

Articoli/5

Bergson and Plotinus on Freedom*

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This article deals with the concept of freedom in Bergson and in Plotinus. This concept is a central one in Bergson's work, as he himself remarks many times: it is on this concept that he builds his own thought and starting from it he interrogates the thought that precedes his. In investigating the presence of this concept in Plotinus, Bergson sees it as linked (and confined to) the concept of the individuality of the soul. This article seeks to question Bergson's reading, showing that Plotinus' concept of freedom is much more pervasive and closer to that of Bergson than Bergson himself thought. As a result, I suggest that both philosophers understand freedom as will. Instead of closing the problem, this conclusion opens up new questions both - historical and philosophical: Can the concept of will be seen as a foundational one in the history of philosophy starting from its Greek inception? Is the will the more radical concept under which to elaborate on freedom?

Bergson's philosophy has in its center a paradox: reality as such is the manifestation of freedom. This peculiar position is made evident already in the title of his major work, *L'évolution créatrice*, where that simple adjective attributes to the unfolding of nature the free act of making the unexpected emerge. In turn, this implies that the source of this freedom is a consciousness. All that lives, then, is the springing up of a free consciousness: the *élan vital* unfolds as an act of freedom, based on no previous plan or on an already codified script. One would be tempted to water down this daring statement, to eliminate what in it is paradoxical, by changing the word «freedom» with the milder word «contingency». Were such an operation possible and legitimate within the frame of Bergson's thought, then the other horn, so to say, of the paradox would have been dealt with: we would have been able to eliminate altogether the word consciousness from the equation. However, neither of these words can be eliminated: the writings of Bergson are filled with them and in fact his entire philosophical experience rests on them. The duration (*durée*) is the accumulation of all the acts of freedom, which progressively build up to shape

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a present, which if it is determined as for its provenance, *qua* accumulated and fixed life, it remains nonetheless open as for its subsequent unfolding. These acts of freedom are conscious not in the sense that they are the fruit of a deliberation on the part of an intelligence of sorts, but in the sense that they manifest a *will* capable of reacting in unpredictable ways to the surrounding circumstances. Consciousness is rather to be understood as *intuition*, that is the presence of all that has been lived, the *durée*, in one point, through a *tension*, which in its turn unfolds in a *distention*. Reality is, thus, the interplay of a tension and a distension: in the former the will, the *élan vital*, is gathered as in a point, while in the latter it unfolds towards the fixity of determinate forms¹. This interplay is the space of conscious freedom².

If freedom is the trait that characterizes all of reality in its unfolding, it does not exclude the self. Rather, this latter is in its turn immersed in it like anything else. However, the freedom of the self, taken usually as its prerogative in the form of *free will* (*liberum voluntatis arbitrium*), is looked at in its turn in a different light. The freedom of the self cannot be seen only as the ability on the part of each individual to choose between different options, thought of as possibilities already given; but as the continuous motion of something that poses itself as it goes, re-actualizing into new forms what is already there in its lived past³. Thus, freedom is the act itself of the *durée*, which as such creates as it goes its own possibilities, and by doing that it creates itself every time anew. In this case also, the word consciousness does not refer first and for most to an act of deliberation, but to a tension, whereby the self gathers itself in its totality through an act of will⁴, out of which new realities are going to be created. It is worth reading a passage from *L'évolution créatrice*, where this point is exposed:

Cherchons, au plus profond de nous-mêmes, le point où nous nous sentons le plus intérieurs à notre propre vie. C'est dans la pure durée que nous nous replongeons alors, une durée où le passé, toujours en marche, se grossit sans cesse d'un présent absolument nouveau. Mais, en même temps, nous sentons se tendre, jusqu'à sa limite extrême, le ressort de notre volonté. Il faut que, par une contraction violente de notre personnalité sur elle-même, nous ramassions notre passé qui se dérobe, pour le pousser compact et indivisé, dans un présent qu'il créera en s'y introduisant. Bien rares sont les moments où nous nous ressaisissons nous-mêmes à ce point: ils ne font qu'un avec nos actions vraiment libres⁵.

¹ Cf. H. Bergson, *L'évolution créatrice*, Paris 2013, p. 201.

² As is well known, this theme is central already in the first major work of Bergson, *Matière et mémoire*.

