de Lyon. Dieu en des temps incertains*, tome XXVI, vol 2 (2021), p. 335-349.

[34] ORIGÈNE, *Traité des Principes*, II, 1, 3, SC 252, p. 239.

[35] *Ibid*., *Traité des Principes*, III, 4, 1, SC 268, p. 201.

[36] *Ibid*., *Contre Celse*, VI, 48, SC 147, p. 301.

On peut retenir de ces deux affirmations prônant le bipartisme anthropologique quelques principes relatifs à l'état de l'humain selon Origène : l'âme vivifie le corps. Il y a une dépendance intrinsèque entre les deux. Les vices comme la convoitise et la colère relèveraient des effets de l'âme. Origène rejette moins la division de l'âme en entités diverses qu'il ne dénonce vertement la composition de l'âme en trois parties. Pour lui, l'âme est une réalité dynamique. Il lui reconnaît une partie supérieure qui est faite à l'image de Dieu et à sa ressemblance[37] et une partie inférieure qui assume la chute, le péché et le libre arbitre et qui, de fait est reliée à la création et qui fait, d'elle une amie de la matière[38].

La deuxième fonction de l'âme est d'habiter dans le corps. Il n'y a donc pas de corps vivant sans âme ni d'âme sans corps. Mais quand l'âme est-elle introduite dans le corps ? Voici la réponse de l'Alexandrin à travers ces deux témoignages :

> 1- Je présume que l'esprit[39] a été inséré du dehors, mais il paraîtra important de montrer cela à partir des Écritures. [...] S'il est prouvé que l'âme de l'homme, assurément inférieure à celle des astres, puisqu'elle est l'âme de l'homme, n'a pas été façonnée avec le corps, mais a été effectivement insérée de l'extérieur, à plus forte raison est-ce le cas des âmes de ces êtres animés qui sont célestes[40].
> 2- Le corps dont nous nous servons maintenant avec sa grossièreté, sa corruption et son infirmité n'est pas autre que celui dont nous nous servirons alors dans l'incorruption, la force et la gloire, mais ce sera le même qui aura rejeté les infirmités dont il souffre maintenant et se sera changé en gloire, devenu spirituel, de sorte que ce qui avait été un vase d'indignité deviendra par sa purification un vase d'honneur et une demeure de béatitude[41].

On voit poindre à l'horizon, dans le premier texte, l'affirmation de la préexistence des âmes qui est une idée propre au platonisme (*Phèdre*, 247 b ; *Phèdre*, 249 c). Dans cette perspective, ce sont des anges qui œuvrent à l'insertion des âmes dans les corps et la destinée humaine est soumise aux mérites ou démérites de la préexistence. Il est donc certain que cette pensée d'Origène est condamnée par l'Église et on peut

---

[37] Archimandrite SOPHRONY, *La Fidélité de connaître la Voie*, Genève, Éditions Labor et Fides, 1988, p. 23 : « L'homme est créé à l'image de Dieu pour vivre à la ressemblance de Dieu. En tant qu'être libre, et conformément au sens même de la liberté, l'homme a été créé au commencement par l'Acte créateur divin comme une pure potentialité, laquelle s'actualise au cours du processus de la vie ».

[38] ORIGÈNE, *Traité des Principes*, II, 10, 7, SC 252, p. 393-395.

[39] Origène parle ici évidemment du νοῦς et non pas du πνεῦμα. *Spiritus* ici n'est pas le bon terme mais plutôt *mens* ou *animus*.

[40] *Traité des Principes*, I, 7, 4, SC 252, p. 215.

[41] *Traité des Principes*, III, 6, 6, SC 268, p. 249.

en déduire que c'est sous la mouvance du platonisme que l'Alexandrin se trompe, d'autant plus qu'il avait l'intuition de démontrer le composé humain à partir des Saintes Écritures. Le platonisme induit Origène en erreur ; la Bible le rétablit dans la vérité, car dans une perspective antignostique, il récuse de considérer l'action divine dans la création de l'homme comme injuste et tragique (*La République*, X, 617 e).

Puis dans le second passage, Origène dépeint négativement le corps, toujours sous l'emprise du platonisme. Toutefois, il appréhende une conception unitaire de l'homme en réaction au pluralisme gnostique. Il enseigne donc qu'il y a un seul corps sous son mode terrestre ou glorieux, qu'il y a une seule nature pour les créatures raisonnables. Par l'usage de la rationalité ou du libre arbitre se dessine alors le destin de l'homme. Le passage de la perspective philosophique de l'incorporéité finale à la thèse chrétienne de la résurrection et de la perpétuité des corps glorieux est significatif. On peut noter par là un basculement significatif dans la pensée de l'Alexandrin qui tourne le dos au platonisme, qui combat des gnostiques, qui se ressaisit et s'accroche à se positionner par rapport aux Saintes Écritures.

La dernière fonction de l'âme est de mouvoir le corps. C'est dans la mesure où ce mouvement est assuré que l'on peut parler de vie. Il est clair que la vie se manifeste par la présence de l'âme dans le corps à la manière d'une activité mouvante. Origène écrit : « En effet, de même que l'âme, insérée par tout le corps, fait tout mouvoir, opère et accomplit toutes choses, de même le Fils unique de Dieu, sa Parole et sa Sagesse, atteint et parvient à toute la puissance de Dieu, car il y est inséré »[42]. Le fait de présenter l'âme comme une réalité introduite dans le corps permet à Origène d'insister sur la différence entre les deux. On peut affirmer que l'âme est la source du mouvement du corps qui, lui, se retrouve dans une situation passive, de réceptivité. Le corps accueille, il reçoit, il se rend disponible, il vit tout simplement, car la vie ne peut être perçue comme telle que lorsqu'elle est vie du corps de sorte que l'être humain est appelé « une âme vivante »[43] : c'est le but du phénomène de l'insufflation. Au contraire, on parle de « mort corporelle » comme conséquence de la séparation de l'âme d'avec Dieu[44]. Il faut retenir que la dichotomie s'intéresse à la vie de l'humain dans ce monde terrestre, celle qui se définit comme assemblage du corps et de l'âme, sans tenir compte du *pneuma*. Dans cette perspective dichotomique, âme-corps, c'est à l'âme que s'applique la théorie de l'image de Dieu. Ce n'est pas

---

[42] *Traité des Principes*, II, 8, 5, SC 252, p. 351.

[43] *Commentaire sur S. Jean*, XIII, XXIV, 142, texte grec, avant-propos, traduction et notes par Cécile Blanc, Paris, Éditions du Cerf, SC 222, 1975, p. 107-109 : « Tel serait aussi le sens de ces mots "Dieu a insufflé sur son visage un souffle de vie et l'homme est devenu une âme vivante", de sorte que nous pouvons entendre spirituellement (*pneumatiquement*) l'insufflation, le souffle de vie et la vie de l'âme ».

[44] *Commentaire sur l'Épître aux Romains*, VI, 6, 4-7, SC 543, p. 131-135.

le corps qui est perçu comme image de Dieu mais plutôt l'âme. Le corps est l'élément du composé subordonné à l'âme. Néanmoins, fait d'un corps et d'une âme, Origène, dans cette perspective, soutient que « l'élément supérieur qui est "à l'image" soit dans l'âme, et que l'inférieur qui correspond au corps soit dans le corps : nul d'entre nous ne le prétend de Dieu »[45], conclut-il. Ce qui revient à dire que c'est l'être humain tout entier qui est à l'image de Dieu et non pas seulement son corps comme le prétexte le platonicien Celse.

4- Le *pneuma* humain, condition d'une anthropologie tripartite

Le « pneuma est l'entraîneur du noûs », écrivait Jacques Dupuis[46]. Sa place est décisive dans la compréhension chrétienne de l'humain. Comme l'écrit Henri de Lubac, « l'esprit est dans la lettre comme le miel dans son rayon »[47], on peut dire que l'esprit est en l'homme comme l'élément le vivifiant. Si le *pneuma* humain est inexistant dans le bipartisme anthropologique, force est de constater qu'il reste le cœur de l'anthropologie chrétienne. En effet, la mention trichotomique est intimement rattachée à la perspective chrétienne qui ne limite pas la vie humaine dans la sphère du terrestre mais la situe comme participant de la vie divine qui est vie dans l'esprit. Le *pneuma* confère la vie divine à l'humain car Dieu est le *Pneuma* par excellence ; il est aussi la Lumière qui illumine le *pneuma* humain[48]. Il reste en constance relation avec l'âme humaine qui est le lieu de cette réceptivité de sorte que le *pneuma* peut être considéré comme étant porteur de la « vie de l'âme ». Le *pneuma* joue donc un rôle de création de relation entre l'être humain et son Créateur, alors que le péché provoque une rupture entre les deux. Le péché occasionne la « mort de l'âme » puisque « l'âme pécheresse elle-même mourra »[49], l'âme peut alors se retrouver dans une situation délicate, partagée entre le choix qui provient du *pneuma* et celui qui vient du péché.

---

[45] *Contre Celse*, VI, 63, SC 147, p. 336-337 : « ἵνα τὸ μὲν « κατ᾽ εἰκόνα » τὸ κρεῖττον ᾖ ἐν τῇ ψυχῇ, τὸ δ᾽ ἔλαττον καὶ κατὰ τὸ σῶμα ἐν τῷ σώματι, ὅπερ οὐδεὶς ἡμῶν φησι ».

[46] Jacques DUPUIS, *« L'esprit de l'homme ». Étude sur l'anthropologie religieuse d'Origène*, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

[47] Henri de LUBAC, *Histoire et Esprit. L'intelligence de l'Écriture d'après Origène*, Paris, Éditions Aubier, coll. « Théologie, n. 16 », 1950, p. 179.

[48] ORIGÈNE, *Commentaire sur S. Jean*, XIII, XXI, 124, SC 222, p. 97 : « Il est en quelque sorte affirmé que son essence c'est le *pneuma* : "Dieu est *pneuma*", dit le texte ; dans la Loi, que c'est le feu, car il est écrit : "Notre Dieu, un feu consumant" ; et, chez Jean, que c'est la lumière : "Dieu, dit-il en effet, est lumière et en lui il n'y a pas de ténèbres" » ; voir aussi *Commentaire sur S. Jean*, XIII, XXI, 124-XXII, 131, SC 222, p. 97-101.

[49] *Entretien avec Héraclide*, 25, SC 67, p. 105.

Dans l'échelle de la graduation, on peut dire que le *pneuma* est l'élément supérieur du composé humain, il est plus proche du divin que l'âme et le corps. Il est à la source du bien que nous faisons et reste totalement orienté vers le monde céleste. Tout le bien que fait l'homme ne peut venir que du *pneuma* qui traduit la marque d'une certaine transcendance en nous. Notre quête de Dieu trouve sa source en lui. Il est le domaine de Dieu en l'âme. Que dire alors du νοῦς et quelle est sa fonction dans l'être humain ?

Dans les trois passages qui suivent, trois concepts récurrents permettent de comprendre l'approche origénienne du νοῦς qui est souvent rendu par le *logos*, la *pensée* et le *cœur* pour signifier la grandeur intellectuelle de l'homme, sa personnalité propre et sa conscience rationnelle :

> 1- Dieu agit de même, lui qui connait les secrets des cœurs [τῆς καρδίας] et qui prévoit le futur : il permet peut-être par sa patience et aussi par les événements extérieurs de faire sortir le mal caché pour purifier celui qui a en lui, à cause de sa négligence, les semences du péché[50].
> 2- Mais l'animal raisonnable, outre la nature imaginative, possède la raison [τὸ μέντοι λογικὸν ζῷον καὶ λόγον] qui juge les représentations, refuse les unes et accepte les autres, pour que le vivant se conduise selon elles[51].
> 3- Grand est le cœur de l'homme […]. Voyez qu'il n'est pas petit le cœur de l'homme qui embrasse tant de choses. Entendez cette grandeur non de ses dimensions physiques, mais de la puissance de sa pensée capable d'embrasser la connaissance de tant de vérités[52].

Lorsqu'Origène traduit le νοῦς[53] par le *cœur* (καρδία), il lui confère le sens de la personne tout entière, de l'élément principal qui fait l'homme, le foyer de la personnalité, le centre de l'âme, le centre du corps : il n'est pas produit par un

---

[50] *Traité des Principes*, III, 1, 13, SC 268, p. 78-79.
[51] *Traité des Principes*, III, 1, 3, SC 268, p. 22-23.
[52] *Homélies sur Luc*, XXI, 6, SC 87, p. 297. Voir *Commentaire sur S. Jean*, II, IV, 34-35, SC 120, p. 231 : « Nous ayant fait connaître, dans les trois propositions précédentes, trois situations (du Verbe), l'évangéliste récapitule les trois en une par ces mots : "Celui-ci était dans le principe auprès de Dieu". De ces trois situations, nous avons appris d'abord en qui était le Verbe : il était dans le principe ; puis, auprès de qui il était : auprès de Dieu ; enfin, qui il était : Dieu. Désignant donc par "celui-ci" le Verbe Dieu, dont il vient de parler, et résumant en une quatrième proposition "Dans le principe était le Verbe", "Le Verbe était auprès de Dieu et le Verbe était Dieu", il dit : "Celui-ci était dans le principe auprès de Dieu" ».
[53] Lorenzo PERRONE, « "Et l'homme tout entier devient dieu" : La déification selon Origène à la lumière des nouvelles *Homélies sur les Psaumes* », dans *Teología y Vida*, vol. 58, n. 2 (2017), p. 187-220, surtout ici, p. 194.

intermédiaire mais par Dieu lui-même[54]. Le cœur devient synonyme de l'intelligence : « Qu'est-ce que voir Dieu avec le cœur [*nam quid aliud est corde deum uidere*], sinon, […] le comprendre et le connaître par l'intelligence [*mente eum intellegere atque cognoscere*] ? »[55]. La raison devient également le lieu d'expression de la personnalité, le lieu où s'exprime la conscience, l'endroit où se réalise les filtres ; c'est elle qui engage l'homme dans la résistance morale. Ainsi, écrit Origène, « les chatouillements et les excitations peuvent se produire, mais la raison [ὁ λόγος δέ], davantage fortifiée et formée par l'exercice et l'étude, parvenue par l'instruction à la fermeté dans sa marche vers le bien, ou du moins devenue proche d'y parvenir, repousse les excitations et affaiblit la convoitise »[56].

Mais le *pneuma* reste l'élément supérieur dans l'humain, le meilleur par rapport aux autres, de même que l'âme est déjà meilleure par rapport au corps. Comme l'écrit Origène, « l'Écriture dit que ce ne fut pas l'âme, mais l'esprit, comme meilleure partie de l'âme, qui fut ranimé. Car même si l'éclat de la lumière qui était en lui [Jacob] n'a pas été complètement éteint quand ses fils lui présentèrent la tunique de Joseph souillée du sang d'un chevreau, et que lui-même fut pris à leur mensonge au point de "déchirer ses vêtements, mettre un sac sur ses reins, pleurer son fils sans vouloir du tout être consolé" »[57], l'âme reste inférieure au *pneuma*[58]. Origène oppose régulièrement le *pneuma*, élément meilleur qui reste la partie divine de notre être, celle qui participe au Verbe de Dieu[59] à l'âme, même s'il insiste sur la nécessité de leur relation à la manière d'une « communication des idiomes »[60].

---

[54] Cf. ORIGÈNE, *Homélies sur S. Jean*, VI, 38, SC 157, p. 157-159.

[55] *Traité des Principes*, I, 1, 9, SC 252, p. 108-109.

[56] *Traité des Principes,* III, 1, 4, SC 268, p. 28-29.

[57] *Homélies sur la Genèse*, XV, 3, introduction d'Henri de Lubac et Louis Doutreleau, Paris, Éditions du Cerf, SC 7 bis, 1976, p. 359 ; voir aussi *Commentaire sur l'Épître aux Romains*, I, 10, 1, SC 532, p. 197.

[58] *Commentaire sur l'Épître aux Romains,* IX, 25, SC 555, p. 163 : « Nous avons souvent parlé de cette différence, que l'homme est désigné tantôt par l'âme, tantôt par la chair, tantôt par l'esprit. Or quand un homme doit être nommé par la meilleure partie, comme quelqu'un qui devrait être compris comme spirituel, il est appelé "esprit" ; quand c'est par la partie inférieure, "âme" ; mais quand il est nommé par la partie la plus basse, il est appelé "chair" ; et nous avons souvent apporté des preuves de cela à partir des Écritures ».

[59] *Commentaire sur S. Jean*, II, 22, SC 120, p. 221 : « Celui qui n'est pas capable d'avoir en lui ce Verbe qui était dans le principe auprès de Dieu, ou bien s'attachera à lui devenu chair, ou bien participera à ceux qui ont quelque participation à ce Verbe, ou encore, déchu d'une participation à celui qui participe, il demeurera dans un soi-disant (verbe), totalement étranger au Verbe ».

[60] Voir Joseph TIXERONT, *Histoire des dogmes dans l'antiquité chrétienne*, I, *La théologie anténicéenne*, Paris, 1915, p. 315ss.

Nous avons essayé de distinguer le *pneuma* humain du voῦς. La distinction du corps est évidente. Il nous revient maintenant de tenter de clarifier un tant soit peu le privilège de chacune de ces composantes de l'humain. Comme dit plus haut, le *pneuma* étant orienté vers le divin, il est la source de toute bonté[61]. Il possède des connaissances élevées relatives au monde céleste. Il est la partie supérieure ou le meilleur élément en nous parce que orienté vers son Créateur. Il n'est pas influencé par les exactions du corps ou de la chair, mais guide l'être humain à développer une conscience religieuse, une connaissance de Dieu et à s'adonner à la prière pour le salut de son âme.

Quant à l'âme, elle représente la personne humaine ; elle guide les actions de l'homme et est le lieu de la décision et des choix. Toute responsabilité de l'être humain incombe à l'âme. Elle est le siège de la raison. C'est dans le voῦς (intelligence, pensée) que la Loi de Dieu est gravée[62]. Le *logos* est semé dans l'âme humaine ; il parle au cœur, l'oriente, organise les décisions à prendre et dicte les interdits et préceptes[63].

Origène renvoie le *pneuma* humain à la conscience morale car il le présente comme une réalité distincte du cœur et de l'âme[64]. La conscience pneumatique indique la position à avoir, la posture à tenir d'une part, et d'autre part, elle joue le rôle de tri, de sélection et juge les actes de l'âme et les orientations que le corps lui impose parfois. Le *pneuma* perçu comme « conscience » conduit l'âme et l'éduque, à la manière d'un pédagogue, vers la vertu, c'est lui qui reçoit la divine Parole[65]. Il est l'entraineur de l'âme vers le bien véritable et il guide le voῦς vers la démarche de la prière[66].

On peut retenir que l'apport substantiel d'Origène est de clarifier la part du pneuma dans l'anthropologie chrétienne. Le *pneuma* est à rechercher dans l'âme humaine ; il en constitue l'élément vital, le cœur, le lieu de la conscience, « là où

---

[61] *Traité des Principes*, III, 6, 6, SC 268, p. 249-251 : « De même qu'un homme peut progresser d'un état antérieur d'homme animal, incapable d'entendre ce qui est de l'Esprit de Dieu, jusqu'à arriver, grâce à l'éducation, à devenir spirituel et à juger de toutes choses sans être lui-même jugé par personne, de même faut-il penser, à propos de la condition du corps, que le même corps qui maintenant en tant qu'instrument de l'âme est appelé animal, à la suite d'un progrès, lorsque l'âme jointe à Dieu sera devenue avec lui un seul esprit, progressera, en tant qu'instrument de l'esprit, pour atteindre une condition et une qualité spirituelles ».

[62] *Commentaire sur l'Épître aux Romains*, VI, 8, 1-12, SC 543, p. 159-173.

[63] *Commentaire sur l'Épître aux Romains*, V, 4, SC 539, p. 409-411.

[64] *Commentaire sur l'Épître aux Romains*, II, 9, 1, SC 532, p. 373 : « Telle est, à mon avis, la circoncision que l'Apôtre dit utile si tu gardes la Loi, non la loi de la lettre, dont tu ne reçois pas la circoncision dans la chair, mais la loi de l'esprit selon laquelle tu es circoncis de cœur ».

[65] *Homélies sur Ézéchiel*, II, 2, SC 352, p. 103-105.

[66] Voir *Peri Euchès*, II, 4.

l'Esprit de Dieu siège »[67]. Chaque homme est pris dans l'unité de son être comme une personne unique dont le modèle est la Trinité Sainte, Dieu en trois Personnes. L'anthropologie corps-âme-esprit dit alors bien l'unicité et l'intégrité de la personne humaine dans son individualité, capable d'agir librement et reste en tension dans la découverte de sa vocation propre.

5- La véritable humanité en Jésus-Christ

Le Christ est vrai homme et vrai Dieu. Pour Origène, son humanité répond aux critères universels qui permettent de définir les hommes. Étant donné que la rédemption est le mobile de son incarnation, du fait qu'il est venu sauver les hommes, le Christ Jésus doit répondre aux divers éléments constitutifs de l'humain : « Ainsi donc notre Sauveur et Seigneur, dans sa volonté de sauver l'homme comme il voulut le sauver, pour cette raison voulut sauver le corps, de même qu'il voulut pareillement sauver l'âme, et voulut en outre sauver ce qui restait de l'homme : l'esprit. Or l'homme n'aurait pas été sauvé tout entier, s'il [l'esprit] n'avait revêtu l'homme tout entier. On supprime le salut du corps humain, si l'on déclare spirituel le corps du Sauveur »[68]. Dans le cas contraire, il manquerait quelque chose à l'humanité de Jésus. Or, il a assumé notre humanité en toute chose à l'exception du péché. Il a donc sauvé l'homme tout entier : corps, âme et esprit.

D'abord, le Christ est Dieu et Homme ; telle est notre foi. Contrairement à Celse qui soutient que tout en Jésus relève de son humanité et que rien n'est divin en lui, Origène dit sa foi en réponse : « Nous, nous croyons en Jésus lui-même, aussi bien quand il dit de la divinité qui est en lui : "Je suis la voie, la vérité, la vie" et autres paroles semblables, que lorsqu'il déclare, parce qu'il était dans un corps humain : "Or vous cherchez à me tuer, moi, un homme qui vous ai dit la vérité", et nous affirmons qu'il a été une sorte d'être composé »[69]. C'est alors qu'on peut voir poindre à l'horizon, certes de manière encore implicite, la double nature (humaine et divine) dont l'unique Personne du Verbe est composée. Origène l'exprime avec les mots qui sont les siens, bien avant la définition de la double nature du Christ : « Tantôt nous voyons en lui certains traits humains qui paraissent ne différer en rien de la fragilité commune des mortels, tantôt des traits si divins qu'ils ne conviennent

---

[67] Métropolite Joseph, « L'amour, ou la recouvrance de l'image et de la ressemblance perdues », dans *L'homme. Éléments d'anthropologie chrétienne*, Éditions Apostolia, 2019, p. 79-113, ici, p. 90.

[68] *Entretien avec Héraclide*, 7, SC 67, p. 71 ; voir *Homélies sur S. Jean*, I, 20-24, SC 120, p. 69-73.

[69] *Contre Celse*, I, 66, SC 132, p. 261.

à personne d'autre qu'à la nature première et ineffable de la divinité »[70]. La double nature établit le Christ comme Médiateur entre Dieu et les hommes : « Il faut d'abord savoir qu'autre est dans le Christ la nature divine, le Fils unique du Père, et autre la nature humaine qu'il a assumée dans les derniers temps pour l'économie de la rédemption »[71].

Ensuite, on peut mettre en l'évidence que la nature humaine du Christ s'affirme ou s'exprime notamment quand il est éprouvé par la faiblesse[72], durant ses tentations[73] et à l'heure de sa mort[74]. Mais le Christ reste Dieu (et homme) tout en assumant la nature humaine qu'il conduit à la promesse du salut, « car le Verbe de Dieu, l'Homme Dieu doit proclamer ce qui est pour le salut de l'auditeur, ce qui l'exhorte à la continence, à la pratique des actions saines, à toutes choses auxquelles l'homme assidu aux travaux et non aux plaisirs doit s'appliquer afin de pouvoir obtenir ce que Dieu a promis »[75]. La souffrance, les tentations ou la mort ne diminuent en rien sa nature divine. Par son humilité, le Christ nous a donné le salut[76] de Dieu.

La « constitution ontologique »[77] de l'humanité est assumée par l'esprit, l'âme et le corps du Christ. Mais Origène fait une précision terminologique qui permet de distinguer les deux natures du Christ : il est Dieu selon le *pneuma* de toute

---

[70] *Traité des Principes*, II, 6, 2, SC 252, p. 313.

[71] *Traité des Principes*, I, 2, 1, SC 252, p. 111.

[72] *Traité des Principes*, IV, 4, 4, SC 268, p. 413 : « Il [le Christ] devient faible avec les faibles pour gagner les faibles. Et parce qu'il est devenu faible, il est dit de lui : *Même s'il a été crucifié par faiblesse, il vit cependant de la force de Dieu* ».

[73] *Homélies sur S. Luc*, XXIX, 3-5, SC 87, p. 363-367.

[74] *Homélies sur S. Jean*, XXXII, III, 25, SC 385, p. 199 : « À l'approche de l'économie de la passion en vue de laquelle il allait être livré par Judas, fils de Simon l'Iscariote, blessé par le diable, "Jésus, nous est-il dit, sachant que le Père lui a tout remis entre les mains, qu'il est venu de Dieu et qu'il retourne à Dieu, se lève de table", alors que déjà le dîner a commencé ».

[75] *Homélies sur Ézéchiel*, III, 3, SC 352, p. 131. Voir aussi *Contre Celse*, IV, 15, SC 136, p. 219-221 : « L'être descendu vers les hommes existait auparavant "en forme de Dieu", et c'est par amour pour les hommes qu' "il s'est anéanti", afin de pouvoir être reçu par les hommes. Non point certes qu'il ait subi un changement du bien au mal, car "il n'a pas fait de péché", ni de la beauté à la laideur, car "il n'a pas connu de péché" ; et il n'est pas venu de la félicité à l'infortune, mais 'il s'est humilié lui-même" et n'en était pas moins heureux même lorsque pour le bienfait de notre race il s'humiliait lui-même ».

[76] Lorenzo PERRONE, « "Et l'homme tout entier devient dieu" : La déification selon Origène à la lumière des nouvelles *Homélies sur les Psaumes* », *art. cit*., p. 205 : « Pour compléter cette présentation du dossier scripturaire sur la déification, il faudrait encore se souvenir du fait que celle-ci, en tant qu'elle réalise l'assimilation de l'homme à l'image du Fils, comporte également, pour ainsi dire, une "christification" : le saint ou le parfait devient alors un *alter Christus* ».

[77] Hans Urs von BALTHASAR, *Parole et Mystère chez Origène*, *op. cit*., p. 30.

éternité et il est homme selon qu'il a pris chair de la Vierge Marie[78]. On peut donc en déduire que le *pneuma* renvoie à la nature divine du Christ tandis que son corps et son âme portent l'expression de son humanité : « En toute propriété de termes, il a dit que la Sagesse est un souffle de la puissance de Dieu. Il faut comprendre cette puissance de Dieu comme celle qui le rend vigoureux, qui lui permet d'établir, de contenir, de gouverner tout le visible et l'invisible, de suffire à tout ce dont il assume la providence : à tout cela cette puissance est unie et présente. […] Cela montre que ce souffle de la puissance de Dieu a toujours été et n'a jamais eu de commencement, si ce n'est Dieu lui-même »[79].

On peut dire que la divinité du Verbe est exprimée par le *pneuma* dans un autre texte qui en fait le parallèle avec l'immortalité. C'est dans la huitième homélie sur la Genèse portant sur le sacrifice d'Abraham qu'Origène fait du Christ, à la suite de la Sainte Écriture, la figure de Prêtre et Victime. Ce passage nous permet de comprendre que l'esprit est incorruptible : « Le Verbe au contraire, qui est le Christ selon l'esprit, dont Isaac est l'image, est demeuré "dans l'incorruptibilité". C'est pourquoi il est à la fois victime et grand prêtre. Selon l'esprit, en effet, il offre la victime à son Père ; selon la chair, lui-même est offert sur l'autel de la croix »[80]. Isaac préfigure le Christ, prêtre et médiateur, tandis que le bélier renvoie au Christ victime. L'esprit est immortel, le corps est corruptible. Mais l'esprit le vivifie ; il est cette chose venue de Dieu qui siège en nous de la même manière qu'Origène écrit au sujet du Christ : « Dans le Christ, il y a une chose qui vient d'en haut et une autre qui a été reçue de la nature humaine et du sein virginal »[81]. Là encore, l'Alexandrin annonce implicitement et avant l'heure la double nature (humaine et divine) du Christ. Voilà pourquoi lui seul peut être le Rédempteur.

Le composé humain trichotomique s'applique bien à la personne du Christ qui est composé d'un corps, d'une âme et d'un esprit[82] sans lesquels il ne serait pas un vrai homme. Ainsi, par son esprit, il a assumé tout l'homme. L'esprit du Christ n'est pas à confondre avec son âme. Alors que « selon certains, "esprit", et "âme" désignent la même réalité »[83], pour Origène, une clarification s'impose : « Deux principes, "l'âme" et "l'esprit", s'acquittent d'une double louange. L'âme célèbre le Seigneur, l'esprit célèbre Dieu, non pas que la louange du Seigneur soit différente

---

[78] Voir Valerry WILSON, « L'Annonciation d'après les *Homélies sur S. Luc* d'Origène », dans *Nova et Vetera*, n. 2 (2022), p. 193-210.

[79] ORIGÈNE, *Traité des Principes*, I, 2, 9, SC 252, p. 131. Voir aussi *Traité des Principes*, IV, 4, 1, SC 268, p. 401-405.

[80] *Ibid.*, *Homélies sur la Genèse*, XV, 3, SC 7 bis, p. 231.

[81] *Idem*.

[82] *Entretien avec Héraclide*, 7, SC 67, p. 71-72.

[83] *Homélies sur S. Luc*, Fr. 25-b, SC 87, p. 481.

de celle de Dieu, puisque Dieu est aussi Seigneur et le Seigneur également Dieu »[84]. Une lecture allégorique du récit de la création faite par Origène explique la constance de sa pensée au sujet de la primauté de l'esprit. En effet, l'homme reçoit de Dieu ordre de dominer toute la création : l'eau représente l'esprit de vie, la terre explique le sens charnel, « en sorte que l'esprit domine les animaux et non pas ceux-ci l'esprit »[85].

Le Christ a assumé l'image du terrestre en nous par la partie inférieure de son âme pour la rédemption. Il possède un *pneuma* humain. Et comme à son habitude, Origène ne manque pas de lui appliquer une dichotomie corps-âme :

> « les critiques doivent savoir que Celui que nous croyons avec conviction être dès l'origine Dieu et Fils de Dieu est par le fait, le Logos en personne, la Sagesse en personne, la Vérité en personne. Et nous affirmons que son corps mortel et l'âme humaine qui l'habite, ont acquis la plus haute dignité non seulement par l'association, mais encore par l'union et le mélange avec Lui et que, participant à sa divinité, ils ont été transformés en Dieu »[86].

En insistant sur le composé dichotomique du Christ, Origène atteste toutefois que le corps et l'âme du Christ sont unis avec le Verbe et sont transfigurés en Dieu. Ainsi, la mort du Christ, la séparation de son âme avec son corps est effective et Origène mentionne peu avant une telle rupture que quand son âme est troublée par sa souffrance[87], son esprit, lui, reste inébranlable tandis que son corps ploie sous le poids de la souffrance.

Avec sa mort, le corps du Christ est déposé au tombeau, son âme va dans l'Hadès et son esprit est rendu à son Père :

> Voulant sauver l'esprit de l'homme, au sujet duquel l'apôtre s'est exprimé ainsi, le Sauveur a revêtu également l'esprit de l'homme. Ces trois éléments, lors de la Passion, ont été séparés ; ces trois éléments, lors de la Résurrection, ont été réunis. Lors de la Passion, ils ont été séparés. Comment ? Le corps dans le tombeau ; l'âme aux enfers ; l'esprit, il l'a déposé entre les mains du Père. L'âme aux enfers. [...] S'il est vrai qu'il a « déposé » son esprit entre les

---

[84] *Ibid.*, *Homélies sur S. Luc*, VIII, 1, SC 87, P. 165.

[85] *Ibid., Homélies sur la Genèse*, I, 12, SC 7 bis, p. 55.

[86] *Ibid.*, *Contre Celse*, III, 41, SC 136, p. 97.

[87] *Ibid.*, *Contre Celse*, II, 9, SC 132, p. 303 : « Nous ne pensons pas non plus que le corps de Jésus, visible alors et perceptible aux sens, est Dieu. Et que dis-je, le corps ? Pas même l'âme, dont il est dit : "Mon âme est triste à en mourir". Mais, selon la doctrine des Juifs, on croit que c'est Dieu, usant de l'âme et du corps du prophète comme d'un instrument, qui dit : "C'est moi, le Seigneur, Dieu de toute chair", et : "Avant moi aucun Dieu n'a existé, et il n'y en aura pas après moi" ».

mains du Père, c'est comme un « dépôt » qu'il a donné son esprit. Autre chose
est « faire don », autre chose « remettre », autre chose « confier en dépôt ».
Le déposant fait un dépôt avec l'intention de recouvrer son dépôt[88].

Le prix de la rédemption est payé par l'âme du Christ et non pas par son esprit. C'est pourquoi, cette sainte âme du Christ est descendue dans l'Hadès, car son *pneuma* ne peut jouer un tel rôle. Poser ainsi la question est difficilement acceptable pour Origène. En effet, « le prix de la rédemption, une fois versé par l'âme du Sauveur, c'est au Christ vivifié selon le *pneuma* (1 Pet., 3, 18) qu'il appartient d'annoncer aux esprits leur délivrance »[89].

On peut dire que le composé humain du Christ (corps, âme et esprit) a été disjoint ou dissocié avec sa mort. Mais l'événement de la résurrection les a regroupés dans l'unique personne du Ressuscité : son corps a retrouvé son âme et son esprit « non pas au moment même de la résurrection, mais immédiatement après la résurrection »[90]. À travers la résurrection, le corps du Christ a retrouvé sa sainte âme, puisqu'à sa mort, « son âme est sortie librement de son corps »[91]. Origène justifie un tel choix en émettant cette hypothèse : « Peut-être la raison de sa hâte à sortir de son corps était-elle de la conserver intact et d'éviter que ses jambes ne fûssent brisées comme celles des brigands crucifiés avec lui »[92]. C'est une manière de justifier la mort du Christ comme séparation de son âme d'avec son corps, puisque nous avons montré que le Seigneur est Dieu et Homme et « nul homme destiné à mourir n'est immortel ; il est immortel quand il ne doit plus mourir »[93] : ce principe s'applique au Christ ressuscité. Il est convaincu de sa résurrection, c'est pourquoi il a affirmé qu'il relèverait le temple en trois jours après sa destruction (Jn 2, 19)[94]. Selon Origène, le *pneuma* du Christ a rejoint son corps et son âme après la résurrection quand le Christ est allé aussitôt le récupérer des mains du Père[95]. Le Christ ressuscité (corps, âme, esprit) sanctifie tous ceux qui viennent à lui. On peut donc en déduire que le *pneuma* du Christ donne la vie de Dieu au *pneuma* humain. Il le vivifie.

---

[88] *Entretien avec Héraclide*, 7, SC 67, p. 73.
[89] Jacques DUPUIS, *« L'esprit de l'homme ». Étude sur l'anthropologie religieuse d'Origène*, *op. cit.*, p. 87.
[90] ORIGÈNE, *Entretien avec Héraclide*, 7, SC 67, p. 73.
[91] *Contre Celse*, II, 16, SC 132, p. 331. Texte légèrement modifié.
[92] *Contre Celse*, II, 16, SC 132, p. 331.
[93] *Idem*.
[94] *Contre Celse*, III, 32, SC 136, p. 77 ; *Contre Celse*, III, 41, SC 136, p. 95-99.
[95] *Entretien avec Héraclide*, 7-8, SC 67, p. 73-75.

Conclusion

Ce parcours sur l'anthropologie d'Origène a permis de comprendre que l'homme formé d'un corps, d'une âme et d'un esprit est le propre de la culture biblique. Chez l'Alexandrin, on retrouve aussi un composé humain bipartite lorsqu'il traite de l'humain comme partie intégrante de la création dans son orientation vers le sensible. Par contre, le rapport à Dieu l'oblige à envisager un tripartisme anthropologique. Le *pneuma* humain relie l'homme à Dieu. Le tripartisme l'engage dans une dimension sotériologique, car Dieu est *Pneuma*. Ainsi donc, l'homme créé par Dieu est digne de par sa similitude avec Dieu. La grandeur de l'homme réside dans sa création à l'image et à la ressemblance de Dieu et dans sa capacité à reconnaître le Christ son Modèle et à s'engager à sa suite. L'image de Dieu implique nécessairement l'homme dans une *relation* intime et dynamique avec le divin, ce qui le fait passer de l'image à la ressemblance.

L'anthropologie origénienne s'ouvre sur une portée mystique dont la pointe se trouve dans l'union avec le Christ. Ainsi, on peut dire que tout a été créé pour l'homme et l'homme est créé pour Dieu. L'homme, par son composé tripartite est ordonné à Dieu. L'humain tout entier est à l'image et à la ressemblance de Dieu. Le Christ est l'Image du Dieu invisible. L'homme qui suit le Christ vit alors selon l'image du Christ Image de Dieu : l'anthropologie chrétienne est donc *christocentrique*. La dignité de la personne humaine trouve ainsi en lui tout son sens. Mais la vision anthropologique d'Origène qui pense Dieu comme Pneuma induit également une conception *théocentrique*[96] de l'homme qui ne peut être appréhendée que dans une approche chrétienne. Contrairement à ce que Celse appelle la prétention des chrétiens, Origène soutient que « Dieu a tout fait pour l'homme »[97], ce qui fait que « l'homme ne s'explique pas au niveau de l'homme »[98], mais ne peut se comprendre qu'en se tournant vers Dieu.

---

[96] Christoph SCHÖNBORN, *La création de l'homme comme Bonne Nouvelle., op. cit.*, p. 48.
[97] ORIGÈNE, *Contre Celse*, IV, 74, SC 136, p. 367.
[98] Olivier CLÉMENT, *Questions sur l'homme*, Paris, Éditions Stock, 1976, p. 8.

The Intellect and the Metaphysics of Light:
Evagrius Ponticus and Plotinus

Daniel JUGRIN[*]

ABSTRACT. This article explores the concept of *nous* and the metaphysics of light in Evagrius Ponticus's mysticism, highlighting how his philosophical background, especially Neoplatonism, influenced his language. Although *nous* is often misunderstood, it serves as a mystical faculty for perceiving intelligible beings and attaining divine union. By comparing Evagrius and Plotinus's views on *nous* and related mystical experiences, including visions of intelligible light, we uncover Evagrius's pioneering approach to *nous*. While sharing similarities with Plotinus, Evagrius's originality is evident in his comprehensive theory of contemplative prayer and the role of *nous* in shaping the Christian ascetic self. His redefinition of *nous* as essential for union with God and his interpretation of spiritual experiences as a return to one's true state of being showcase his innovative contribution to Late Antiquity's understanding of mystical vision.

Keywords: *nous*, contemplation, noetic light, Evagrius Ponticus, Plotinus.