³ On this particular point cf. the penetrating remarks of R.-M. Mossé-Bastide, *Bergson et Plotin*, Paris 1959, pp. 308-314.

⁴ What is at work here has an unmistakable Augustinian mark: the couple tension-distension as possibilities of the will is what governs Augustine's transformation of Plotinus' cosmological psychology into an anthropological one, shaped as it is around the investigation of time in *Conf. XI*.

⁵ H. Bergson, *L'évolution créatrice*, cit., p. 201.

The *élan vital* is the act of freedom that poses itself in its duration, thus making a consciousness rise, which is increasingly aware of itself *qua* act of will posing the totality. The self is, thus, looked at as if from behind its boundaries – fixed as they are by the prevailing tradition in the confines of deliberative reason: now it is seen *again* as a manifestation of a much larger reality, i.e. a much larger consciousness, to which it is necessarily linked and within which it necessarily acts. I say ‘again’, because Bergson is not the first to have done this, as I will show in the following pages.

The paradox is, therefore, unavoidable and with it the challenge that it poses. The entire philosophical tradition is called into question, as in it freedom was disposed of, in favor of systematizations each time based on an understanding of reality as something already pre-determined. This confrontation with the rest of the philosophical tradition runs across all the works of Bergson: the last chapter of *L'évolution créatrice*, centered as it is on an examination of the previous philosophical systems, clearly shows Bergson's engagement with the previous tradition. This engagement is not simply a survey of the history of philosophy, but rather a radically critical perspective on it, which as such allows Bergson to mark the distance and the novelty of his own position. In chapter 4 of *L'évolution créatrice* we find a condensed and mature form of this long engagement, of which the newly published lectures at the *Collège de France* allow us now to appreciate the development.

The two volumes, recently published, give us the texts of two courses, one on the problem of time, the other on that of freedom⁶. I will concentrate on the latter.

In the course entitled *L'évolution du problème de la liberté* Bergson examines ancient and modern philosophers, skipping over the Middle-Ages. The philosopher, with whom his analysis of antiquity culminates, is Plotinus⁷. The works of the head of the so called Neo-Platonic school represent for Bergson a privileged point of observation, as in them the core of the tradition that precedes is made clear, together with problems that were not made explicit. Plotinus is seen by Bergson as the philosopher who allows us to understand what in Plato and Aristotle is only touched upon or implied. This is so, because his thought – highly systematic, according to Bergson – fully develops, almost exasperating it, what in the thought of Plato and Aristotle – both unsystematic, according to Bergson – was only at the level of suggestions. The works of Plotinus represent, in other words, a systematized development of the unsystematic positions, each time different within an implied general view, of his two great predecessors. In this sense, the thought of Plotinus brings to fruition certain latent insights

⁶H. Bergson, *Histoire de l'idée de temps. Cours au Collège de France 1902-1903*, Paris 2016; Id., *L'évolution du problème de la liberté. Cours au Collège de France 1904-1905*, Paris 2017.

⁷This, of course, does not surprise those who are acquainted with Bergson, as Plotinus represents one of his most important interlocutors, as R.-M. Mossé-Bastide, *cit.*, has showed.

already present in Plato and in Aristotle; and because of this Plotinus appears as a privileged interlocutor out of the ancient tradition⁸.

While the tradition before Plotinus had seen reality as the unfolding out of a pre-determined model, compressing freedom – a concept never thematically posed as such – into the narrow space of contingency⁹, Plotinus granted more consideration to the possibility of freedom as an ingredient in the fabric of reality, Bergson thinks. According to him, Plotinus has explicitly posed three fundamental questions regarding the problem of freedom¹⁰: 1) Given the regularity of nature and the fixity of its laws, can we think that there is anything like personal freedom? 2) If this freedom exists, what is then the relation of the human being with the rest of reality? 3) Assuming that the human being is free and that he can act on his freedom, even surpassing and undoing the fixed regularity of the established order of nature, should he do that?

The first question is the result of Plotinus' dispute with the Stoics, whose positions he counters in all his works. The Stoics saw nature as a great organism, which works through what they called *συμπάθεια*, whereby each single part of nature is linked to any other part, not mechanically, but organically. Nature is understood as a living body, whose parts, although distant from each other, nonetheless are linked, thus exercising and suffering reciprocal influence, for the very fact that they are integral parts of one organism. Plotinus accepts this doctrine, which in fact represents the core of his understanding of nature and its working, but he refuses the strict immanentism that informs all of Stoicism, to base it instead on the transcendentalism typical of the Platonic tradition. This gives him some space to maneuver a defense of free will: on the one hand nature is the result of the unfolding of the activity of the Intellect, which in its acting is free of any determination, on the other each of us – as individual – is linked to nature as for the part of us that is completely implicated in nature, but is free as for that part that does not depend on nature, being of the same reality of the Intellect. Bergson brings as evidence of this reading of Plotinus *Enn.* IV 4.34¹¹, in which Plotinus states that we are bound to the body of nature only through that part of us which belongs solely to it, whereas for the rest we are our own masters¹². This solution offered by Plotinus appears to Bergson quite weak, as he

⁸ Cf. H. Bergson, *L'évolution du problème*, cit., pp. 177-179.

⁹ This is the thesis that informs Bergson's exposition of the thought of the predecessors of Plotinus down to the Stoics: cf. H. Bergson, *L'évolution du problème*, cit., the lectures that precede those on Plotinus.

¹⁰ Cf. H. Bergson, *L'évolution du problème*, cit., pp. 180-189 and 191.

¹¹ Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 197 and note 309 p. 363.

¹² Cf. *Enn.* IV 4.34, 1-7: «Ἡμᾶς δὲ διδόντας τὸ μέρος αὐτῶν εἰς τὸ πάσχειν, ὅσον ἦν ἡμέτερον ἐκείνου τοῦ σώματος, μὴ τὸ πᾶν ἐκείνου νομίζοντας, μέτρια παρ' αὐτοῦ πάσχειν· ὡσπερ οἱ ἔμφρονες τῶν θητευόντων τὸ μὲν τι τοῖς δεσπόζουσιν ὑπηρετοῦντες, τὸ δ' αὐτῶν ὄντες, μετριωτέρων τῶν παρὰ τοῦ δεσπότη ἐπιταγμάτων διὰ τοῦτο τυγχάνοντες, ἅτε μὴ ἀνδράποδα ὄντες μηδὲ τὸ πᾶν ἄλλου». («But we, by yielding that part of ourselves to experience which was our share of the body of the All, and not considering the whole of ourselves to belong to it, are subject to experience only within reasonable limits: just as sensible slaves with one part of themselves serve their master, but with another belong to themselves, and therefore receive more reasonably limited orders

does not see how anything like free determination can be asserted, once reality is seen as the «projection» of something already given, i.e. the Intellect itself¹³.

This criticism of Bergson touches indeed on an important point of Plotinus' thought, showing what is perhaps the fundamental point of distinction between Plotinus and the previous tradition. A distinction that being unexpressed and thus unresolved stands as the problematic core of Plotinus' thought: namely, the fact that Plotinus does indeed base his understanding of the unfolding of things on the ultimately undetermined, but then recurs to the intellectualistic scheme typical of Platonism as well as of Aristotelianism, whereby a fixed determination works always as the ultimate foundation. But, leaving aside for the moment this point, to which we will later come back, we must go to the second question Bergson points out and give a closer look at how Bergson describes the inner logic of Plotinus' doctrine regarding the relation of the soul with the body. For, in it we will find all the traits that characterize Bergson's understanding of the entirety of ancient philosophy and of Plotinus within it; this understanding is the same that appears in the last chapter of *L'évolution créatrice*. Bergson sees this question as the most important one among the three questions posed by Plotinus. In fact, he goes as far as saying that Plotinus himself saw it as the most important, to then immediately temper this statement saying that this question is «du moins celle que Plotin a traité le plus copieusement»¹⁴. As we will see, there is an interesting parallelism linking the way in which Bergson understands on the one hand the general structure on which the entirety of ancient philosophy rests, and on the other the relation between the élan vital and the unfolding of individual life (founded on the dichotomy 'tension' 'distension'), with the description he gives of Plotinus' doctrine of embodiment. This question is in Bergson's opinion the most important, perhaps because of the fact that the answer provided to it in Bergson's analysis is at the same time the most fruitful for the development of his own ongoing reflection. It is starting from this hypothesis that we will be able to question Bergson's reading of Plotinus as well as appreciate the distance that Bergson himself sought to mark between his thought and the rest of the preceding tradition. By way of anticipation, this distance rests on Bergson's analysis of the concept of nothingness and its refusal and hence rejection.