Introduction

This article examines the concept of *nous* and the metaphysics of light in Evagrius Ponticus, focusing on how his philosophical background, especially Neoplatonism, influenced his language. Though often translated as 'mind' or 'intellect,' the full depth of the Greek term *nous* extends beyond these modern terms. Our aim is to show that, in a mystical context, *nous* goes beyond rational thought and acts

* Center for Studies and Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue, University of Bucharest, Romania.
  Email: jugrindaniel@gmail.com
  WoS ResearcherID: https://www.webofscience.com/wos/author/record/B-7116-2019

as a higher, intuitive faculty for directly perceiving intelligible beings and ultimately uniting with the Divine. To do this, we compare and analyze texts from Evagrius Ponticus and Plotinus, studying their unique views on *nous*, their descriptions of mystical experiences like visions of luminous light, and the relationship between intellect and the divine. Our methods include philological analysis, contextual interpretation, and detailed comparison to highlight both commonalities and key differences. Ultimately, the article emphasizes Evagrius's original perspective on *nous*. While sharing similarities with Plotinus regarding luminous visions and intellectual purification, Evagrius's distinctiveness lies in his coherent theory of contemplative prayer and the special role of *nous* in shaping the Christian spiritual journey. His redefinition of *nous* as vital for union with God and his view of spiritual experiences as a return to one's true nature highlight his innovative contribution to understanding mystical vision in Late Antiquity.

The concept of *nous*

The term '*nous*' holds a central place in the vocabulary of any Greek-language mystical tradition.[1] It is often translated as "mind" or "intellect," but neither term fully captures the depth of the Greek word's meanings. Additionally, neither has a corresponding verb, which causes the meanings of their derivatives (intellection, intellectual, etc.) to differ significantly from "*nous*" in Greek. This difference is largely cultural, as A. Louth observes:

> "The Greeks were pre-Cartesian; we are all post-Cartesian. We say, 'I think, therefore I am,' that is, thinking is an activity I engage in and there must therefore be an 'I' to engage in it; the Greeks would say, 'I think, therefore there is that which I think – *to noeta*.' What I think is something going on in my head; what the Greek thinks, *to noeta*, are the objects of thought that (for example, for Plato) exist in a higher, more real world."[2]

While the latter primarily indicates a rational thought process, *nous* and *noesis* suggest an almost intuitive perception of reality. Festugière explains this difference as follows:

---

[1] (Louth 2007), xvi.
[2] (Louth 2007), xiv.

"The great truths of religion — the existence and attributes of God, divine governance and providence, the origin, nature, and fate of the soul — are capable of being known through reason. They can be demonstrated. (...) However, it is one thing to approach these truths through reason, and another to grasp them through that intuitive faculty the ancients called *nous*, Francis de Sales called the 'fine point of the soul,' and Pascal called the 'heart.'"[3]

God, in His essence, remains an unknown (*agnostos*) and infinitely surpasses reason. This is not due to a complete lack of knowledge about Him, but because His true being and intimate nature are inaccessible to us. Similarly, the soul also surpasses reason. While it includes reason, it is much more than that. By its very nature, the soul is a faculty of intuition and love. It seeks a form of knowledge that is direct contact, a 'feeling,' a touch, or a sight. Ultimately, it longs for a union that involves a "total fusion and interpenetration of two living beings."[4] *Nous* is fundamentally a 'faculty of mystical union,' transcending what 'mind' or 'intellect' typically suggest. Although *nous* means mind and *noesis* refers to a 'more contemplative form of thought,' not entirely distinct from thinking, it's essential to imbue these words with a mystical connotation, moving beyond their common, limited understanding.[5]

In Plotinus's philosophy, *nous* is translated as 'Divine Intellect' or 'Divine Intelligence,'[6] but it is most often rendered as 'Intellectual principle,' which, while imperfect, remains both "expressive and convenient."[7] Similarly, in modern languages, the same term often refers to both the divine principle and its corresponding human

---

[3] (Festugière and Massignon 1986), 63.

[4] (Festugière and Massignon 1986), 64–65.

[5] (Louth 2007), xv.

[6] Plotinus distinguishes three principal hypostases: the One (τὸ ἕν), the Intellect (νοῦς), and the Soul (ψυχή). The first hypostasis is that of the One, which is both the principle and primary source of Being, and its ultimate goal. The second hypostasis is that of the Divine Intellect, eternally caught in the contemplation of the first principle and in self-thought [following the model of Aristotle's Divine Intellect, *Metaphysics* 1072b.19–22: "And the Intellect thinks itself by perceiving itself as intelligible. It becomes intelligible by touching itself and thinking itself, so that Intellect and intelligible become identical. For Intellect is the receptacle of the Intelligible and of Being" – αὐτὸν δὲ νοεῖ ὁ νοῦς κατὰ μετάληψιν τοῦ νοητοῦ· νοητὸς γὰρ γίγνεται θιγγάνων καὶ νοῶν, ὥστε ταὐτὸν νοῦς καὶ νοητόν. τὸ γὰρ δεκτικὸν τοῦ νοητοῦ καὶ τῆς οὐσίας νοῦς. "Thinking in itself" is probably a way of referring to the highest form of human thinking, namely contemplation. (Aristotle 2019), 230–232]. It is, thus, intelligible, eternal, and incorruptible Being, which manifests the identity between primary Being and pure thought. Encompassing the totality of intelligible Forms, the Intellect is the intelligible model of all reality. The last of the three hypostases – namely, the Soul – governs the sensible world, impressing form and order upon it. However, the Soul is but an image of the intelligible model. See (Vlad 2011), 30–37.

[7] (Mackenna 1991), xxxii.

act. In both cases, the intellectual principle signifies what is "highest and truly knowable." To fully capture the mystical and religious dimension of a text, some exegetes suggest temporarily retranslating 'Intellectual principle' as 'Spirit.'[8] Plurality or multiplicity originates within the *nous*. This 'divine intellectual principle' not only contains but is the intelligible universe (*ta noēta*).[9] This universe, also called the Intelligible, embodies the entirety of 'divine thoughts,' known in the Platonic tradition as the Ideas (or Forms). These Ideas are real entities: they are "the eternal Originals, Archetypes, and Intellectual Forms of all that exists in the lower spheres."[10] For this reason, this realm of intelligibles is sometimes called the 'Spiritual Universe.'[11]

---

[8] The translation of the name of Plotinus's second hypostasis has posed challenges for translators that are difficult to resolve. In French, the variants Intellect, Intelligence, and Esprit have been employed; in English, Intellect has been favoured; in German, it is Geist. The difficulty stems from the fact that in Plotinus, νοῦς refers to intuitive, supra-rational thought that does not deliberate or engage in reasoning – although it does not contradict the outcome of such reasoning if correct – a meaning that neither "Intellect" nor "Intelligence" conveys. Conversely, "discursive thought" based on reasoning is termed διάνοια or λογισμός by Plotinus. From this perspective, the variant "Spirit" would have been more suitable. The drawback of "Spirit" is its lack of etymological connection to "intelligible," which corresponds to νοητόν, and therefore it cannot be associated with the phrase κόσμος νοητός, "intelligible universe" – an equivalent, in Plotinus, for νοῦς. Furthermore, "Spirit" carries a Christian connotation, translating πνεῦμα, a concept that has no relation to Plotinus's νοῦς. Therefore, the variant "Intellect," capitalized, is preferred, with the understanding that a clear distinction must be made between "Intellect" in Plotinus and what is typically referred to as "intellect." See (Cornea 2009), 15.

[9] The expression κόσμος νοητός does not appear in Plato but is found in Philo of Alexandria, who, attempting to reconcile Greek philosophy with Hebrew theology, positions the Platonic Forms – which he claims are created – within a divine Logos (Philo, *De opificiis*, 4, 17–20). Plato, conversely, only spoke of a "place (τόπος) of Ideas" (cf. Plato, *Republic* 508c, 507b; Phaedrus 247c–e), which represents the model of the sensible universe (κόσμος αἰσθητὸς) (cf. *Timaeus* 30c–d). See (Chindea 2008), 131–136. See also (Runia 1999), 160–162.

[10] Plato reveals the relationship between the intelligible and the sensible as one between the original (model) and the copy. The Intelligible – comprising the eternal Forms – serves as the original (παράδειγμα, ἀρχέτυπον), while sensible, corporeal things, in continuous becoming, represent imitation (μίμημα), image, copy, and reflection (εἴδωλον). The Forms constitute the authentic reality, and by imitating or participating in them, sensory things acquire their reality, even if it is secondary, diminished, or derived reality. (Cornea 2003), 72.

[11] (Mackenna 1991), xxxiii.

The Vision of Divine Light in Evagrius Ponticus

For Evagrius, *nous* is the highest dimension of man, the image of God within us.[12] Oriented by creation toward its Prototype,[13] the Intellect is most capable[14] of knowing God[15], and prayer[16] is the most natural act for a human being.[17] Evagrius warns that the intellect (*nous*) must avoid any form of contemplation that might "imprint" a form upon it, because, even after surpassing the contemplation of corporeal nature (*theōrían tēs sōmatikēs physeōs*)[18], the intellect remains caught in the multiplicity of intelligible things (*noēta*).[19] At the time of prayer, the *nous* must "completely detach from the senses" (*anaisthēsian ktēsamenos*),[20] because the intellect cannot perceive the "place of God" (*ho topos tou Theou*) within itself (*en heautō*)

---

[12] *Skemmata* 34.

[13] (Bunge 2022), 153.

[14] "The intellect, as the image of God, is receptive (*dektikos*) to its divine Prototype," cf. *Epistula ad Melaniam* 16. See (Bunge 2022), 163–164.

[15] *Praktikos* 49.

[16] *De oratione* 84.

[17] (Harmless and Fitzgerald 2001a), 513–514.

[18] Evagrius frequently explores the concept of contemplation (*theōria*) throughout his *Kephalaia Gnostika* (hereafter *KG*). In *KG* 3.19 (S1), for instance, he differentiates between "Primary Contemplation" (Πρώτη θεωρία) and "Secondary Contemplation" (Δευτέρα θεωρία). The distinction lies not in the contemplative subject (the intellect, here termed "the seer"), but in the nature of the object: Primary Contemplation focuses on the immaterial, while Secondary Contemplation engages with the material. See (Ramelli 2015), 152. See also (Guillaumont 1972), 44.

[19] Cf. *De oratione 58*: "Even if the intellect (ὁ νοῦς) rises above (ὑπὲρ) the contemplation (τὴν θεωρίαν) of corporeal nature (τῆς σωματικῆς φύσεως), it has not yet perfectly beheld (ἐθεάσατο) the place of God (τὸν τόπον τοῦ θεου); for it can exist within the knowledge of Intelligibles (ἐν τῇ γνώσει τῶν νοητῶν) and be diversified (ποικίλλεσθαι) by it." (Casiday 2006), 192. *KG 4.77* (S2): "Objects are outside the intellect, but the *theōria* concerning them is established inside it. But it is not so concerning the Holy Trinity, for it alone is essential knowledge." (Evagrius of Pontus 2024), 349. When contemplating the Holy Trinity, the distinction between subject and object dissolves. In this state, the intellect (*nous*) actively participates in the "non-numerical unity that is characteristic of God." (cf. *Epistula fidei* 7: ἡ δὲ μονὰς καὶ ἑνὰς τῆς ἁπλῆς καὶ ἀπεριλήπτου οὐσίας ἐστὶ σημαντική – "'One and Only' is the designation of the simple and uncircumscribed essence." (Casiday 2006), 48. God is uncircumscribed, and the knowledge of him remains an experience that cannot be encompassed or understood: "But only our intellect is incomprehensible to us, as is God, its creator. Indeed, it is not possible to understand what a nature receptive of the Holy Trinity is nor to understand the unity, that is, essential knowledge." *KG* 2.11, S2; (Evagrius of Pontus 2024), 213. Cf. (Conway-Jones 2018), 272.

[20] *De oratione* 120: "Blessed is the intellect that at the time of prayer attains total freedom from perception (ἀναισθησίαν κτησάμενος)." (Casiday 2006), 198. Cf. *De oratione* 118.

until it has surpassed all mental "representations" (*noēmata*)[21] related to created things.[22]

Evagrius defines prayer as "a state of the intellect (*nous*) destructive of every earthly 'representation' (*noēmatos*),"[23] meaning any image of a sensible object. "This inner experience"[24] frees the intellect from "the mental representations that leave imprints (*typoō*) upon it."[25] The goal is to "approaching the Immaterial One in an immaterial way."[26]

This "pure prayer" manifests as an intense, transitory process in which the intellect (*nous*), liberated from images and concepts, enters a "formless" state – achieving direct communion with God without intermediaries. This iconoclastic noetic experience also reflects a gnoseological movement from multiplicity to simplicity.[27]

In an exceptional use of language concerning 'imprinting,' Evagrius states in *On Thoughts* that, "at the moment of pure prayer (*proseuchēs katharas*), a divine

---

[21] *De oratione* 70.

[22] *Skemmata* 23: Οὐκ ἂν ἴδοι ὁ νοῦς τὸν τοῦ Θεοῦ τόπον ἐν ἑαυτῷ, μὴ πάντων τῶν ἐν τοῖς πράγμασιν νοημάτων ὑψηλότερος γεγονώς; (Harmless and Fitzgerald 2001c), 525, modif. (Bitton-Ashkelony 2011), 302.

[23] *Skemmata* 26: Προσευχή ἐστι κατάστασις νοῦ, φθαρτικὴ παντὸς ἐπιγείου νοήματος; (Harmless and Fitzgerald 2001c), 526, modif. Evagrius stresses that one cannot 'pray purely' (προσεύξασθαι καθαρῶς), "while being tangled up with material things and shaken by unremitting cares. For prayer is the setting aside of representations (προσευχὴ γάρ ἐστιν ἀπόθεσις νοημάτων)"; *De oratione* 71; (Casiday 2006), 193. "Those who desire pure prayer (καθαρᾶς προσευχῆς), must keep watch over their anger (θυμὸν), control their belly, limit their water consumption, keep vigil in prayer [...] knock at the door of Scripture with the hands of virtues. Then *apatheia* of the heart (καρδίας ἀπάθεια) will dawn for you and you will see, during prayer, the intellect shining like a star (νοῦν ἀστεροειδῆ ὄψει ἐν προσευχῇ)." *De malignis cogitationibus* 43; (Évagre le Pontique 1998), 298, 299.

[24] (Harmless and Fitzgerald 2001a), 518.

[25] This state of prayer assumes that the intellect is devoid of any representation, of any "form" – not only of sensible things and any created reality, but even of God Himself. See *De oratione* 67: "Never give a shape (Μὴ σχηματίσῃς) to the divine as such when you pray, nor allow your intellect to be imprinted (τυπωθῆναί) by any form (μορφήν), but go immaterial to the Immaterial (ἀλλὰ ἄϋλος τῷ ἀϋλῳ πρόσιθι) and you will understand (καὶ συνήσεις)." Cf. (Casiday 2006), 193. Any representation of God, Christ, or angels that might arise at this moment can only be a deception of the demons, especially the demon of vainglory, cf. *De oratione* 116. See (Guillaumont 1984), 255–256.

[26] *De oratione* 67. The contemplative realizes that, in his reality as a creature, the fundamental dimension is not his material body, but his immaterial intellect (*nous*). This intellect, created and perfectly adapted, aims to know the Immaterial, namely, God as a non-numerical Trinity and perfect unity. The intellect thus becomes the "immaterial icon of the Immaterial God." (Driscoll 2003), 15.

[27] *De oratione* 85: ἡ δὲ προσευχὴ προοίμιόν ἐστι τῆς ἀΰλου καὶ ἀποικίλου γνώσεως – "And prayer is a prelude to the immaterial and simple knowledge." (Bitton-Ashkelony 2011), 300.

light (*phos*) appears in the intellect and imprints (*ektypóō*[28]) 'the place of God' (*topos tou Theou*)." The use of '*ektypóō*' here[29] is particularly surprising, as in the very next chapter, the '*noēma tou theou*' is explicitly listed among 'representations' that leave no form in the intellect.[30]

In the expression *to noēma tou Theou*,[31] the word *noēma* no longer signifies a 'representation,' but rather the 'idea,' 'concept,' or 'thought' of God — *hē mnēmē tou Theou*, "the memory of God,"[32] as described in the *Chapters to Evagrius' Disciples*.[33]

As this divine ray recreates the authentic "state of the intellect" (*noû katástasis*), it gains the capacity to contemplate itself, "like sapphire or sky-blue – which Scripture also calls 'the place of God' (*tópon Theoû*), seen on Mt Sinai by the elders."[34] What it sees possesses brilliance and color but lacks form.[35]

---

[28] ἐκτυπόω (derived from ἔκτυπος) = "worked in high relief." For another unusual use of the language of "imprinting" [τυπόω = "form by impress;" "form, mould, model"; (Liddell et al. 1996), 524, 1835], see *KG* 5.41 (Hausherr 1939), 231: "The one bearing the *intelligible cosmos* (νοητὸς κόσμος) imprinted (τυπούμενον) in himself ceases from all corruptible desire (ἐπιθυμία φθαρτή); and he is ashamed at those things he first he enjoyed; his thought (λογισμός) frequently reproaches him for his earlier insensibility." (Evagrius of Pontus 2024), 380.

[29] *De malignis cogitationibus* 40.9, which also appears in 25.40 (Évagre le Pontique 1998), 242: "But, pay attention to yourself (πρόσεχε σεαυτῷ) and see how the intellect (ὁ νοῦς) puts on the form (ἐνδύεται τὴν μορφήν) of its own body without the face, but again imprints (ἐκτυποῖ) the neighbour entirely by means of discursive thought (κατὰ διάνοιαν), since having grasped beforehand and seen such a one entirely."

[30] 41.27–29, (Évagre le Pontique 1998), 294: διότι τὸ τοῦ θεοῦ νόημα οὐκ ἐν τοῖς τυποῦσιν τὸν νοῦν νοήμασίν ἐστιν.

[31] *De malignis cogitationibus* 41.17. The expression τὸ νόημα τοῦ θεοῦ – which appears only here and in the *Scholion* 1 *on Psalm* 140.2(1) ("τὸ δὲ τοῦ θεοῦ νόημα") – may seem unusual: the word νόημα takes on the meaning of "notion," "idea," or "concept" in this context rather than that of "representation." (Évagre le Pontique 1998), 293, n. 7.

[32] *Capita cic auctoribus discipulis Evagrii* 61.6 (Évagre le Pontique 2007), 162. The formula "ἡ μνήμη τοῦ Θεοῦ" is another biblically inspired way of designating the state of prayer. See *Scholion* 22 *on Psalm* 118.55: "for the evil thought (λογισμὸς), lingering in the discursive thought (τῇ διανοίᾳ), distracts the intellect (τὸν νοῦν) and separates it from the memory of God (τῆς μνήμης τῆς τοῦ θεοῦ)" (Évagre le Pontique 2007), 162, n. 61. "The memory of God" plays an important role in Evagrian spirituality, as evidenced by *Admonitio paraenetica* 3. This expression stands in opposition to "passion-laden memories" (*Praktikos* 34.1: Ὧν τὰς μνήμας ἔχομεν ἐμπαθεῖς), which include bad thoughts and the distractions arising from people and worldly affairs. (Muyldermans 1952), 87, 126, 157.

[33] (Guillaumont 1998), 21–22.

[34] *De malignis cogitationibus* 39.3–6 (Évagre le Pontique 1998), 286: σαπφείρῳ ἢ οὐρανίῳ χρώματι παρεμφερῆ, ἥντινα καὶ τόπον θεοῦ ἡ γραφὴ ὀνομάζει ὑπὸ τῶν πρεσβυτέρων ὀφθέντα ἐπὶ τοῦ ὄρους Σινᾶ. (Casiday 2006), 114.

[35] See *Skemmata* 2: καὶ τότε ὄψεται αὐτὸν σαπφείρῳ ἢ οὐρανίῳ χρώματι παρεμφερῆ – "then he will see the intellect appear similar to sapphire or to the colour of the sky." (Harmless and Fitzgerald 2001c), 521. *Skemmata* 4: Νοῦ κατάστασίς ἐστιν ὕψος νοητὸν οὐρανίῳ χρώματι παρεμφερές· – "The state of the intellect is an *intelligible height*, comparable in colour to the sky." (Harmless and Fitzgerald 2001c), 521. (Stewart 2001), 197–198.