In the first part of the last chapter of *L'évolution créatrice* Bergson examines the concept of nothingness. The aim of this examination is to show on the one hand that this concept is an empty one, a petition of principle, on the

from their master since they are not slaves and do not totally belong to another», tr. by A. H. Armstrong, in *Plotinus. Ennead IV*, Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge MA 1984, henceforth all translations of Plotinus will be taken from Armstrong).

¹³ Cf. H. Bergson, *L'évolution du problème*, cit., p. 197: «Si tout qui se fait dans la nature, si la nature n'est toute entière que la projection, dans l'espace et dans le temps, de l'Intelligence, si notre corps et tout ce que fait notre corps par conséquent est la projection, dans l'espace et dans le temps, de ce qui est l'Intelligible correspondant à notre âme, alors tout ce qui se fait dans l'espace et dans le temps n'est que la projection, par conséquent, de quelque chose de donné, de donné tout d'un coup dans l'incorporel et dans l'éternel».

¹⁴ Cf. H. Bergson, *L'évolution du problème*, cit., p. 191.

other to bring to light what Bergson takes to be the guiding assumption of the entirety of the philosophical tradition in its dealing with reality. As for the former point, Bergson shows how the concept of nothingness is an empty one, by underlining the fact that this concept cannot be pictured in anyway, being thus an abstraction; moreover and more importantly as a concept it rests completely on an act of will on the part of the thinker, who however cannot in any way abolish himself *qua* thinking. Thus, the concept of nothingness is not only an empty one, but is also a fiction of the mind. This fact – i.e. nothingness being a fiction of the mind – allows us to understand the second point Bergson underlines about this concept: this fiction is functional to a certain way of construing reality and thus of forming a vision of it. For, once the absolutely nothing, i.e. the absolutely void of anything, has been posited, *e converso* and from within the very same logic the absolutely full is also posited. The absolutely full is nothing else but what philosophers have thought of as *being*, understood as immutable, perfect, thus fully and already determined. Reality, then, is the descending gradation from the higher point, the perfection of being which is already given at once¹⁵, into nothingness, each thing hence being at most the defective version of perfection¹⁶.

When describing how Plotinus solves the problem of the presence of the soul in the body, more specifically of how the soul gets into a body, Bergson sees the same scheme at work. The soul, each individual soul, being one of the Intelligibles, is also perfect and whole, given *ab aeterno* in a dimension that transcends time: as such, it is an extreme concentration, a concentrated dot of light, in a state of extreme and pristine *tension*. The embodiment (*ἐνσωμάτωσις*) is then the act whereby this extreme tension gets distended, propagating itself in a series of rays, in between which there is darkness, i.e. what Plotinus calls matter and Bergson takes to be a name for nothingness. It is worth quoting two passages in their entirety:

[...] d'après Plotin, si nous voulions comprendre cette opération, il faut que nous nous transportions dans l'Intelligible. Le corps nous apparaît comme inclus dans une âme, laquelle âme elle-même est comme la distension, la dilatation dans l'espace et dans le temps d'une Idée, d'une essence intelligible; c'est ce que Plotin appelle le νοητόν (*noèton*), c'est-à-dire l'Idée platonicienne, mais devenue celle d'un individu, et non plus celle d'un genre¹⁷.

and a few lines after:

[...] cette Intelligence tout en restant où elle est peut descendre par une partie d'elle-même, absolument comme d'un point lumineux partent des rayons, sans que pour

¹⁵ Cf. H. Bergson, *L'évolution du problème*, cit., p. 197: «quelque chose de donné, de donné tout d'un coup».

¹⁶ Cf. H. Bergson, *L'évolution créatrice*, cit., pp. 323-225, above all: «Cette conception qui transparait de plus en plus sous les raisonnements des philosophes grecs à mesure qu'on va de Platon à Plotin, nous la formulerions ainsi: *La position d'une réalité implique la position simultanée de tous les degrés de réalité intermédiaires entre elle et le pur néant*».

¹⁷ Cf. H. Bergson, *L'évolution du problème*, cit., pp. 191-192.

cela ce point lumineux soit en aucune façon amoindri. Pour que l'Intelligence procède ainsi, devienne âme et par conséquent corps, elle n'a pas besoin de rien s'adjoindre, ce n'est pas une addition, c'est au contraire une diminution. De même que pour tirer d'un point lumineux des rayons il n'y a rien à y ajouter que de l'espace vide, en quelque sorte de l'espace ténébreux tout autour – on y ajoute du rien en quelque sorte pour qu'il rayonne – ainsi pour que l'Intelligence devienne âme et par conséquent corps et nature, il n'y a rien à y ajouter, au contraire il faut qu'un principe de diminution, un principe ténébreux, s'adjoigne. C'est ce que Plotin appelle la «matière», quelque chose de purement négatif¹⁸.

What we notice in these two passages is the equation matter = nothingness, which as a posited principle stands at the opposite end of a spectrum whose positive end is the fullness of the stable reality that are the Intelligibles. Leaving aside the legitimate question, to which we will later come back, whether Plotinus' concept of matter can legitimately be equated with that of nothingness, we can stress the fact that the relation between these two poles, the Intelligibles and matter/nothingness, is marked by a progressive «diminution». The «diminution» which Bergson sees at work is, thus, a diminution of perfect actuality into the total nothingness, that is into matter. According to this reading the pole out of which reality emanates in Plotinus' thought is the perfect stability of Intelligibles, which with an Aristotelian term we can refer to as perfect actuality. We can notice, moreover, that the dichotomy 'tension'-'distension' is also already at work in Bergson's analysis, as it will be in the pages of *L'évolution créatrice*. However, here its sense is determined by the reading Bergson gives of Plotinus' emanating principle of reality. For, while in the pages of his major work the positive pole in the dichotomy 'tension'-'distension' is not a substantial reality, given as a fixed datum from the start, but is rather the un-boundedness of *will*, in the reading he gives of Plotinus' doctrine of embodiment the positive pole is an actual and thus fixed principle, behind which we cannot climb further.

To use an image built on Bergsonian terms, we could say that in Bergson's view Plotinus – and with him the previous tradition – sees the unfolding of reality not as pure movement, but rather as a motion starting from a fixed point, what Bergson calls *le mobile*, proceeding towards a point zero, which although conceived as an absolute void, is in fact a point in its turn. In this way the very nature of movement is obfuscated: we end up with a motion from A to A¹, a motion already predetermined as for its direction as well as its unfolding. And together with movement what gets lost is any real understanding of potentiality (δύναμις). Using a formula we could say that in Bergson's reading of Plotinus' thought actuality precedes everything else and is the source of everything else. The second question that Plotinus addresses is, according to Bergson, answered this way: the human being, *qua* soul dealing with matter, is the manifestation of a *distension* out of a point of perfect and absolute actuality, the concentration of *tension*.

¹⁸ Cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 193-194.

Once this understanding of Plotinus' thought regarding the dealing of the soul with matter has been established, Bergson can proceed to give an answer to the third question Plotinus posed. An answer that is, of course, an interpretation of Plotinus, as such already determined by the preceding interpretation regarding the entirety of Plotinus' thought and its ultimate sense. The third question that Plotinus addressed is: «que vaut cette liberté, jusqu'à quel point convient-il d'en user, n'y aurait-il pas un meilleur usage à en faire?»¹⁹. The guiding word to understand Plotinus' answer to this question is θεωρία. In the reading that Bergson gives of this word, it ends up meaning the same thing that it means starting from Aristotle down to the Stoics: the retreat of man from activity into contemplation of the Intelligibles, of which man himself in his essence is a part. In other words, θεωρία understood as contemplation is *opposed* to activity (πρᾶξις/ποίησις), this latter being the process of the progressive diminution ending up with the production of individual material things.

According to Bergson, thus, Plotinus' answer to that question is this: given the fact that reality is perfect in its own way, as the product of the activity of the world-soul, which contemplates the perfection of the Intellect, the individual should refrain from using his potentially subversive freedom, and should instead limit himself to embrace the orderly perfection of the whole through contemplation. This coincides with a withdrawal from any activity within the world of becoming in order to fix one's gaze on the perfection of the stability of the Intellect. The end point of θεωρία would then be the fixity of the gaze on something fixed and in itself closed: here we see the fundamental reduction of Plotinus' thought – which precisely in the concept of θεωρία becomes peculiarly daring- to the scheme of Aristotelian thought.