This "formless light,"[36] through which the intellect perceives itself, is not inherent to the intellect but is, in fact, the light of God Himself.[37] By seeing itself as light, much like the azure of the sky, the intellect uncovers its likeness to God. Simultaneously, it perceives and comprehends – "indirectly, as if in a mirror" – "the immaterial, uncreated light that is God."[38] However, what the intellect sees is not God Himself in His essence. Instead, much like the people of ancient Israel, it perceives the 'place of God,' which is its own self, enveloped in divine light.[39]

The Vision of Intelligible Light in Plotinus

A. Guillaumont argued that, to express the experience during pure prayer, "Evagrius used language influenced by his philosophical culture, especially Neoplatonism."[40] For a diachronic comparison, Plotinus may serve as the primary point of reference due to his extensive descriptions of mystical experiences and luminous visions.[41]

Like Evagrius, Plotinus emphasized the highest spiritual experience, recognizing the limits of language in expressing it.[42] "For this reason the vision (*theama*) is hard to express (*dysphraston*) in words."[43] Mystical vision, by its very nature, "transcends the

---

[36] (Conway-Jones 2018), 271; (Guillaumont 1984), 256.

[37] Thus, in moments of "pure prayer," the intellect sees itself because it has become luminous; however, this light that enables it to see itself and perceive its "state" is the divine light that envelops it. This divine light is God Himself, as Evagrius states, adopting the Johannine formula (1 Jn 1:5), "God, in his essence, is light." Cf. *Kephalaia gnostica* 1.35, S1, (Frankenberg 1912), 79: Ωσπερ το φως παντα ημιν αποδεικνυον αλλου φωτος ου δειται προς το θεαθηναι εν αυτωι ουτως ουδε ο θεος αποδεικνυων ημιν παν τι φωτος δειται εις το γνωσθηναι εν αυτωι. αυτος γαρ τηι ουσιαι φως εστι. – "Just as light (*phos*) itself, while showing everything to us, does not need another light (*phos*) by which to be seen, so also God, although he shows everything, does not need another light (*phos*) by which to be known. For, in his essence, 'He is light (*phos*).'" (Evagrius of Pontus 2024), 169.

[38] (Harmless and Fitzgerald 2001a), 519.

[39] (Guillaumont 1984), 260.

[40] (Guillaumont 1984), 260.

[41] (Konstantinovsky 2009), 78.

[42] Plotinus differentiates between ordinary 'inferential or discursive thought' (called *dianoia* or *logismos*) and the 'non-discursive, intuitive thought' characteristic of the Intellect. For the latter, he employs the terms *noesis* ('intellection') and *theoria* ('contemplation'). Unlike discursive thought, "non-discursive thought is not inferential; it grasps its objects all at once, is non-representational (not thinking in images), is veridical and certain, and possesses its object rather than searching for it." See (Emilsson 2007), 176–185.

[43] *Enneads* (*hereafter Enn.*) 6.9.10 (Plotinus 2011b), 340.19–21; (Plotinus 2011b), 341.

limits of intelligible categories," meaning it cannot be strictly analyzed in rational terms.[44] Furthermore, providing a complete description of a profound spiritual experience is impossible from the perspective of the experience itself, as it requires transcending ordinary consciousness and annulling the subject-object distinction.[45] "How could you proclaim him as other /than yourself/, if, when you were in contemplation (*theaomai*), you did not see him as being other, but as a unity with yourself?"[46]

Due to the abolition of the subject-object distinction even at the level of awareness, the language used to describe the mystical experience, after the event,[47] will be approximate, possessing an evocative rather than an analytical character.[48]

In *Ennead* 4.8.1, Plotinus famously describes the "soul's awakening from the body to the mystical beauty of the self", followed by its "return from the Intellect to discursive reasoning:"[49]

> "Often I have woken up out of the body to my self and have entered into myself, going out from all other things; I have seen a beauty wonderfully great and felt assurance that then most of all I belonged to the better part; I have actually lived the best life and come to identity with the divine (*tōi theíōi eis tautòn gegenēménos*); and set firm in it I have come to that supreme actuality, setting myself above all else in the realm of the intelligible (*noēton*). Then after that rest in the divine, when I have come down from

---

[44] (O'Daly 2019), 82.

[45] See Plotinus, *Enn.* 1.6.9.1.1 sq.; 6.9.2.35; 6.9.11.8 sq.; 4.8.6.1.1 sq. (Konstantinovsky 2009), 98.

[46] *Enn.* 6.9.10 (Plotinus 2011b), 340.20–21: πῶς γὰρ ἂν ἀπαγγείλειέ τις ὡς ἕτερον οὐκ ἰδὼν ἐκεῖ ὅτε ἐθεᾶτο ἕτερον, ἀλλὰ ἓν πρὸς ἑαυτόν. (Plotin 2003a), 309.

[47] A description made after a mystical event, from a restored state of normal discursive reasoning and with the re-established distinction between subject and object, cannot fully capture the experience itself. See (Konstantinovsky 2009), 99.

[48] Nevertheless, Plotinus, aware that union with the Absolute represents the pinnacle of his thought, seeks to connect this description, albeit with reluctance, to his entire system of thought. Thus, he aims not only to evoke but also to analyse, perceiving the experience as a form of knowledge. (O'Daly 2019), 82.

[49] The experience describes a union with the One, beginning from the level of the Intellect, which does not operate through analytical and discursive thought. Once this experience concludes, the Soul returns to its "centre of gravity," i.e., to reasoning and discursive thought. (Plotin 2003a), 250, n. 2. Following Plato, Plotinus opposes analytical intelligence (*dianoia*) to pure intellect (*nous*), which can access simple entities that cannot be expressed by a "*logos*" composed of subject and predicate (see Plato, *Republic* 511c–d; cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, VIII, 10). The Soul can know these only by uniting with them, "being" them in a certain way. Knowledge in Plotinus becomes identification with the known object (see *Enn.* 6.9.3.10–13). (Plotin 2003a), 291, n. 28.

Intellect (*nous*) to discursive reasoning (*logismos*), I am puzzled how I ever came down, and how my soul has come to be in the body when it is what it has shown itself to be by itself, even when it is in the body."[50]

Some commentators have interpreted this Plotinian passage as a depiction of personal mystical experiences,[51] which his student, Porphyry, also references in *Vita Plotini* 23.[52]

A. Guillaumont sought to link Plotinus' ecstatic experience in *Enneads* 4.8.1[53] with Evagrius' accounts of the intellect contemplating itself as light during 'pure prayer.' However, Professor Bitton-Ashkelony suggests that a comparable record of ecstatic experience is absent from Evagrius' writings.[54] Furthermore, Evagrius does not seem to regard 'pure prayer' as ecstatic in the strict sense. While ecstasy (*ekstasis*) implies a 'standing out' from oneself, Evagrius' prayer involves a *katastasis* – a "return to one's true state of being" – rather than self-abandonment.[55]

---

[50] *Enn.* 4.8.1 (Plotinus 2011a), 396.1–9: Πολλάκις ἐγειρόμενος εἰς ἐμαυτὸν ἐκ τοῦ σώματος καὶ γινόμενος τῶν μὲν ἄλλων ἔξω, ἐμαυτοῦ δὲ εἴσω, θαυμαστὸν ἡλίκον ὁρῶν κάλλος, καὶ τῆς κρείττονος μοίρας πιστεύσας τότε μάλιστα εἶναι, ζωήν τε ἀρίστην ἐνεργήσας καὶ τῷ θείῳ εἰς ταὐτὸν γεγενημένος καὶ ἐν αὐτῷ ἱδρυθεὶς εἰς ἐνέργειαν ἐλθὼν ἐκείνην ὑπὲρ πᾶν τὸ ἄλλο νοητὸν ἐμαυτὸν ἱδρύσας, μετὰ ταύτην τὴν ἐν τῷ θείῳ στάσιν εἰς λογισμὸν ἐκ νοῦ καταβὰς ἀπορῶ, πῶς ποτε καὶ νῦν καταβαίνω, καὶ ὅπως ποτέ μοι ἔνδον ἡ ψυχὴ γεγένηται τοῦ σώματος τοῦτο οὖσα, οἷον ἐφάνη καθ' ἑαυτήν, καίπερ οὖσα ἐν σώματι (Plotinus 2011a), 397, modif.

[51] See (Wallis 1976), 121–154. Especially the passages that describe the radiant luminosity of the Intelligible world [*Enn.* 6.7.15: "so that the region is illuminated by noetic light – ὡς φέγγει νοερῷ καταλάμπεσθαι τὸν τόπον… but one must become that [the Intellect], and make oneself the contemplation" – δεῖ δὲ ἑαυτὸν ἐκεῖνο γενόμενον τὴν θέαν /ἑαυτόν/ ποιήσασθαι." (Plotinus 2011b), 136.30–31; 32–33. (Plotinus 2011b), 137] represent a type of proof that Plotinus has in mind "an actual experience" and that the *nous* is "not a mere theoretical construction derived from the Aristotelian and Middle Platonic tradition." (Wallis 1976), 123. See also A. Cornea, (Plotin 2003a), 250, n. 1: "Philosophy in Plotinus is not only a desk affair or a commentary, but an attempt to interpret in rational terms and, following the Platonic tradition, a *personal mystical experience*."

[52] For Plotinus (Porphyry, *Vita Plotini* 23), "his end and goal was to be united to, to approach the God who is over all things." – Τέλος γὰρ αὐτῷ καὶ σκοπὸς ἦν τὸ ἑνωθῆναι καὶ πελάσαι τῷ ἐπὶ πᾶσι θεῷ. (Plotinus 1989), 71. "Plotinus attained this goal [of union with the One] four times, not as a mere possibility but in ineffable actuality." – Ἔτυχε δὲ τετράκις που, ὅτε αὐτῷ συνήμην, τοῦ σκοποῦ τούτου ἐνεργείᾳ ἀρρήτῳ [καὶ οὐ δυνάμει]. (Plotinus 1989), 70.15–18; (Plotinus 1989), 71.

[53] (Guillaumont 1984), 260: "Plotinus describes in analogous terms a state that he claims to have experienced many times (*Enn.* 4. 8.1.1–11)."

[54] (Bitton-Ashkelony 2011), 304.

[55] (Harmless and Fitzgerald 2001b), 514.

The experience of *ekstasis*[56] in Plotinus occurs "suddenly" (*exaíphnēs*),[57] and the Intellect has the vision of a light, not of an object illuminated by a light that is different from itself,[58] but of the light itself.[59] This is the light of the Good, the Good itself, which illuminates the Intellect, and the Intellect sees itself illuminated,[60] shining, and filled with intelligible light, until it becomes pure light itself: "It is therefore possible

[56] To reach the transcendent, the Intellect must acquire "another way of seeing" (ἀλλὰ ἄλλος τρόπος τοῦ ἰδεῖν), "to go out of itself" (ἔκστασις) and become something "simple" (ἅπλωσις) (*Enn.* 6.9.11.22–23), "not Being, but beyond Being" (οὐκ οὐσία, ἀλλ᾿ ἐπέκεινα οὐσίας) (*Enn.* 6.9.11.41). (Chindea 2008), 218. Nevertheless, for Plotinus, "ecstasy is nothing but a revelation, at a given moment, of an eternal *datum*." (Dodds 1960), 6. In Evagrius, the term ἔκστασις appears with its pejorative meaning of "disorder of the mind" (Liddell et al. 1996), 520. See *Praktikos* 14.6 (Évagre le Pontique 1971), 534: ἔκστασις φρενῶν – „losing one's mind". *Capitula xxxiii* (*definitiones passionum animae rationalis*) 9, (Migne 1863), 1265B: Ἔκστασις, ἔστι νεῦσις πάλιν πρὸς κακίαν λογικῆς ψυχῆς μετὰ τὴν ἀρετὴν καὶ γνῶσιν τὴν τοῦ Θεοῦ – „*Ecstasy* is a turning back towards vice of the rational soul, after having acquired virtue and the knowledge of God."

[57] ἐξαίφνης = "suddenly," "unexpectedly," or "abruptly" (Liddell et al. 1996), 582. Platon, *Symposium* 210.e.4–5: ἐξαίφνης κατόψεταί τι θαυμαστὸν τὴν φύσιν καλόν – "suddenly, he glimpses something by its nature wonderfully beautiful." (Platon 2011), 148. See Plotinus, *Enn.* 5.3.17.29: ὅταν ἡ ψυχὴ ἐξαίφνης φῶς λάβῃ – "when the Soul suddenly caught sight of light" (Plotin 2009), 341; cf. *Enn.* 5.5.3.13; 5.5.7.34; 5.8.7.14; 6.7.34.13; 6.7.36.19. The immediate nature of the light's appearance experienced by Plotinus (*Enn.* 5.5.7.26) can also be confirmed by Plato (*Letters* VII, 341c7–d1), who talks about knowledge transmitted from teacher to student: οἷον ἀπὸ πυρὸς πεδήσαντος ἐξάφθὲν φῶς – "which leaps forth like a light from a kindled fire." See (Bussanich 1988), 137–139. Knowledge that comes suddenly and unexpectedly (*exaíphnēs*), as an enlightenment, is, for Evagrius (cf. *Epistulae* 64.67), a gift from God, an undeserved grace. (Abba Evagrius Ponticus 2022), 375, n. 889.

[58] *Enn.* 6.7.36.10–13 (Plotinus 2011b), 198: Ὅστις γένηται ὁμοῦ θεατής τε καὶ θέαμα αὐτὸς αὐτοῦ καὶ τῶν ἄλλων καὶ γενόμενος οὐσία καὶ νοῦς καὶ <ζῷον παντελὲς> μηκέτι ἔξωθεν αὐτὸ βλέποι – "Whoever suddenly becomes both seer and vision – seeing himself and seeing the rest – becoming being, Intellect, and 'Complete Living Being,' would no longer be able to look at Him from the outside." (Plotin 2009), 85.

[59] *Enn.* 6.7.36.15–21 (Plotinus 2011b), 200: Ἔνθα δὴ ἐάσας τις πᾶν μάθημα, καὶ μέχρι του παιδαγωγηθεὶς καὶ ἐν καλῷ ἱδρυθείς, ἐν ᾧ μέν ἐστι, μέχρι τούτου νοεῖ, ἐξενεχθεὶς δὲ τῷ αὐτοῦ τοῦ νοῦ οἷον κύματι καὶ ὑψοῦ ὑπ᾿ αὐτοῦ οἷον οἰδήσαντος ἀρθεὶς εἰσεῖδεν ἐξαίφνης οὐκ ἰδὼν ὅπως, ἀλλ᾿ ἡ θέα πλήσασα φωτὸς τὰ ὄμματα οὐ δι᾿ αὐτοῦ πεποίηκεν ἄλλο ὁρᾶν, ἀλλ᾿ αὐτὸ τὸ φῶς τὸ ὅραμα ἦν – "There you set aside all knowledge; up to a certain point, you received instruction. Being established in Beauty, you think as far as your present state. But, being carried beyond the very wave of the Intellect itself, swept away by its swelling surge, you saw suddenly (*exaíphnēs*), without seeing how; the vision, filling your eyes with light, did not make you see something else through light, but what you saw was it – the light!" (Plotin 2009), 86.

[60] *Enn.* 5.3.17.34–38 (Plotinus 1984), 134: φωτισθεῖσα δὲ ἔχει, ὃ ἐζήτει, καὶ τοῦτο τὸ τέλος τἀληθινὸν ψυχῇ, ἐφάψασθαι φωτὸς ἐκείνου καὶ αὐτῷ αὐτὸ θεάσασθαι, οὐκ ἄλλου φωτί, ἀλλ᾿ αὐτό, δι᾿ οὗ καὶ ὁρᾷ. Δι᾿ οὗ γὰρ ἐφωτίσθη, τοῦτό ἐστιν, ὃ δεῖ θεάσασθαι – „But when it is enlightened, it possesses the One it seeks, and this is the true goal of the Soul – to come into contact with that light and to see it through the light itself, not through another light, but through the very light by which it also sees. Indeed, it is the very light by which it was enlightened that it must look through." (Plotin 2009), 342.

Here to see (*horaō*) Him and to see your Self, as you are allowed to see: your Self / to see it/ shining, full of an intelligible light (*phōtos plērēs noētou*); rather the Self itself having become pure light (*phōs katharon*), unburdened, light, having become a God, or rather being God."[61]

When contemplating the light, the Intellect does not see it as something existing outside itself,[62] but rather like the eye, which, in darkness or under pressure,[63] suddenly sees a light emanating from within itself:

> "Thus, the intellect (*nous*), having veiled itself from all other things and gathered itself (*synagagō*) inward (*eis to eso*), seeing nothing /external/ (*meden horon*), will behold (*theaomai*) not a different light (*phōs*) in something else, but the light (*phōs*) itself, in itself (*kath' heauton*), the only pure (*katharon*) light, suddenly (*exaiphnēs*) manifesting within itself (*eph' heautou*)."[64]

According to J. Bussanich,[65] "the One, as the source of light[66] and the luminosity

---

[61] *Enn.* 6.9.9.56–59 (Plotinus 2011b), 338: Ὁρᾶν δὴ ἔστιν ἐνταῦθα κἀκεῖνον καὶ ἑαυτὸν ὡς ὁρᾶν θέμις· ἑαυτὸν μὲν ἠγλαϊσμένον, φωτὸς πλήρη νοητοῦ, μᾶλλον δὲ φῶς αὐτὸ καθαρόν, ἀβαρῆ, κοῦφον, θεὸν γενόμενον. (Plotin 2003a), 307–308.

[62] *Enn.* 5.5.7.21–23 (Plotinus 1984), 176: Ἀλλ' ἐπεὶ μὴ ὡς ἔξω ὂν δεῖ τὸν νοῦν τοῦτο τὸ φῶς βλέπειν – "But the Intellect must not look at this light as something external (to itself)…" (Plotin 2003b), 368.

[63] *Enn.* 5.5.7.25–29.

[64] *Enn.* 5.5.7.31–34 (Plotinus 1984), 178: Οὕτω δὴ καὶ νοῦς αὐτὸν ἀπὸ τῶν ἄλλων καλύψας καὶ συναγαγὼν εἰς τὸ εἴσω μηδὲν ὁρῶν θεάσεται οὐκ ἄλλο ἐν ἄλλῳ φῶς, ἀλλ' αὐτὸ καθ' ἑαυτὸ μόνον καθαρὸν ἐφ' αὑτοῦ ἐξαίφνης φανέν. (Plotin 2003b), 369.

[65] Throughout Chapter 7 of Treatise 5.5 [32], Plotinus makes extensive analogies between *aisthesis* (sensation) and *noesis* (intellection) to clarify the relationship between the One and the Intellect. He shows that *aisthesis* is dual, involving both the sensible object (*aistheton*) and the light medium through which it is perceived (lines 1–16). "Similarly" (*houtos*), "*noesis* is directed toward the intelligible objects and the light from the One that illuminates them" (16–22). Plotinus then discusses the "light internal to the eye, which is apprehended by not seeing when external objects are removed from the field of vision" (22–31). "Similarly (*houtos*), the Intellect perceives its own internal light when it 'veils itself' from its objects" (31–35). See (Bussanich 1988), 133–139.