Briefly put, Bergson sees the concept of freedom in Plotinus represented – although never explicitly – in what the philosopher says regarding the individual soul²⁰. The phenomenal world is the result of the operation of the world-soul, which shapes reality in its totality, that is to say in its general lines. The individual soul intervenes on a certain segment of the total fabric woven by the world-soul. In this space of intervention the freedom of the individual soul can manifest itself:

¹⁹ Cf. H. Bergson, *L'évolution du problème*, cit., p. 185.

²⁰ Bergson assumes that the concept of soul can be read as synonymous of that of individual, or at the very least he sees each soul as marked by individuality as its main trait. In relation to Plotinus and to the Platonic tradition in general, this is quite controversial, and because of this much could be said about it. Therefore, I won't enter here into this problem, but I will limit myself to refer the reader to P. Kalligas, *Forms of Individuals in Plotinus: a Re-Examination*, «Phronesis», XLII, 1997, 2, pp. 206-227. P. Kalligas suggests that in Plotinus the soul is per se something indefinite, which in its being indefinite possesses the formal reasons (λόγοι) of each individual, which *qua* individual is definite. We might notice that here there is a confirmation of the general scheme underpinning the entirety of Plotinus' thought: δύναμις understood as indefinite potentiality, is superior to ἐνέργεια. It seems as if Plotinus tries to think processually, but he uses conceptual tools based on the Aristotelian thought that operates through categories, for which actuality, as form, precedes potentiality. Individuals are, hence, for Plotinus actualizations, limitations, of the infinite potentiality of the soul, of each soul, which in itself contains all formal reasons.

what we are dealing with, then, is a freedom with solidly established boundaries. For, the fabric of the whole in its totality is already established. Nothing, therefore, of the radical outlook that characterizes Bergson's position, whereby freedom in its essence is not the possibility to choose between different options already given, but rather the very act of creation of reality. Plotinus remains ultimately bound to the idea of a necessitated and pre-determined nature, an idea very distant from the radical position of Bergson, who sees in nature itself the manifestation and the unfolding of a fundamental act of freedom. In this perspective, the only true possibility to acquire freedom for the individual soul, is to detach itself from all links with the already predetermined sympathetic organism of nature, and to tend toward the perfection of the form²¹. Thus, although characterized by a deep urgency regarding the problem of freedom, the thought of Plotinus remains in its core fundamentally linked to and determined by the thought on necessity that characterizes the tradition that precedes him. Moreover, Plotinus' adherence to the fundamental outlook of the tradition before him is also witnessed by the general scheme, to which his philosophy can be reduced: reality seen as the descending line that starting from the perfect actuality of the principle goes down to nothingness.

However, we can wonder whether the concept of freedom plays a deeper role in Plotinus' philosophical experience; a role that makes it a concept as necessary as it is in Bergson's philosophy.

Plotinus' thought has in its center a paradox as well: everything that is, is because of and in view of θεωρία²². Θεωρία is the *activity* through which everything that is, is. Plotinus himself was very well aware of the paradoxical nature of this position, which he introduces almost as a joke: «Παίζοντες δὴ τὴν πρώτην πρὶν ἐπιχειρεῖν σπουδάζειν εἰ λέγοιμεν πάντα θεωρίας ἐφίεσθαι καὶ εἰς τέλος τοῦτο βλέπειν, [...] ἄρ' ἂν τις ἀνάσχοιτο τὸ παράδοξον τοῦ λόγου;»²³. The discourse that he wants to propose is paradoxical, where the adjective is to be taken in its literal sense: it goes against the common opinion. In this case, the opinion is a sedimented and well established idea that starting from at least Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* had permeated the core of Greek philosophy. According to it, the human being is the only being capable of reaching θεωρία, precisely because he is endowed with reason; θεωρία represents, in fact, the

²¹ For all this development cf. the lesson of March 10 in, *L'évolution du problème*, cit., pp. 191-207.