[66] The sources of sensible and intelligible light are briefly mentioned in this chapter: the sun (5.5.7.11) and "the primary nature" (πρώτη φύσει) (5.5.7.17–18). Elsewhere, the procession of Intellect from the One is presented more explicitly as light, which is associated with the theory of double-activity (*energeia*). See *Enn.* 5.3.12.40–45 (Plotinus 1984), 116: "We shall say that the first *energeia*, which, as it were, flows from it (ἀπ' αὐτοῦ) like light from the sun (ὡς ἀπὸ ἡλίου φῶς), is the *nous* and all intelligible nature (πᾶσαν τὴν νοητὴν φύσιν); but he himself, remaining motionless at the summit of the intelligible world (ἐπ' ἄκρῳ τῷ νοητῷ), reigns over it (βασιλεύειν ἐπ' αὐτοῦ): he does not cast out the radiance (ἐκφανέν) from himself – for we would admit another light before light (ἢ ἄλλο φῶς πρὸ φωτὸς ποιήσομεν) – but always illuminates (ἐπιλάμπειν), remaining unchanged over the intelligible world (ἀεὶ μένοντα ἐπὶ τοῦ νοητοῦ)."(Plotinus 1984), 117. For the Good as the cause of Intellect and intellection, closely following Plato, *Republic* 508e–509b, cf. Plotinus, *Enn.* 5.7.16.21–31. See (Bussanich 1988), 134–135.

of the intelligible universe,"[67] serves as the starting point for "the mystical vision of the One," as illustrated by Plotinus in this passage.[68] At the same time, as the "Intellect withdraws from intelligible objects,"[69] it undergoes a "gathering inward."[70] "This inward turning is a mystical imperative, not only because the Good is present within everything, but also because it too 'is, if we may say so, borne to his own interior.'"[71]

The radical transformation of the 'Intellect's normal intelligible vision' is captured by the phrase *mēden horōn* ("seeing nothing"[72]). This mirrors what occurs when the eye turns inward: "For then in not seeing (*ouch horōn*) it sees (*horāi*), and sees then most of all; for it sees (*horāi*) light (*phōs*)."[73] The Intellect, in turn, sees this light but is soon enveloped by it, leading to the instantaneous dissolution of distinctions between subject and object, as well as inner and outer. This hyper-

---

[67] According to Plotinus, in the intelligible universe, considered apart from the One, light is pervasive. See *Enn.* 5.8.4.5–7 (Plotinus 1984), 248: "for all things are transparent (διαφανῆ), and there is nothing dark (σκοτεινὸν) or opaque (ἀντίτυπον); everything and all things are clear to the inmost part to everything (εἰς τὸ εἴσω); for light (φῶς) is transparent to light (φωτί)." (Plotinus 1984), 249. Based on the principle of omnipresence, and continuity, of light, Intellect is the source of light for the Soul, cf. *Enn.* 4.3.11.14–15 (Plotinus 2011a), 70: Ἦν δὴ νοῦς ἐκεῖνος ὁ ἐκεῖ ἥλιος – "So that sun in the divine realm is Intellect," and what derives from Intellect is „light from light" – φῶς ἐκ φωτός (4.3.17.13–14); (Plotinus 2011a), 88. See (Bussanich 1988), 135.

[68] (Bussanich 1988), 135.

[69] *Enn.* 5.5.7.31: αὐτὸν ἀπὸ τῶν ἄλλων καλύψας – "having veiled itself from all other things" – suggests that the 'Intellect is moving away from its usual apprehension of intelligible beings' and shifting toward 'a direct inner awareness of the One.' The Intellect's turn to focus on the light-medium through which it perceives is also expressed earlier at 5.5.7.20: ἀφήσει τὰ ὁρώμενα – "it abandons the things it sees" (Plotinus 1984), 177, a phrase that echoes the technical language of negative theology at 5.3.17.38: Ἄφελε πάντα – "Take away everything!" (Plotinus 1984), 135. See (Bussanich 1988), 135.

[70] (Bussanich 1988), 136. The phrase "εἰς τὸ εἴσω" signals a 'mystical approach to the One,' as reflected in the statement that "the soul must let go of all outward things and turn altogether to what is within." *Enn.* 6.9.7.17–18 (Plotinus 2011b), 328: πάντων τῶν ἔξω ἀφεμένην δεῖ ἐπιστραφῆναι πρὸς τὸ εἴσω πάντη (Plotinus 2011b), 329.

[71] *Enn.* 6.8.16.13 (Plotinus 2011b), 280: ὁ δ' εἰς τὸ εἴσω οἷον φέρεται αὐτοῦ. (Plotinus 2011b), 281.

[72] Werner Beierwaltes underscores that the luminous nature of theophanic events is central to epistemology, defining knowledge as a direct, illuminated participation in divine reality. See (Beierwaltes 1961), 343: "'Seeing nothing' (*Nichts sehend*), the Intellect sees, because light (*Licht*) cannot be grasped as an objective thing, because it does not reside in something else as a quality, but, being in itself (*in sich seiend*), is only itself (*nur es selbst ist*) and shines only from itself (*nur von sich selbst her scheinend ist*). Light is light because it is unified in itself (*einig in sich selbst ist*). But non-seeing (*Nicht-Sehen*) is the only appropriate way of seeing (*Sehens*) corresponding to light that is in itself (*in sich seienden*), which does not see with the help of light (*Lichtes*), but is one with it by seeing-not-seeing (*nichtsehend-sehend*)."

[73] *Enn.* 5.5.7.29-30 (Plotinus 1984), 178: Τότε γὰρ οὐχ ὁρῶν ὁρᾷ καὶ μάλιστα τότε ὁρᾷ· φῶς γὰρ ὁρᾷ·

noetic[74] mode of knowledge is analogous to "immediate intuitive apprehension" (*athroa prosbolēi*[75]), a state attributed to the eye when it turns upon itself.[76]

It is important to emphasize the analogy between the Intellect's "turning inward" (*synagō eis to eisō*) and the contemplation (*horaō/ theaomai*) of light (*phōs*) in Plotinus, and Evagrius's theory that, during prayer, the intellect contemplates (*horaō/ theōreō*) its "own state (*katastasis*),"[77] "its own light/radiance (*phengos*)"[78]. In this context, the Plotinian concept of the Intellect's "dual vision"[79] could become, as Brouria Bitton-Ashkelony suggests,[80] the key to understanding the culmination of Evagrius's theory of "pure prayer."

> "Intellect (*nous*) also, then, has one power (*dynamis*) for thinking (*noeō*), by which it looks (*blepō*) at the things in itself (*en autō*), and one by which it looks at what transcends it (*epekeina autou*) by a direct intuition (*epibolē*) and direct reception (*paradochē*), by which also before it saw (*horaō*) only, and by seeing (*horaō*) acquired intellect (*nous*) and is one."[81]

The Intellect's self-contemplation in Plotinus is likened to light (*phōs*) seeing itself (*"auto ara auto horai"*), a conception based on the fact that "actual seeing is double"[82] and that, "There" (*ekei*), in the intelligible universe,

> "it sees not through another (*di' heterou*), but through itself (*di' hautēs*), because there is nothing outside (*mēde exō*) it. Therefore, one light (*phōs*) sees (*horaō*) another light (*phōs allo*) by means of another light (*allō phōti*),

---

[74] Cf. also (O'Daly 2019), 84.

[75] *Enn.* 5.5.7.8 (Plotinus 1984), 176. The same term describes the Intellect's intuitive grasp of the One at 3.8.10.33. See (Plotinus 1980), 396: προσβολῇ συνείς – "knowing it by intuition"; (Plotinus 1980), 397], just as its synonym, ἐπιβολῇ, does: 3.8.9.21 [(Plotinus 1980), 390: ἐπιβολῇ ἀθρόᾳ – „immediate intuition"; (Plotin 2003b), 330]; 6.7.35.22 (Plotinus 2011b), 196: βλέπει … ἐπιβολῇ – „sees by immediate intuition." (Plotin 2009), 84.

[76] See (Bussanich 1988), 136.

[77] Evagrius, *De malignis cogitationibus* 39.2–6: ἑαυτοῦ κατάστασιν.

[78] Evagrius, *Gnostikos* 45.6–8: τὸ οἰκεῖον φέγγος; *Praktikos* 64.1–3: τὸ οἰκεῖον φέγγος.

[79] *Enn.* 6.9.3.33–34 (Plotinus 2011b), 312: Δύναται δὲ ὁρᾶν ὁ νοῦς ἢ τὰ πρὸ αὐτοῦ ἢ τὰ αὐτοῦ [ἢ τὰ παρ' αὐτοῦ] – "The Intellect can see either those things that are prior to it, or its own things, [or those that proceed from it." (Plotin 2003a), 292.

[80] (Bitton-Ashkelony 2011), 304.

[81] *Enn.* 6.7.35.20–24 (Plotinus 2011b), 196: Καὶ τὸν νοῦν τοίνυν τὴν μὲν ἔχειν δύναμιν εἰς τὸ νοεῖν, ᾗ τὰ ἐν αὐτῷ βλέπει, τὴν δέ, ᾗ τὰ ἐπέκεινα αὐτοῦ ἐπιβολῇ τινι καὶ παραδοχῇ, καθ' ἣν καὶ πρότερον ἑώρα μόνον καὶ ὁρῶν ὕστερον καὶ νοῦν ἔσχε καὶ ἕν ἐστι. (Plotin 2009), 84, modif.

[82] *Enn.* 5.5.7.1 (Plotinus 1984), 174: Ἦ ἐπειδὴ διττὸν καὶ τὸ ἐνεργείᾳ βλέπειν. (Plotinus 1984), 175.

not through anything else (*di' allou*). So then, one light sees another light, and consequently, it sees itself (*auto hautō horā*)."[83]

This Plotinian perspective of the Intellect, which "needs to see itself, or rather to possess the seeing of itself (...), and its seeing is its substance,"[84] must have been significant, as Bitton-Ashkelony concludes, "in shaping Evagrius' theory of the self-vision of the *nous*, the summit of the activity of the praying *nous*."[85]

Evagrius and Plotinus

It is broadly acknowledged that phenomena involving light during meditation are documented across a range of religious traditions. When comparing figures such as Evagrius and Plotinus[86] or other mystics, it is important to remember that seemingly similar terminology can obscure significant differences[87] in usage. Moreover, experiences that appear alike might lead us to overlook crucial distinctions in religious culture.[88]

---

[83] *Enneade* 5.3.8.20–22: ἐκεῖ δὲ οὐ δι' ἑτέρου, ἀλλὰ δι' αὐτῆς, ὅτι μηδὲ ἔξω. Ἄλλῳ οὖν φωτὶ ἄλλο φῶς ὁρᾷ, οὐ δι' ἄλλου. Φῶς ἄρα φῶς ἄλλο ὁρᾷ· αὐτὸ ἄρα αὐτὸ ὁρᾷ (Plotin 2009), 329. See also (Hadot 1997), 104: "For Plotinus, as for Plato, vision consists of a contact between the inner light (*lumière intérieure*) of the eye and the outer light (*lumière extérieure*). However, Plotinus concludes that when vision becomes spiritual, there is no longer any distinction between the inner light and the outer light. Vision is light, and light is vision (*La vision est lumière et la lumière est vision*). There is a kind of self-vision of light (*autovision de la lumière*): light is as if transparent to itself (*la lumière est comme transparente à elle-même*)."

[84] *Enn.* 5.3.10.9–13 (Plotinus 1984), 104: τὸν νοῦν δεηθῆναι τοῦ ὁρᾶν ἑαυτόν, μᾶλλον δὲ ἔχειν τὸ ὁρᾶν ἑαυτόν,…, καὶ τὴν οὐσίαν αὐτοῦ ὅρασιν εἶναι. (Plotinus 1984), 105.

[85] However, unlike Plotinus, Evagrius does not describe the mechanism of the *nous's* dual capacity to see; he merely states that "just as, then, the intellect receives the representations of all sensible things, so too does it receive those of its own organism." *De malignis cogitationibus* 25.14–16; (Évagre le Pontique 1998), 240. (Bitton-Ashkelony 2011), 305.

[86] Similar to Evagrius, Plotinus created his own symbolic language to articulate ineffable experiences. His accounts of union with supreme reality feature subjective elements, such as joy and light, alongside poetic and metaphorical descriptions, like a 'choral dance.' (*Enn.* 6.9.8.38). See (Konstantinovsky 2009), 99.

[87] For example, Guillaumont points to texts where Plotinus describes the light perceived by the *nous* as inherent to itself when it moves beyond discursive thought, rather than being external (see *Enn*. 5.3.17.29–37; 5.5.7.23–32). Also, in Book 6, Plotinus identifies this light as the "constitutive nature of the nous itself, originating from the light that generates all intelligibles." (*Enn*. 6.7.36.21–27; 6.9.9.56–61). See (Stewart 2001), 195 and n. 106.

[88] See (Katz 1978), 46: "Mystical experience is 'over-determined' by its socio-religious milieu: as a result of his process of intellectual acculturation in its broadest sense, the mystic brings to his experience a world of concepts, images, symbols, and values which shape as well as colour the experience he eventually and actually has."

The experiential contents recounted by Evagrius and Plotinus[89] can be best understood through a holistic[90] approach that considers the essential aspects of their conceptual systems.[91]

Plotinus develops the concept of *henosis*[92] to designate "the union of the Soul with the Intellect,"[93] and for union with the One, he resorts either to the verb *henoō* ("to be united, to become united"[94]), or to the expression *hen amphō*: "no longer are they two, but both – one."[95]

Plotinus' description of mystical union stems from his conception of the One: just as the higher part[96] ("summit") of the soul remains in eternal union with the Intellect, the highest level of the Intellect – "the *nous* in love" or "that in *nous* which is not *nous*" – also remains in eternal union with the One. Therefore, the One does not need to "turn towards us," because it is always present at the core of our being: to realize it, we only need to "remove all things" (*aphairesis*). By doing this, we "make ourselves formless" and anticipate the sudden appearance of the One.[97]

At the highest point of the Plotinian ascent, the vision of the One occurs through the power of the Intellect, yet through a *nous* "emptied" of content. The perception of the One's presence aligns with a kind of simple intuition, but an intuition that is experienced only when the soul becomes completely one with the

---

[89] See (de Andia 2005), 83: "Evagrius Ponticus, like Dionysius the Areopagite, also aligns with the thought of Plotinus and Porphyry, for whom the *noûs*, which contemplates the One, is without form, *aneideos*."

[90] See (Katz 1978), 47: "Choosing descriptions of mystic experience out of their total context does not provide grounds for their comparability, but rather severs all grounds of their intelligibility, for it empties the chosen phrases, terms, and descriptions of definite meaning."

[91] See (Konstantinovsky 2009), 101–102.

[92] In contrast, Evagrius' "doctrine of prayer does not promote any ecstatic behaviour, nor does it lead to union with God in the classic sense of *henosis*." (Bitton-Ashkelony 2011), 299. See also (McGinn 2004), 154: "Evagrius never uses the term 'mystical union,' and even the standard terms for union (*henosis*, *koinonia*, etc.) are largely absent from his vocabulary."

[93] Plotinus, *Enn.* 4.4.2.26.

[94] Porphyry, *Vita Plotini*, 23.15: ἐνωθῆναι. See also Plotinus, *Enn.* 6.9.9.33–34; 45–47.

[95] Plotinus, *Enn.* 6.7.34.13–14: οὐδ᾽ ἔτι δύο, ἀλλ᾽ ἓν ἄμφω; (Plotin 2009), 83. (de Andia 1996), 7.

[96] Evagrius, *De oratione* 36: „Prayer is the ascent of the intellect to God." – Προσευχή ἐστιν ἀνάβασις νοῦ πρὸς Θεόν. Evagrius speaks of "an ascent of the intellect," that is, the "higher" part of our being, and not the soul. As I. Hausherr points out, it is crucial to acknowledge Evagrius's tripartite division. This framework, although unusual for us, consistently uses "intellect" in contexts where we would typically refer to the "soul." (Hausherr 1959), 145. Although Evagrius most often speaks only of the intellect, as Bunge notes, he always has in mind the whole human being, specifically viewed as the "image of God," oriented toward a personal encounter with God through "knowledge" (*gnosis*). See (Bunge 2022), 136.

[97] Plotinus, *Enn.* 1.6.8.23–25; 6.7.35.5–9; 6.8.11.33–35; 6.8.21.25–28; 5.3.17.36–38. (Wallis 1989), 473.

Intellect.[98] To attain union with the One, "the soul must become entirely simple"[99] relinquishing awareness of all intelligible, and previously sensible, realities.[100] In this process, it loses 'consciousness of self,' but at the same time, it discovers its 'true Self.' This 'spiritual journey' is not an external quest but "an inward movement, experienced by the soul as a return to its origin and true home."[101]

According to D. Linge, Evagrius' understanding of reality, while inspired by Platonic thought, is essentially 'experiential,' serving as a "path of purification through which the ascetic ascends to union with God." Platonic philosophy offered reflective Christian ascetics like Evagrius a "metaphysics of transformation, which they connected to the Church's anticipated eschatological transformation, ultimately where 'God will be all in all'."[102] This metaphysics is 'transformative' because its description of reality – "unfolding in descending levels from the supreme Good" – acts as a 'ladder of ascent' for "the initiated to rediscover their true nature and achieve the direct vision of God."[103]

Although the direct influence remains unproven, Evagrius' concept of the 'first creation' may exhibit similarities with Plotinus' Intellect and its relationship to the One and the lower Hypostasis (Soul). Analogous to Plotinus' Intellect, Evagrius regards the 'original creation' as "strictly immaterial." For both thinkers, the "descending

---

[98] Plotinus, *Enn.* 3.8.10.31–32: Εἰ δὲ ἀφελὼν τὸ εἶναι λαμβάνοις, θαῦμα ἕξεις – "But if you grasp it by taking away being from it, you will be filled with wonder." (Plotinus 1980), 397). In this way, Plotinus' mysticism can be considered "a mysticism of the *nous*." (Merlan 1963), 2. Cf. (Carabine 1995), 141.

[99] Plotinus, *Enn.* 5.3.14.2–3.

[100] The soul's imperative to "flee alone to the Alone" (φυγὴ μόνου πρὸς μόνον), means it must shed 'external relations' and "separate itself from this foreign world" (ἀπαλλαγὴ τῶν ἄλλων τῶν τῇδε). See *Enn.* 6.9.11.50–51). As K. Corrigan clarifies, this 'flight' is not 'narcissistic' or 'solipsistic.' Instead, it signifies a purification from all that is alien to one's identity, leading to an 'integral union' that bestows meaningful existence and light. In this context, *monos* (alone) does not imply 'abandonment' or 'self-absorption,' but rather a state 'free of barriers' that could hinder 'complete union.' See (Corrigan 1996), 41–42. Cf. Evagrius, *De oratione* 67 (Migne 1865), 1181: "Never give a shape (Μὴ σχηματίσῃς) to the divine as such when you pray, nor allow your intellect to be imprinted (τυπωθῆναί) by any form (μορφήν), but go immaterial to the Immaterial (ἀλλὰ ἄϋλος τῷ ἀΰλῳ πρόσιθι) and you will understand (καὶ συνήσεις)." Evagrius emphasizes this formless approach because God has no body and leaves no mental impression (cf. *De oratione* 41). His "go immaterial to the Immaterial" closely parallels Plotinus' "fleeing alone to the Alone." (*Enn.* 5.1.16, 6.9.11). (Casiday 2006), 235, n. 25.

[101] (Gregory 1999), 124.

[102] 1 Cor 15:28.

[103] See (Linge 2000), 543. Linge argues that the 'unifying theme in Evagrius' thought' stems from "Plato's concept of the spiritual cosmos's 'coming forth' from God, its subsequent fall into material plurality, and its eventual return to harmony with the transcendent Source." This Platonic framework, evident in *Timaeus's* (27d–52c) cosmic structure and the ascent themes of *Symposium* (204b–212a), *Phaedrus* (247c–251b), and *Republic* (511b–515e), highlights the "essential religious core of the Platonic tradition, particularly as developed by Middle Platonism and Neoplatonists like Plotinus, through the themes of 'procession' (*próodos*) and 'return' (*epistrophē*)." See (Linge 2000), 543 and n. 8.

metaphysical movement" signifies a "transformation from the immaterial to the material," whereas "the reverse, soteriological movement, ultimately results in the complete 'annihilation' of the body."[104]

In describing 'fallen' rational creatures, some scholars propose a tripartite 'anthropology' of *sōma*, *psychē*, and *nous*, applying this framework to humans, angels, and demons alike. Following this interpretation, Evagrius' analysis appears closer to Plato and Plotinus than to Origen, notably due to the central and prominent role he assigns to the concept of *nous*. Like Plotinus, Evagrius considers the *nous* to be the "contemplative essence of the human being, capable of existing independently of the soul and body."[105] In its 'current' embodied state, the *nous* has taken on a discursive function (*to logistikon* or *dianoia*), engaging with the world of plurality and change. Meanwhile, its higher, original nature – as 'direct apprehension' (*theoria*) – remains 'concealed and inactive,' influenced by the 'passible soul.'[106]

Evagrius appears to view the 'natures' into which intellects have fallen within the 'second creation' as notably 'provisional.' According to Linge, this provisionality highlitghs the "influence of ascetic life on his theology." "One's 'nature' – their place in the 'hierarchy of being' – is not permanently fixed;" instead, it develops "from and also reflects their current capacity (or incapacity) for contemplating God."[107]

Recently, Doru Costache[108] has proposed a new interpretation of the metaphysical positions in *Kephalaia Gnostika*,[109] considering them – "at least on a

---

[104] See *KG* 2.15, 17, 77; 3.66; 1.26 and *Epistulae* 64. Evagrius, much like Plotinus, focuses on the "non-discursive awareness of rational beings" and how the lower regions of being "participate in" and are, in fact, "images" of the higher ones. This can be seen by comparing Evagrius' writings, such as *KG* 2.4, 4.90 or *De oratione* 55–73 (on 'formless prayer'), with Plotinus' treatises like 'On Intelligible Beauty' (*Enn*. 5.8.4) and 'On the Kinds of Being' (*Enn*. 6.2.21, 28 sq.). See (Linge 2000), 544 and n. 11.

[105] *KG* 4.85.

[106] In Plato's *Republic*, Book IX, he identifies three parts of the soul: the rational (*logistikon*), irascible (*thymikon*), and desiring (*epithymētikon*). He advises preparing for sleep by stimulating the rational part with arguments, calming the irascible, and moderately satisfying the desiring part, which he deems particularly dangerous due to its 'lawless dimension' (571d–572a, 572b). Evagrius adopts this terminology, replacing *logistikon* with *nous*, likely because *nous* more closely aligns with the biblical concept of the 'heart' or the human center. See (Case 2006), 160, n. 267 and 161, n. 268. *Epithymia* and *thymos* are influenced by the changing realm of sensory experience. Therefore, from the perspective of the individual 'fallen *nous*,' the purpose of life in the material-visible world is to gradually "free oneself from the influences of the soul and body." See (Linge 2000), 544–545.

[107] (Linge 2000), 547.

[108] See (Costache 2021), 718–730.

[109] *KG* 3.28: „The soul is the intellect which, through its negligence, has *fallen* from unity; and because of this negligence has descended to the level of practice." (Evagrius of Pontus 2024), S2, 269. Typically, scholars interpret this passage in a metaphysical sense, seeing it as describing the "fall" of the intellect into the condition of the "second creation." Cf. (Linge 2000), 545; (Ramelli 2015), 156–157.

certain hermeneutical level – metaphorical depictions of monastic life." "In the monastic code," the passage reflects "the trials and dangers faced by advanced monastics on their spiritual journey," including the risk of "regressing to the status of simple ascetics, incapable of gnosis." Similarly, "the primordial unity of the intellects symbolizes the fellowship of Evagrius' monastic peers, perhaps his own circle of disciples."[110]

In this new framework, the "'degradation' of the intellect into the soul of a simple, 'practical' ascetic" signifies the advanced ascetic's need to "return to basics" after "succumbing to bodily passions," aiming to "retrieve lost perfection." Through this lens of 'ascetic theology,' seemingly metaphysical topics like 'the renunciation of the body'[111] and 'final restoration'[112] become 'metaphors' for conquering 'bodily passions' and achieving a 'higher spiritual state.' Thus, considerations of restoration – "the intellect's ascent from the 'second creation'" – represent "the existential transformations experienced during spiritual progress."[113]

Spiritual ascent, therefore, is not an ontological change, literal 'angelization,' or final 'disembodiment.' Instead, Costache sees it as "parables and images of the monastic journey"[114] – a life traditionally called 'angelic,' perfected through 'immaterial' or 'undistracted prayer.'[115] Evagrius's use of 'cosmological parables' to illustrate monastic life aligns with his scriptural interpretation, enabling the "monastic 'spirit' to imbue the metaphysical 'letter' of his cosmological speculations. By examining his stance on this intricate scriptural and monastic foundation, it becomes evident that "under the guise of cosmological narratives and metaphysical speculations, Evagrius spoke of the experience of the spiritually advanced."[116]

Costache concludes that Evagrius' 'metaphysical speculations' in *Kephalaia Gnostika* were designed for advanced students, using a 'heuristic pedagogy' to help them "read between the lines and decode puzzles." Behind the "fragmented cosmological narrative," these students could see "a complex map of the spiritual journey's" changes, rather than just "a story of a dissolving world."[117]

---

[110] (Casiday 2013), 76–99. Cf. (Costache 2021), 724.

[111] See *KG* 1.26; 3.68.

[112] *KG* 3.60: "The sign of the East is the symbol of the saints; the sign of the West is (the symbol of) the souls that are in Sheol. But the Holy Trinity is the end of the *return* 'course' of all." (Évagre le Pontique 1958), S2, 123. On "return" (S2: *pūnāyā*, probably Gk. *epistrophe*, cf. Acts 15.3 Peshitta), see also *KG* 5.22; 6.19. (Evagrius of Pontus 2024), 214–215, 287.

[113] *KG* 5.22. (Costache 2021), 725.

[114] Costache suggests that this interpretation may even apply to the entire Evagrian metaphysical discourse. (Costache 2021), 726.

[115] See (Harmless 2004), 351–352.

[116] See (Costache 2021), 726–727.

[117] "Thus, the view that Evagrius believed in the 'dematerialization of the cosmos,' advocating for a 'spiritualist metaphysics,' does not hold up under careful scrutiny," cf. (Costache 2021), 729–730.

As noted, Plotinus delved into many mystical themes also found in Evagrius. These include the 'soul's withdrawal from the multiplicity of objects (*pragmata*)'[118] as a prelude to a 'higher state of consciousness,' its 'resemblance to and union with the supreme Reality,' the 'temporary suspension of the subject-object distinction,' and 'liberation from bodily awareness.'[119]

While Plotinus' language of union may have influenced the mystical imagery of Late Antiquity,[120] extending the analogy too far with Evagrius risks obscuring the unique nature of his thought.[121] Unlike the Neoplatonic[122] tradition of the third and fourth centuries, which lacked a comprehensive theory of contemplative prayer and the 'praying *nous*,' Evagrius' coherent teaching made a remarkably stimulating and innovative contribution to the ascetic self in Eastern Christianity. This underscores its profound novelty within the broader Christian and non-Christian understanding of mystical vision in Late Antiquity.[123]

Conclusion

The study of the concept of *nous* in Greek and Christian mysticism, through a comparative analysis of the works of Evagrius Ponticus and Plotinus, reveals a level of semantic complexity and experiential depth that goes well beyond modern translations like 'mind' or 'intellect.' In this context, *nous* is better understood as an intuitive ability to grasp intelligible beings and as a capacity for mystical union with the divine that surpasses discursive rational processes.

---

[118] Evagrie, *Skemmata* 23; *De malignis cogitationibus* 40.

[119] (Konstantinovsky 2009), 99.

[120] (Guillaumont 1984), 260.

[121] (Konstantinovsky 2009), 99–100. Evagrius, a man of letters, philosopher, theologian, and dialectician, sharpened his skills in Constantinople's anti-Arian struggles before bringing his refined spirituality to the Egyptian deserts, emulating the monastic model of the Cappadocians. Although he owed much to Gregory of Nyssa's asceticism, Origen was his primary influence. Evagrius read Origen directly, wholeheartedly embracing his ideas without the reservations held by the Cappadocians. Nevertheless, the spiritual system he crafted from Origen's teachings was distinctly his own and *original*. Cf. (Bouyer 1963), 382. For Evagrius' classical education, see (Lackner 1966), 17–29.

[122] For Proclus (412–485 AD), "philosophical prayer" (exemplified by Plato's *Timaeus*) goes beyond verbal invocation. It signifies a profound alignment of human will and intellect with the divine, making the act of philosophizing and ordering one's life according to divine principles the ultimate prayer. This leads to divine unification and the fulfilment of existence. See (Layne 2013).

[123] Cf. (Bitton-Ashkelony 2017), 20; (Bitton-Ashkelony 2011), 303.

While both Evagrius and Plotinus describe mystical experiences involving light visions, their interpretations and the roles of this phenomenon differ fundamentally. For Evagrius, the human *nous* is considered the 'image of God,' realizing its essence through 'pure prayer.' In this state (*katastasis*), the *nous* sheds all mental images and enters into direct communion with God, leading to the appearance of a divine light (the "place of God") that reflects the *nous's* likeness to the Divine. Plotinus, in contrast, presents an ecstatic union with the One, where light is not external but becomes the very essence of the Intellect. This comparison highlights the influence of Neoplatonism on Evagrius's mystical language while emphasizing the uniqueness of Christian spirituality.

Ultimately, although there are obvious terminological similarities, the approaches of the two authors differ in their cultural contexts and goals. While Plotinus examines a wide range of mystical themes related to union with the One through *henosis*, Evagrius develops a 'metaphysics of transformation' (Linge) that is deeply connected with ascetic monastic life. This view not only emphasizes Evagrius's originality in creating a coherent theory of contemplative prayer but also highlights his innovative contribution to understanding the ascetic self in Eastern Christianity. In conclusion, the *nous*, in its many forms, acts both as a bridge to the divine and as a mirror reflecting humanity's inner transformation.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Abba Evagrius Ponticus. 2022. *Letters from the Desert*. Edited by Gabriel Bunge. Translated by Ioan I. Ică jr. Sibiu: Deisis.

Andia, Ysabel de. 1996. *Henosis: L'union à Dieu chez Denys L'Aréopagite*. Philosophia antiqua, Volume 71. Leiden ; New York ; Koln: E.J. Brill.

———. 2005. "Le statut de l'intellect dans l'union mystique." In *Mystique: la passion de l'Un, de l'Antiquité à nos jours*, by Alain Dierkens and Benoît Beyer de Ryke, 73–96. Problèmes d'histoire des religions, T. 15. Bruxelles [Le Plessis-Paté]: Éd. de l'Université de Bruxelles Tothèmes diff.

Aristotle. 2019. Metaphysics*: Book Lambda*. Edited by Lindsay Judson. Clarendon Aristotle Series. Oxford: Clarendon press.

Beierwaltes, Werner. 1961. "Die Metaphysik Des Lichtes in Der Philosophie Plotins." *Zeitschrift Für Philosophische Forschung* 15 (3): 334–62.

Bitton-Ashkelony, Brouria. 2011. "The Limit of the Mind (Noῦς): Pure Prayer According to Evagrius Ponticus and Isaac of Nineveh." *Zeitschrift Für Antikes Christentum / Journal of Ancient Christianity* 15 (2): 291–321.

———. 2017. "Theories of Prayer in Late Antiquity: Doubts and Practices from Maximos of Tyre to Isaac of Nineveh." In *Prayer and Worship in Eastern Christianities, 5th to 11th Centuries*, by Derek Krueger and Brouria Bitton-Ashkelony, 10–33. London New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

Bouyer, Louis. 1963. *The Spirituality of the New Testament and the Fathers*. Translated by Mary P. Ryan. London: Burns & Oates.

Bunge, Gabriel. 2022. "The Spiritual Teaching of Evagrius Ponticus." In *Letters from the Desert*, by Evagrius Ponticus, 126–75. Sibiu: Deisis.

Bussanich, John. 1988. *The One and Its Relation to Intellect in Plotinus*. Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden, The Netherlands.

Carabine, Deirdre. 1995. *The Unknown God: Negative Theology in the Platonic Tradition: Plato to Eriugena*. Louvain Theological & Pastoral Monographs 19. Louvain: Peeters Press [u.a.].

Casiday, Augustine. 2006. *Evagrius Ponticus*. Abingdon, Oxon ; New York: Routledge.

———. 2013. *Reconstructing the Theology of Evagrius Ponticus: Beyond Heresy*. Cambridge, United Kingdom ; New York: Cambridge University Press.

Chindea, Gabriel. 2008. *Paradoxul Transcendenței La Aristotel Și Plotin*. București: Humanitas.

Conway-Jones, Ann. 2018. "'The Greatest Paradox of All': The 'Place of God' in the Mystical Theologies of Gregory of Nyssa and Evagrius of Pontus." *Journal of the Bible and Its Reception* 5 (2): 259–79. https://doi.org/10.1515/jbr-2018-0006.

Cornea, Andrei. 2003. "An Interpretation of Plotinus' Philosophy, or How to Take Metaphysics Seriously." In *Opere*, by Plotin, translated by Andrei Cornea. Vol. I. București: Humanitas.

———. 2009. "Lămuriri Preliminare [Preliminary Clarifications]." In *Opere*, by Plotin, translated by Andrei Cornea. Vol. III. București: Humanitas.

Corrigan, Kevin. 1996. "'Solitary' Mysticism in Plotinus, Proclus, Gregory of Nyssa, and Pseudo-Dionysius." *The Journal of Religion* 76 (1): 28–42. https://doi.org/10.1086/489734.

Costache, Doru. 2021. "A Note on Evagrius' Cosmological and Metaphysical Statements." *The Journal of Theological Studies* 71 (2): 718–30. https://doi.org/10.1093/jts/flaa143.

Dodds, E.R. 1960. "Tradition and Personal Achievement in the Philosophy of Plotinus." *The Journal of Roman Studies* 50:1–7.

Driscoll, Jeremy. 2003. "Introduction." In *Ad Monachos*, by Evagrius Ponticus, 1–37. Ancient Christian Writers, no. 59. New York: Newman Press.

Emilsson, Eyjólfur Kjalar. 2007. *Plotinus on Intellect*. Oxford : New York: Clarendon Press ; Oxford University Press.

Évagre le Pontique. 1958. *Les six centuries des "Kephalaia gnostica": Édition critique de la version syriaque commune et édition d'une nouvelle version syriaque, intégrale, avec une double traduction française;* Kephalaia gnostica. Edited by Antoine Guillaumont. Patrologia Orientalis 28. Paris: Firmin-Didot.

———. 1971. *Traité pratique, ou, Le moine*. Edited by Antoine Guillaumont and Claire Guillaumont. Vol. II. Sources chrétiennes 171. Paris: Éditions du Cerf.

———. 1998. *Sur les pensées*. Edited by Paul Géhin, Claire Guillaumont, and Antoine Guillaumont. Sources chrétiennes 438. Paris: Cerf.

———. 2007. *Chapitres Des Disciples d'Évagre*. Edited by Paul Géhin. Sources Chrétiennes 514. Paris: Éditions du Cerf.

Evagrius of Pontus. 2024. *The Gnostic Trilogy*. Translated by Robin Darling Young, Joel Kalvesmaki, Columba Stewart, Luke Dysinger, and Charles M. Stang. New York: Oxford University Press.

Festugière, A.-J., and Louis Massignon. 1986. *La Révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste. I. L'astrologie et Les Sciences Occultes*. Paris: Les Belles Lettres.

Frankenberg, W., ed. 1912. *Euagrius Ponticus*. Abhandlungen der Königlichen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen. Philologisch-Historische Klasse, n.F. 13, no. 2. Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung.

Gregory, John. 1999. *The Neoplatonists: A Reader*. 2. ed. London: Routledge.

Guillaumont, Antoine. 1972. "Un philosophe au désert: Evagre le Pontique." *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 181 (1): 29–56. https://doi.org/10.3406/rhr.1972.9807.

———. 1984. "La Vision de l'intellect Par Lui-Même Dans La Mystique Évagrienne." *Mélanges de l'Université Saint-Joseph* 50:255–62.

———. 1998. "Introduction." In *Sur les pensées*, by Évagre le Pontique, edited by Paul Géhin, Claire Guillaumont, and Antoine Guillaumont. Sources chrétiennes 438. Paris: Cerf.

Hadot, Pierre. 1997. *Plotin ou La simplicité du regard*. Folio 302. Paris: Gallimard.

Harmless, William. 2004. *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

Harmless, William, and Raymond R. Fitzgerald. 2001a. "The Sapphire Light of the Mind: The *Skemmata* of Evagrius Ponticus." *Theological Studies* 62 (3): 493–529.

———. 2001b. "The Sapphire Light of the Mind: The *Skemmata* of Evagrius Ponticus." *Theological Studies* 62 (3): 493–529.

———. 2001c. "The *Skemmata*: A Translation." *Theological Studies* 62 (3): 521–29.

Hausherr, Irénée. 1939. "Nouveaux fragments grecs d'Évagre le Pontique." *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 5:229–33.

———. 1959. "Le *Traité de l'Oraison* d'Évagre Le Pontique (Suite)." *Revue d'Ascétique et de Mystique* 35 (138): 121–46.

Katz, Steven T. 1978. "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism." In *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, edited by Steven T. Katz, 1. publ., 6. [print], 22–74. New York: Oxford Univ. Press.

Konstantinovsky, Julia. 2009. *Evagrius Ponticus: The Making of a Gnostic*. Ashgate New Critical Thinking in Religion, Theology, and Biblical Studies. Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate.

Layne, Danielle A. 2013. "Philosophical Prayer in Proclus's 'Commentary on Plato's Timaeus.'" *The Review of Metaphysics* 67 (2): 345–68.

Liddell, Henry George, Robert Scott, Henry Stuart Jones, Roderick McKenzie, and Peter Geoffrey William Glare. 1996. *A Greek-English Lexicon*. Rev. and augm. Throughout. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Linge, David E. 2000. "Leading the Life of Angels: Ascetic Practice and Reflection in the Writings of Evagrius of Pontus." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 68 (3): 537–68.

Louth, Andrew. 2007. *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Mackenna, Stephen. 1991. "Extracts from the Explanatory Matter in the First Edition." In *The Enneads*, by Plotinus, edited by John M. Dillon, translated by Stephen Mackenna, Abridged ed. London, England ; New York, N.Y., USA: Penguin.

McGinn, Bernard. 2004. *The Foundations of Mysticism*. Vol. I. The Presence of God : A History of Western Christian Mysticism / by Bernard McGinn, vol. 1. New York: Crossroad.

Merlan, Philip. 1963. *Monopsychism Mysticism Metaconsciousness: Problems of the Soul in the Neoaristotelian and Neoplatonic Tradition*. Archives Internationales d'Histoire Des Idées Minor Ser, v. 2. Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands.

Migne, J.-P., ed. 1863. *Patrologiae Cursus Completus: Series Graeca*. Vol. 40. Paris.

———, ed. 1865. *Patrologiae Cursus Completus: Series Graeca*. Vol. 79. Paris.

Muyldermans, Joseph, ed. 1952. *Evagriana Syriaca: Textes Inedits Du British Museum et de La Vaticane*. Bibliothèque Du Muséon 31. Louvain: Publications universitaires.

O'Daly, Gerard J. P. 2019. "Plotinus' Philosophy of the Self." In *Platonism Pagan and Christian: Studies in Plotinus and Augustine*, by Gerard J. P. O'Daly, 1–121. Milton: Routledge.

Platon. 2011. *Banchetul*. Translated by Petru Creția. București: Humanitas.

Plotin. 2003a. *Opere I*. Translated by Andrei Cornea. București: Humanitas.

———. 2003b. *Opere II*. Translated by Andrei Cornea. București: Humanitas.

———. 2009. *Opere III*. Translated by Andrei Cornea. București: Humanitas.

Plotinus. 1980. *Enneads III.1-9*. Reprint-1980. The Loeb classical library 442. London: Heinemann.

———. 1984. *Enneads V.1-9*. Translated by Arthur Hilary Armstrong. Plotinus. Cambridge, Mass./ London: Harvard University Press/ W. Heinemann.

———. 1989. *Porphyry on The Life of Plotinus and the Order of His Boos. Enneads I.1-9*. Translated by Arthur Hilary Armstrong. Vol. I. The Loeb Classical Library 440. Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press.

———. 2011a. *Enneads IV.1-9*. Translated by Arthur Hilary Armstrong. Reprinted. The Loeb classical library 443. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press.

———. 2011b. *Enneads. VI.6-9*. Translated by Arthur Hilary Armstrong. Reprinted. The Loeb classical library 468. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press.

Ramelli, Ilaria L. E. 2015. *Evagrius's* Kephalaia Gnostica*: A New Translation of the Unreformed Text from the Syriac*. Writings from the Greco-Roman World. Atlanta: SBL Press.

Runia, D.T. 1999. "A Brief History of the Term Kosmos Noetos." In *Traditions of Platonism: Essays in Honour of John Dillon*, edited by John M. Dillon and John J. Cleary. Alsershot ; Brookfield, Vt: Ashgate.

Stewart, Columba. 2001. "Imageless Prayer and the Theological Vision of Evagrius Ponticus." *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 9 (2): 173–204. https://doi.org/10.1353/earl.2001.0035.

Vlad, Marilena. 2011. *Dincolo de Ființă: Neoplatonismul Și Aporiile Originii Inefabile*. București: Zeta Books.

Wallis, R.T. 1976. "NOUS as Experience." In *The Significance of Neoplatonism*, edited by R. Baine Harris, 121–54. New York (N.Y.): State University of New York Press.

———. 1989. "The Spiritual Importance of Not Knowing." In *Classical Mediterranean Spirituality: Egyptian, Greek, Roman*, edited by A.H. Armstrong, 460–80. New York, NY: Crossroad.

Didaktik[*] and Hermeneutics: On the Ontological Ground of the Art of Teaching and the Philosophical Nature of *Didaktik*

Adrian COSTACHE[**]

ABSTRACT. This paper retraces the history of *Didaktik* and hermeneutics and argues that these two disciplines, seemingly unrelated at first, are deeply intertwined. The paper shows how *Didaktik* and hermeneutics first appeared in the 17th century, after a long period of gestation begun in Ancient Greece and carried further in the Middle Ages, as twin disciplines meant to address the basic needs of spiritual life. But it shows, their existence was short-lived, for they will disappear without a trace for more than a century only to be reborn again in the thought of Friedrich Schleiermacher under the impetus of the idea of alterity. This, the paper shows, will determine Schleiermacher to probe into the ontological ground of the act of teaching and will transform *Didaktik*, when understood in its full breadth, into a philosophical discipline.

Keywords: *Didaktik*, hermeneutics, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Wolfgang Rathke, Caspar Seidel, Jan Amos Comenius, Johann Joachim Becher, childhood, ontological difference between adult and child.

---

[*] In keeping with the current practice, widespread in the literature, throughout this paper we will use the German original name "*Didaktik*" rather than its English equivalent "didactics" because the latter is actually a false friend. In the *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* (Eleventh Edition), "didactics" is defined as "systematic instruction, pedagogy" (11th Edition, s.v. "Didactics"). In the on-line edition of the Oxford English Dictionary it is defined as "the science, art, or practice of teaching." (s.v. "didactics", https://www.oed.com/search/advanced/Meanings?textTermText0=didactics& textTermOpt0=WordPhrase, accessed 30 May 2025). As we shall see though, "*Didaktik*" and its equivalents in other Continental European languages ("didactique" (Fr.), "didattica" (It.), "didactică" (Rom.), "didaktika" (Hun.)) has a precise sense. It is not simply the science or the art of teaching, but the *theory* of the art of teaching. It is an academic discipline which assumes the practice of teaching, generally regarded as an "art" in rigorous epistemological terms, as its object. In this sense it must carefully be distinguished from pedagogy whose object is education in general. The sense of *Didaktik* will be further clarified later in this paper.

[**] Department of Didactics of Human Sciences, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania. Email: adrian.costache@ubbcluj.ro

Introduction

In this paper, we will retrace the history of *Didaktik* and hermeneutics in pursuit of two goals. First of all, we aim to show that these two disciplines share an intricate and deeply intertwined common past. As we will demonstrate, their roots go back to Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle in Ancient Greece, pass through Saint Augustine's work in the Middle Ages, emerge in the 17th century as twin disciplines called upon to cover the two basic faces of spiritual life – the preservation of past culture and knowledge and its transmission to future generations – only to soon disappear without any historical trace. They are then reborn in the 19th century in Friedrich Schleiermacher's work, prompted by one and the same impulse: the discovery of alterity.

Second of all, we want to show how, under the impetus of the idea of alterity, Schleiermacher's pedagogical thought is lead to an inquiry into the ontological ground of the art of teaching which transforms *Didaktik*, when taken in its full breadth, into a philosophical discipline.

Didaktik and Hermeneutics: Definitions

In Europe, *Didaktik* is a pedagogical discipline situated epistemologically in the vicinity of pedagogy and educational psychology. Its role is to regulate the practice of teaching in general (referred to as general *Didaktik* or, in German, "*Allgemeine Didaktik*") as well as of specific subjects (known as special *Didaktik*, or in German, "*Fachdidaktik*"). The basic theoretical aim of *Didaktik* is to answer the question "How to teach (a subject)?" and to translate this answer into practical advice for teachers.

In its development, *Didaktik* is guided by two vectors:

1. By the subject (subjects) whose teaching it is called to regulate. Each school subject has a specific epistemological profile, so each poses specific didactic challenges. When teaching algebra, the teacher must help students acquire certain algorithmic strategies for problem solving. When teaching biology, on the other hand, the challenge is to help them understand the basic criteria leading to the identification of the classes described.

2. By the legal, political, ideological, etc. context within which school operates. For instance, in an authoritarian or totalitarian regime, each subject becomes a vehicle for cultivating discipline and instilling respect for authority in students; in a democratic one, the fundamental educational objective pursued through all subjects will be critical thinking.

Hermeneutics, on the other hand, is a philosophical discipline, one of the central disciplines of 20th century continental philosophy. It is the theory or, more accurately, the body of discourses and debates centered on the problems of interpretation and understanding, and by extension, of communication, translation, language, the sign, and other closely related topics. More accurately a "body of discourses" because every major figure in the history of hermeneutics has his own understanding of what hermeneutics theory is and what it is supposed to do. For Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher, hermeneutic theory is a reflection on the conditions of possibility and the rules of interpretation and understanding. For Gadamer, on the other hand, it is an inquiry into what happens when something is understood.

In general, though, the fundamental questions of hermeneutics are: "How to interpret?" and "How to understand?"

So, at first glance, there seems to be no connection between *Didaktik* and hermeneutics. And yet, a closer look into their past reveals that their core themes and problems have always been closely tied.

Intersections: The Prehistory of *Didaktik* and Hermeneutics

The (pre-)history of *Didaktik* and hermeneutics begins in Ancient Greece between 450 and 350 BCE during the "Time of Pericles," as it was called (Flacelière 1965). During this period, the practice of interpretation – understood in the strong sense we attribute to it today, as the intellectual act of taking something as something else – becomes widespread. Socrates, Plato and Aristotle present the natural universe as the material expression of a higher, immaterial realm of Ideas or Forms. At the same time, Plato and Aristotle undertake the first systematic investigations into language, exploring the relationship between word and thing (Plato in *Ion* (Plato 1997, 937–49)), and the nature of the linguistic sign (Aristotle in *On Interpretation* (Aristotle 1952a, 25–38)). As we mentioned, this is the problematic core around which 19th– and 20th–century hermeneutics will revolve.

But Plato and Aristotle tackle also the problem of education, the central questions for them being "What is learning?", "How does it take place?", and "What should be learned?" The issue at stake being whether virtue can be learned or not.

Plato addresses the first two of these questions in *Meno* (81a-86c; Plato 1997, 880–86), in the famous passage where Socrates presents a young slave with a geometry problem, and argues that learning is, in fact, a process of recollection

[*anamnesis*] of the truth known by our immortal souls before incarnation enacted through maieutic dialogue.[1]

In his turn, Aristotle approaches the first question in *Posterior Analytics* (71a1-11; Aristotle 1952a, 97) and *Metaphysics* (992b24-33; Aristotle 1952a, 511). And the third, in book II of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (Aristotle 1952b, 348–55).

Plato and Aristotle's answers to these questions lead, in today's jargon, to the first rudiments of philosophy of education and educational psychology (the first question), the first rudiments of pedagogy (the second) and the first rudiments of curriculum theory (the third).

The second step in the (pre-)history of *Didaktik* and hermeneutics takes place in the Middle Ages. Out of these three questions the Middle Ages retain only one: What should be learned? The other two – What is learning? and How does it take place? – are replaced by a new one: From whom should we learn? Who should be taken as teacher?

This latter question is first addressed by St. Augustine in *De magistro* (388-289 AD) and taken up again nearly nine centuries later by St. Thomas Aquinas in an homonymous work (St. Thomas Aquinas 1929). Here though, the problem of education is no longer independent from the hermeneutic problematic, as it was in Ancient Greece. They co-determine one other.

De magistro is in fact a treatise of semiology. In order to answer the question "Who should be taken as teacher?" Augustine begins with an analysis of the linguistic sign and the mechanisms of its functioning. For, as he argues, all teaching is done by signifying (Augustine 1924, 67). His thesis, however, is that language exhausts its communicative power in signifying and is completely incapable of effectively referring to something outside itself, in the world. Because of this, language separates and estranges our thought from the things it is supposed to reveal. Therefore, language proves incapable of serving as an instrument for teaching.

For Augustine, corporeal or "carnal" objects come to be known through the senses, while the objects of the mind, "spiritual" things, are known through our "inner truth" [*interiorem veritatem*] (S. Aurelii Augustini 1871), or the "interior evidence," as it was translated into English. Hence, the only teacher, the true teacher is God herself (Augustine 1924, 79).[2]

---

[1] This answer will be further refined in *The Republic* (514a-520a; Plato 1997, 1132–37) by the appeal to the allegory of the cave where learning and the pursuit of knowledge are presented as an ascension of the soul from the underworld of sensory illusion to the light of reason.

[2] The English edition of Augustine's text is not faithful to the original in that it downplays it's deep theological and religious tone.

The other question – What should be learned? – finds an answer in *De doctrina christinana* [*On Christian Teaching*] (Augustine 1873). As it has been widely acknowledged in the literature, *De doctrina christiana* was conceived explicitly as a "handbook and a guide for the Christian education" (Kevane 1970, 176). In essence though, it is a hermeneutic treatise, a complex and comprehensive one. As Martin Heidegger remarks in *Ontology: The Hermeneutics of Facticity*: "Augustine provides the first 'hermeneutics' in grand style" (Heidegger 1999, 9).

Because the good Christian is held to know what is written in the Bible, their good education requires the acquisition of the hermeneutical precepts necessary for the correct interpretation of the text. In order to discover these precepts Augustin embarks again in a semiological analysis that delves into the nature of the linguistic sign and the types of signs, as well as the origin of writing and the sources of misunderstanding.

Within this world, in this conceptual universe, there is no place for *Didaktik* in a strong sense. Its fundamental question – How to teach? – is completely absent. The situation seems to change with the dawn of Modernity.

The Birth of *Didaktik* and Hermeneutics in Modernity

From the beginning of the 17th century, we witness a true inflation of works dedicated to the question of teaching. In 1612-1613 Wolfgang Rathke outlines a "general introduction to *didactica*" the main tenets of which are disseminated first by two of his collaborators who, in 1613, publish a *Kurtzer Bericht von der Didactica, oder Lehrkunst Wolfgang Ratichii* (Helwig and Joachim 1613) and later by Rathke himself in *Desiderata methodus nova Ratichiana* (1615) and in *Methodum Linguarum generalis introductio* (1617) (see Walmsley 1990, 31). In 1621 Elias Bodinus publishes *Didactica sive ars docendi.*[3] In 1638 Caspar Seidel publishes *Didactiva nova* (Seidel 1638). In 1657 Jan Amos Comenius publishes *Didactica magna* (the book was begun in 1627 and finished in 1642) (Comenius 1657). And in 1668 Johann Joachim Becher publishes *Methodus didactica seu clavis et praxis super novum suum organon philologicum.*[4]

---

[3] Apud. Bârsănescu 1935, 6 and Comenius 1896, 9. Unfortunately, this work was inaccessible to us and, aside from these two references, we have found no other mentions of it.

[4] The year of publication remains problematic. In the abstract of his paper "Johann Joachim Becher (1635-1682), A Little Known Opponent of Comenius' Theory of Language and Language Learning" Werner Hüllen cites 1668 as the publication year (Hüllen 1996). In contrast, the German Wikipedia article dedicated to Becher lists the year as 1669 (cf. https://benjamins.com/catalog/hl.23.1-2.04hul?srsltid= AfmBOooD_3zNc8ViNPmgn5R2QOR1hUlP2Zjk5yOQVGGmWEH-8B6H5gD5 and https://als.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johann_Joachim_Becher; both accessed June 2, 2025). However, in his paper Hüllen draws on the second edition of Becher's text from 1674. This is also the version available to us.

On the other hand, in 1630 Johann Conrad Dannhauer publishes *Idea boni interpreti* (Dannhauer 1630), a treatise on general hermeneutics wherein this discipline is also finally called by its proper name. And in 1654 the same Dannhauer will publish another treatise where the name of the discipline figures in the title: *Hermeneutica sacra sive methodus exponendarum sacrum literarum* (Dannhauer 1654).

The fact that teaching and interpretation – a topic completely absent for two millennia and one just marginally present – burst onto the scene of history; the fact that within such a short time span (there are only 13 years between Rathke's *Didaktik* from Dannhauer's hermeneutics) these topics give rise to full-fledged disciplines might be bewildering at first. However, any bewilderment soon vanishes if we take a closer look at what these books set out to do. For, upon closer inspection, it becomes apparent that *Didaktik* and hermeneutics were not born together by accident. They are twin disciplines, called upon to address the two faces of spiritual life: the preservation of past culture and knowledge, and their future transmission.

Dannhauer's general hermeneutics describes a method for interpreting all types of texts and discourses, one that is capable of leading not only to their understanding, but also to the discernment of truth and falsehood within them. Comenius's "great" *Didaktik* describes the method of teaching "all things to all men" (Comenius 1896, 155), as the subtitle goes. Just as the "smaller" *Didaktik*s of Rathke, Seidel and Becher describe methods of teaching Latin and other foreign languages.

However, the situation of *Didaktik* and hermeneutics, absent for more than two millennia, only seems to change in Modernity. And this, for two reasons.

First, because the intellectual efforts of all these thinkers have been almost entirely lost to the mists of time. Their works leave virtually no trace in history. Both Rathke's and Comenius's writings start to circulate only late, at the end of the 19th century, with their translation into German and English.[5] Becher is remembered throughout time for introducing the concept of phlogiston, rather than as a pedagogue. His *Didaktik* project gaining attention only in the second half of the 20th century. While Elias Bodinus and Caspar Seidel remain virtually unknown to this day.

Second, and more importantly, because what these authors do is not *Didaktik* per se, but rather "*Methodik*," the methodology of instruction, a label which, most probably, they would have willingly attached to their work had they have distinguished between these two pedagogical disciplines as we do today. For although they tackle the question "How to teach?" head-on, they offer only partial answers, as they all fix their attention on just one element of the didactic triangle – the educational

---

[5] Rathke's work appeared in German as *Allgemeine Anleitung in der Didacticam* in J. Müller, "Handschriftliche Ratichiana," *Pädagogische Blätter*, XI, 1882, 250-274 and XIII, 1884, 446-460 (Walmsley 1990, 31). Comenius's *Didactica magna* appeared in German as in 1871 (Comenius 1871) and in English in 1896 in the edition cited (Comenius 1896).

content – completely losing sight of the other – the pupil to be taught. The methods of teaching proposed by Rathke, Comenius, Seidel, and Becher segment the educational content into discrete units and prescribe the order in which these should be approached, with no regard for the pupils' intellectual capacities, interests, or needs. One of the basic principles of method for all these authors is to start from the simple (easy) and to progress toward what is more complex (difficult). What is simple though is always determined from the point of view of the teacher, and never from that of the child. In his *Didactica nova,* Seidel notes it explicitly. What is taught should be "facilimus, sehr Leicht," very easy, but "Einmal für den Lehrmeister, hernach auch für den Discipul oder Lehrjüngern." [First for the teacher, and afterwards also for the disciple or the young learner.] (Seidel 1638, 58).

The reason why these authors lose sight of the figure of the pupil in the development of their *Didaktik* projects is the same reason why the question "How to teach?" was not, could not have been posed in Antiquity and the Middle Ages. As Philippe Ariès shows in his monumental *Centuries of Childhood* (Ariès 1962) for all this time the child does not exist.

The idea of childhood, the notion that there is, in principle, a difference between the adult and the child, is foreign to the medieval mind and only slowly begins to take shape in the modern one.[6] Rousseau, who is generally acknowledged as the author of the first systematic treatise on the philosophy of education, perceives this difference and seems to understand that it poses a pedagogical problem. In the preface to *Emile*, in a passage which reads as a direct tirade against the four authors mentioned above, he writes:

> "Childhood is unknown. Starting from the false idea one has of it, the farther one goes, the more one loses one's way. The wisest men concentrate on what it is important for men to know without considering what children are in a condition to learn" (Rousseau 1979, 33–34).

And further on, in the second book, he adds:

> "Childhood has its ways of seeing, thinking, and feeling which are proper to it. Nothing is less sensible than to want to substitute ours for theirs…" (Rousseau 1979, 90).

6　See especially chapter 2, "The discovery of childhood," 33-49.

But even though he acknowledges the problem, he ultimately eludes it. Rousseau does not investigate these specific "ways of seeing, thinking, and feeling" and treats the difference between the adult and the child as a purely negative difference: the child in an incomplete adult, an adult in the making.

The (Re-)Birth of *Didaktik* and Hermeneutics with Schleiermacher

The first to fully grasp the radical difference between adult and child – and thus the one with whom *Didaktik*, in the proper sense of the term, is born – is also the one with whom hermeneutics is (re-)born, namely Friedrich Schleiermacher. These two disciplines (re-)emerge in Schleiermacher's thought from one and the same intellectual impulse coming from Schleiermacher's felicitous encounter with a text: David Collins's *Remarks on the Dispositions, Customs, Manners, etc., of the Native Inhabitants of New South Wales* (Collins 1798, 543–616).

As Stephen Prickett shows in "Coleridge, Schlegel and Schleiermacher: England, Germany (and Australia) in 1798" (Prickett 1998, 170–84), Schleiermacher stumbles upon this text by chance. At the end of 1798 or the beginning of 1799, he is approached by a publisher from Berlin named Johann Karl Philipp Spenser with the proposal to translate and publish it in 1800 in a collection entitled "The Historical Genealogical Calendar or Yearbook of the Most Remarkable Events of the New World." Schleiermacher is completely absorbed by this text which he reads and translates at once and which determines him to plunge deep into the subject (Prickett 1998, 178–79). His fascination with it comes from the fact that here Collins adopts (maybe for the first time in European history) an axiologically neutral attitude toward the people he describes, an attitude free of the two anthropological prejudices dominant in his time portraying the other, the inhabitants of other continents, either as just a tool at our (the Europeans') disposal or, on the contrary, as "noble savages," as John Dryden's formula goes (Dryden 1695, 6), not to be interfered with. This gives Collins the possibility to discover three things inconceivable for the European mind until then.

First, that there are people on the face of the earth who are entirely devoid of religiosity, people for whom there is no transcendence, and in whose lives the divine plays no role. This observation is nothing short of revolutionary in a time when religion was regarded as an anthropological constant of man. The prevailing belief then was that to be human is to have a god.

Second, that these people, completely deprived of religion, nonetheless distinguish between good and bad and right and wrong; that they lead a rational existence (generally assumed to be the exclusive privilege of the Europeans) despite

living in ways radically different from ours. For they are polygamous, they display no sense of shame or modesty, and they do not consider chastity a virtue. They pierce their septum and punish the close ones of the deceased for negligence (rather than the perpetrators themselves when the death is the result of a murder).

And third, that they speak a language radically different from ours. Something inconceivable for us, Europeans, who, by virtue of our geographical proximity, speak closely related languages, each bearing within itself a significant lexical fund from the others (Collins 1798, 543–616).

Collins thus attests, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that there are other kinds of people; that the other who happens to stand before me may not be an other like me, but an other than me. He discovers alterity.

This discovery radically changes the data of the hermeneutic problem and leads Schleiermacher not toward a "general" theory of interpretation like the one proposed by Dannhauer before him, but toward a "fundamental" theory, one dealing with the very foundations of interpretation and understanding, because it makes two questions unavoidable: First, how can I understand an other who addresses me in a language radically different from mine? How can I make contact with the other without any bridge between us? And second, how can I be sure that I understand the other who addresses me in a (seemingly) common language if the other might be radically different from myself?

These questions prompt Schleiermacher's famous reversal of the relation between understanding and misunderstanding and his strange definition of hermeneutics. Earlier hermeneutics took understanding to be the norm and misunderstanding an exception, typically attributed to the ambiguity of the text or the interpreter's lack of familiarity with its language. With Schleiermacher, misunderstanding becomes the norm, while understanding "must be desired and sought at every point" (Schleiermacher 1998, 22). And so, hermeneutics becomes the art of avoiding misunderstanding (Schleiermacher 1998, 21).

But, on the other hand, this discovery of alterity prompted by Collins's *Remarks* helps Schleiermacher understand the difference between adult and child as a positive difference. It makes him realize that the art of teaching poses a philosophical problem and leads to the birth of *Didaktik* in the proper sense of the term.

At first, nothing announces a radical transformation of pedagogical thought in Schleiermacher. Most probably, he approached the field compelled by external circumstances.

In 1763 Frederick the Second of Prussia issued a decree, the *General-Landschul-Reglement*, making daily school attendance mandatory for children between the age of 5 and 13 (Green 1990, 119). This led to an explosion in the number of

students and, of course, to a growing need for qualified teachers. To address this need, Prussian universities were mandated to offer courses in pedagogy, which were sometimes taught in rotation by philosophy professors.

This is how Kant came to lecture on pedagogy in 1776-1777 and a decade later in 1786-17877 and to write *Über Pädagogik* (Bowen 2003, 212), a book that will have a lasting impact on the history of education in both Europe and the New World.[7] Most likely, this is also what steered Schleiermacher toward pedagogy, a field in which he lectured in 1813-1814, 1820-1821, and during the summer semester of 1826 (Friesen and Kenklies 2023, 2).

Right at the beginning of the introduction to his 1826 lectures, Schleiermacher mentions *Didaktik* with that partial sense attributed to it in the 17th century, but he does not give the impression that it was of particular concern to him. Schleiermacher writes:

> "Every science and every art has its own method which springs much more directly from the content itself rather than from the relation between teacher and learner. *Didaktik*, the methodology of instruction, is hardly something for itself, but a supplement to the sciences and arts to be transmitted" (Schleiermacher 1957, 8).[8]

But he soon moves on to other matters. The lecture continues with an overview of the epistemological status of pedagogy and its sphere of application, distinguishes the stages of education and the various forms of schooling, and proceeds to establish the specific educational objectives associated with each.

Yet, in the middle of the course, after a long and patient discussion of whether and how each traditional school subject – reading and writing, foreign languages, history and geography, mathematics and natural sciences, vocal and instrumental music, drawing and crafts, and physical education – contributes to the attainment of the objectives of the popular school [*Volkschule*][9] Schleiermacher raises the question of teaching, the basic question of *Didaktik*:

> "We have covered the whole range of popular education; the question that immediately arises is this: Is there a common principle for all subjects taught in popular school, or must they also be separated from the point of view of method and must each seek its own principles?" (Schleiermacher 1957, 266).

---

[7] As Tero Autio shows, *Über Pädagogik* contains the seeds of the divide between the Anglo-American approach to education in terms of curriculum theory and the European approach in terms of pedagogy and *Didaktik* (see Autio 2006, 99–124).

[8] All translations from Schleiermacher's *Pädagogik* are mine.

[9] The equivalent of today primary school, mandatory for all children regardless of their social class.

As Schleiermacher carries on to show, in his time, Pestalozzi's method came to be regarded as such a unitary principle for teaching all school subjects. Much like his 17th century predecessors though, the Swiss pedagogue advocated for a progressive approach in teaching, from known to unknown, from concrete to abstract, from simple to complex. His whole method consisting, as R. H. Quick, a 19th century English educationist aptly describes it, in "…analyzing the knowledge the children should acquire about their surroundings, arranging it in a regular sequence, and bringing it to the child's consciousness gradually, and in a way which their minds will act upon it."[10] The only real difference from the methods proposed in the 17th century by Rathke, Seidel, Comenius, or Becher lying in his insistence on anchoring educational contents in the learner's intuition [*Anschauung*] (Pestalozzi 1894, 32–33).[11]

For Schleiermacher though, insofar as it is focused, again, exclusively on the educational content to be taught to the detriment of the learner, this method (like all the others similar to it) suffers from a vice which makes it unusable as such.

> "Pestalozzi himself recalls how a very spirited man [looking to apply his method to all subjects] told him what he was up to, namely, to mechanize everything. And Pestalozzi recognized in this the hard core of his method and took it as an appropriate name for it. But mechanization cannot be a merit, because it is the death of spirit. The mechanical is the dead. [*Das Mechanische ist das Tote.*]" (Schleiermacher 1957, 266).

For such methods to be usable, if they are to avoid mortification, they must assume as guiding principle what is proper to the child. So, Schleiermacher sees himself forced to start searching for this.

In this search, Schleiermacher refrains from taking the adult as reference. Having learned from Collins that there are other kinds of people, that people might look and speak like us but still be radically different from us though, he knows not to project onto the child the life of the adult (only to return and show that it is incomplete, unsaturated, or otherwise deficient in some way). He knows to turn his gaze on the child themselves and keep his eyes wide open. And so he comes to understand that what is proper to the child is a particular mode of being, a "specific human existence" [*ein bestimmtes menschliches Dasein*]:

---

[10] Apud. Ebenezer Cooke, Introduction to Pestalozzi 1894, xlvii.

[11] The English edition translates Anschauung by "sense-impression." Even though Pestalozzi often refers to the psychology of the child in the description of his method, that is simply projected onto the child rather than discovered based on the study of childhood.

"Regarded from the point of view of his appearance, man is, like everything temporal and becoming, in a state of constant change. Strictly speaking, every moment man is otherwise than before. Man's inner life activity, which is also manifest, is subject to change as well. If we take two distant moments in time, one from childhood and one from later life, when self-conscious activity appears in the most distinctive way, everyone will admit that these moments are different. If we isolate one of these moments, we are confronted with a specific human existence" (Schleiermacher 1957, 46–47).

The adult and the child have radically different modes of being in the world. The difference between them is an ontological difference. The child lives in the present, the adult in the future. For the child, the past is an integral part of the present. For the adult, the present is a reflection of the future. As Schleiermacher argues:

"It is a generally known fact that, just as the continuity of consciousness develops gradually, so too develops the relationship every moment has with the past and the future. But at this age [popular school age, between 5 and 13], the relationship with the past will be much more alive because it already belongs to real life and has been inscribed in it through the continuity of consciousness. For this age the future does not mean much, and we will not obtain much if we will ask the child to do something for the sake of the future. This will always be a weak motive for the young, and we will have to take recourse to strange means to sustain it. A thing we want to avoid as much as possible" (Schleiermacher 1957, 267).

This ontological difference which Schleiermacher uncovers goes unnoticed by Martin Heidegger despite the fact that, in *Being and Time* (Heidegger 1962), he assumes explicitly the task of bringing to light the fundamental mode of being of human Dasein (in general). For Heidegger comes to posit a particular mode of being, dominated by care [*Sorge*] and oriented toward the future, as specific to us regardless of age. To his credit, Hans-Georg Gadamer, his pupil, saw the problem confronting his master's thought. In *Truth and Method*, after warning against the tendency of authors like Otto Bollnow to reduce the ontology of *Being and Time* to a mere anthropological discourse, he quickly adds:

"It is nonetheless true that the being of children or indeed animals – in contrast to that ideal of 'innocence' – remains an ontological problem. Their mode of being is not, at any rate, 'existence' and historicity such as Heidegger claims for human Dasein" (Gadamer 2004, 253).

That is to say, children do not live "outside themselves" (this is what Heidegger means by "existence")[12] and out of a past, on the ground of a past, because they do not yet have one. However, just like Rousseau before him, Gadamer does not dwell on this issue, nor does he ask how children live.

The discovery of the ontological difference between adult and child confronts *Didaktik* from the very beginning with an ethical dilemma. If the specific way of being of those in front of the teacher is tied to the present and for them the future does not exist, what entitles the teacher to ask them to do something else than what they want to do? This is, after all, what we do in school: we ask pupils to give up on themselves for a future that exists only for us. As Schleiermacher notes: "Every pedagogical influence presents itself as the sacrifice of a particular moment for a future one. The question arising is whether we are allowed to make such sacrifices" (Schleiermacher 1957, 46). In fact, one is bound to as in general: "Are we allowed to sacrifice a moment of life as a mere means to an end for another moment of life?" (Schleiermacher 1957, 46).

Schleiermacher's answer is categorically no. For, as he shows, "[o]ur entire life activity manifests constant reluctance to such practice" (Schleiermacher 1957, 46).

So, this Kantian maxim to "act in such a way as to treat every moment as an end in itself and never solely as a means to another" becomes, for Schleiermacher, the fundamental principle of *Didaktik*. It is the common principle of teaching for all subjects searched for.

> "… in education one must not sacrifice any moment entirely for the future, but every moment must be something for itself. […] … we must not fill children's time with things which are solely means for something else, everything must be an end in itself. […] The principle apparently lies in organizing everything related to teaching in such a way that each activity can be regarded as an end in itself and as carrying satisfaction in itself" (Schleiermacher 1957, 267).

This didactic principle alone can counteract the mortifying tendencies of the teaching methods deduced solely from the educational content to be taught. In itself, it is not meant to substitute them. Rather, it is called to complement them by guiding their application. Only with it and because of the ontological reflection on the specific mode of being of the adult and the child does *Didaktik* deserves to

---

[12] See in this sense Aho 2021, 268–70.

be recognized as an autonomous discipline, independent of both *Methodik*, the methodology of instruction, and *Pädagogik*, a systematic reflection on training, instruction and education in general, on their general means and individual and social effects.

Such an ontological reflection is the true ground of the art of teaching. We begin to teach only when we realize that the student might be, might think and live, otherwise than ourselves. And we can teach only if, and insofar as, we understand and respect (to the extent that it is possible) this different mode of being. Without such respect and understanding, when the student, the pupil, is treated as an adult, as such or in becoming, the teacher ends up speaking only for themselves.

Because it relies on an ontological reflection though, *Didaktik* is an eminently philosophical discipline. And this, regardless of whether it is applied to philosophy, mathematics, languages, or music or whether it aims to guide the art of teaching in general. That is to say, *Didaktik* is a philosophical discipline both as *Allgemeine Didaktik* and as *Fachdidaktik*, irrespective of the subject taught.

Never before has pedagogical reflection reached such depths and, as far as we know, never will it reach them again. Posterity has largely proven incapable of understanding Schleiermacher. Later, "scientific," educational psychology scrupulously counts positive differences between the adult and the child without bothering to wonder what they amount to. While later *Didaktik* mostly reverts back to a 17th–century–style *Methodik* and is happy to multiply the methods of teaching conceived exclusively starting from the educational content. In the few instances when the figure of the child was not completely forgotten, it was dematerialized. The child was disfigured. It lost its face and stopped addressing us as an other. It has become a bundle of cognitive and affective processes. Today, we count on our fingers the number of pedagogues who do research on education for flesh-and-blood human beings.

On the other hand, in spite of its depth (or because of it?) Schleiermacher nevertheless misses something as simple but as essential for *Didaktik*. So, as it would seem, Paul de Man's maxim according to which "[c]ritics' moments of greatest blindness with regard to their own critical assumptions are also moments at which they achieve their greatest insight" (de Man 1983, 109) works also for authors and the other way round. For all the hermeneutic canons he establishes function at the same time as didactic canons and ought to be adopted by *Didaktik* as regulative ideas for the art of teaching. After all, to learn one must (first) understand. And to teach one must make the educational content and oneself understood.

Conclusion

In the present text, we have retraced the turning points in the prehistory and history of *Didaktik* and hermeneutics and argued that, even though these two disciplines seem completely unrelated at first, they are deeply intertwined.

As we have shown, *Didaktik* and hermeneutics were born in the 17th century after a long period of gestation beginning in Ancient Greece with Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, the first to explore both the thematic nexus of hermeneutics and the problematic of education. This endeavor was carried further in the Middle Ages by St. Augustine who articulates the first full-fledged hermeneutic theory precisely with a didactic purpose in mind: to offer Christians a means to interpret Scripture and thereby to learn what they need to know. The fact that *Didaktik* and hermeneutics emerged virtually at the same time is no coincidence, for they were both conceived as theories of method called upon to cover the two faces of spiritual life, i.e., the preservation of the culture and knowledge of the past and its transmission to the future generation.

As we have shown though, when viewed through the looking glass of today's panorama of pedagogical sciences, the *Didaktik* theories put forth in the 17th century do not live up to their name. They fit under the heading of *Methodik* rather than that of *Didaktik* as such. For all the authors who dealt with the question of teaching approached it exclusively from the point of view of the educational content, leaving aside the other vertex of the didactic triangle – the pupil to be taught.

That is why, as we have shown, *Didaktik* proper emerges much later, at the beginning of the 19th century, from the same intellectual impulse which also gives rise to hermeneutics as we know it today. *Didaktik* begins with Schleiermacher. What makes Schleiermacher turn his gaze toward the pupil, so far forgotten, is the discovery of alterity, the realization that the other that stands before me may not be an other like me, but an other than me. This realization allows Schleiermacher to see that childhood involves a specific mode of being in a world, radically different from the adult's. The child lives in the present, the adult in the future. There is an ontological difference between them.

This ontological reflection on childhood, we argued, is the ultimate foundation of the art of teaching. We can teach only insofar we understand and respect the mode of being of the pupil; otherwise we speak alone. But this ontological reflection also makes *Didaktik* a philosophical discipline.

REFERENCES

Aho, Kevin. 2021. "Ek-sistence (Ek-sistenz)." In Mark A. Wrathall, ed., *The Cambridge Heidegger Lexicon*. Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press.

Ariès, Philippe. 1962. *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*. Translated by Robert Baldick. New York: Vintage Books.

Aristotle. 1952a. *The Works of Aristotle. Vol. I*. Edited by W. D. Ross. Chicago & London: Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc.

———. 1952b. *The Works of Aristotle. Vol. II*. Edited by W. D. Ross. Chicago & London: Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc.

Augustine, Aurelius. 1873. *On Christian Doctrine; The Enchiridion*. Translated by S. D. Salmond. Edinburgh: T & T Clark.

Autio, Tero. 2006. *Subjectivity, Curriculum, and Society: Between and Beyond German Didaktik and Anglo-American Curriculum Studies*. Mahwah, New Jersey & London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.

Bârsănescu, Ștefan. 1935. *Didactica pentru școalele normale și seminarii*. Craiova: Scrisul românesc.

Becher, Johann Joachim. 1674. *Methodus didactica*. Frankfurt: Johann David Zunners Verlag.

Bowen, James. 2003. *A History of Western Education: The Modern West Europe and the New World. Vol. III.* London & New York: Routledge.

Collins, David. 1798. *An Account of the English Colony in New South Wales*. London: Cadell Jun. and W. Davies.

Comenius, Jan Amos. 1657. *Opera didactica omnia*. Amsterdam: Laurentius de Geer.

———. 1871. *Grosse Unterrichtslehre*. Translated by Julius Beeger and Franz Boubek. Berlin: Julius Klönne Verlag.

Comenius, John Amos. 1896. *The Great Didactic*. Translated by M. W. Keatinge. London: Adam and Charles Black.

Dannhauer, Johann Conrad. 1630. *Idea boni interpreti*. Strasbourg: Wilhelm Christian Glaser.

———. 1654. *Hermeneutica sacra sive methodus exponendarum sacrum literarum*. Strasbourg: Jost Stadell.

de Man, Paul. 1983. *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*. London: Methuen & Co. Ltd.

Dryden, John. 1695. *The Conquest of Granada by the Spaniards*. London: Henry Herringman.

Flacelière, Robert. 1965. *Daily Life in Greece at the Time of Pericles*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., INC.

Friesen, Norm, and Karsten Kenklies, eds. 2023. *F.D.E. Schleiermacher's Outlines of the Art of Education: A Translation and Commentary*. New York, Berlin, Brussels, Lausanne, Oxford: Peter Lang.

Gadamer, Hans-Georg. 2004. *Truth and Method*. Translated by Joel Weinsheimer. London & New York: Continuum.

Green, Andy. 1990. *Education and State Formation: The Rise of Education Systems in England, France and the USA*. London: Macmillan.

Heidegger, Martin. 1962. *Being and Time*. Translated by John Macquarrie. San Francisco: Harper & Row.

———. 1999. *Ontology: The Hermeneutics of Facticity*. Translated by John van Buren. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Helwig, Cristoph, and Joachim Jungius. 1613. *Kurtzer Bericht von Der Didactica, Oder Lehrkunst Wolfgang Ratichii*. Frankfurt am Main: Erasmus Kempffer.

Hüllen, Werner. 1996. "Johann Joachim Becher (1635-1682), A Little Known Opponent of Comenius' Theory of Language and Language Learning." *Historiographia Linguistica*, vol. 23, no. 1:73-88.

Kevane, Eugene. 1970. "Paideia and Anti-paideia: The Prooemium of St. Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana*." In *Augustinian Studies*, vol. 1: 153-180.

Pestalozzi, Johann Heinrich. 1894. *How Gertrude Teaches Her Children: An Attempt to Help Mothers to Teach Their Own Children*. Translated by Lucy E. Holland and Frances C. Turner. London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co.

Plato. 1997. *The Complete Works*. Edited by John M. Cooper. Indianapolis: Hackett.

Prikett, Stephen. 1998. "Coleridge, Schlegel and Schleiermacher: England, Germany (and Australia) in 1798." In Richard Cronin, ed., *1798: The Year of the Lyrical Ballads*. New York: Palgrave.

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. 1979. *Emile: or On Education*. Translated by Allan Bloom. New York: Basic Books.

S. Aurelii Augustini. 1877. "De magistro liber unus." In *Patrologíae cursus completus*. Series Prima (Patrologia latina). Tomus XXXII. Paris: Apud Jacques-Paul Migne editorem in via dicta d'Amboise. Available at https://www.augustinus.it/latino/maestro/index.htm. Accessed 15 June 2025.

Saint Augustine. 1924. *The Philosophy of Teaching: A Study in the Symbolism of Language. A Translation of Saint Augustine's De Magistro*. Translated by Francis E. Tourscher. Pennsylvania: Villanova College.

St. Thomas Aquinas. 1929. *The Philosophy of Teaching*. Translated by Mary Helen Mayer. New York, Milwaukee (Wisconsin) & Chicago: The Bruce Publishing Company.

Schleiermacher, Friedrich Ernst Daniel. 1957. *Pädagogische Schriften. Erster Band. Die Vorlesungen Aus Dem Jahre 1826*. Düsseldorf & München: Verlag Helmut Küpper.

———. 1998. *Hermeneutics and Criticism and Other Writings*. Translated by Andrew Bowie. Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press.

Seidel, Caspar. 1638. *Didactica Nova*. Tübingen: Zacharia Hertell.

Walmsley, John Brian. 1990. "Wolfgang Rathke (Ratichius) and His Educational Writings." PhD Diss. University of Durham.