²² The word θεωρία is usually translated with «contemplation»; this practice is followed also by A.H. Armstrong in translating this word in the *Enneads*. However, I will restrain from translating it and will leave it in Greek, for lack of a better option. This choice is dictated by the fact that what Plotinus means with the word θεωρία is not covered at all by the word «contemplation», since this latter points to the establishment and portioning of a fixed space on which the gaze fixes itself (v. Lat. *contemplor* from *cum* + *templum*, this latter term indicating a portion of the sky cut by the *augur* in order to observe the presages: cf. A. Ernout and A. Meillet, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue latine*, Paris 2001, s.v. *templum*).

²³ Cf. *Enn.* III 8.1, 1-3; 8 («Suppose we said, playing at first before we set out to be serious, that all things aspire to contemplation, and direct their gaze to this end [...] could anyone endure the oddity of this line of thought?»).

peak of all the abilities that characterize that particular being, which in its turn represents the peak of the animal kingdom, i.e. the human being. Moreover, this peculiar trait of the human being is opposed to *πρᾶξις*: for, as an activity it does not consist in the production of something, but rather in the contemplation of the principles on which reality itself rests²⁴. We find here the roots on which the opposition between *vita activa* and *vita contemplative*, exemplified e.g. in the works of Petrarch, will unfold throughout the history of Western thought.

Plotinus gainsays both these points: he affirms on the one hand that everything that exists is the fruit of *θεωρία*, to which it tends. This implies robbing man of his position of privilege and equating him to all the rest of reality²⁵. On the other hand, he eliminates the dichotomy established by Aristotle between *θεωρία* and *πρᾶξις*, seeing this latter as a species of the former²⁶.

The concept of *θεωρία* formulated in this unprecedented manner is an attempt to address the question regarding the coming into being of things and their abidance in being. We can go as far as saying that it represents a radical attempt to take up again and re-think that most Greek of all concepts: *φύσις*. As such, *θεωρία*, as a concept, finds in the concept of matter its necessary correlative correspondent: in this connection, it will become clear that not only was not matter understood by Plotinus as nothingness (a concept by the way foreign if not even scandalous to Greek thought), but that matter itself represents one of the two poles, the necessary linking of which allows to envisage the possibility and the reality of generation, where this latter term must not be understood to be limited to nature, but to embrace also human production: in his producing, man keeps along the line followed by *φύσις*, only his producing is somewhat different in its unfolding. In other words, with the word *θεωρία* Plotinus tries to think the root of productivity as such – i.e. declined both as *ποίησις* and as *πρᾶξις* – and in order to do so he needs to postulate matter as the receptacle of the dynamic activity unfolding in and through *θεωρία* itself.

As such, this concept is somewhat of an oddity not only in relation with the previous tradition, but in a certain way also within the development of

²⁴ A poignant summary of this particular perspective can be read in a passage of Epictetus' *Discourses*, I 6, 13, 19-22: «Τὸν δ' ἄνθρωπον θεατὴν εἰσήγαγεν αὐτοῦ τε καὶ τῶν ἔργων τῶν αὐτοῦ, καὶ οὐ μόνον θεατὴν, ἀλλὰ καὶ ἐξηγητὴν αὐτῶν. Διὰ τοῦτο αἰσχρὸν ἐστὶ τῷ ἀνθρώπῳ ἄρχεσθαι καὶ καταλήγειν ὅπου καὶ τὰ ἄλογα, ἀλλὰ μᾶλλον ἔνθεν μὲν ἄρχεσθαι, καταλήγειν δὲ ἐφ' ὃ κατέληξεν ἐφ' ἡμῶν καὶ ἡ φύσις. Κατέληξεν δὲ ἐπὶ θεωρίαν καὶ παρακολούθησιν καὶ σύμφωνον διεξαγωγὴν τῇ φύσει. Ὅρατε οὖν, μὴ ἀθέατοι τούτων ἀποθάνητε». («He [the god] introduced man as a contemplator of it and of its works, and not only a contemplator, but also an interpreter of them. Because of this it is indecent for man to start and end where all other animals start and end, but rather man should start there where all other animals start, but end there where nature ends in us. It ended up on contemplation and consciousness and an inquiry that agrees with nature. Be careful then not to die without having contemplated these things», my translation).

²⁵ Cf. *Enn.* III 8.1, 3-4: «[...] οὐ μόνον ἔλλογα ἀλλὰ καὶ ἄλογα ζῶα καὶ τὴν ἐν φυτοῖς φύσιν καὶ τὴν ταῦτα γεννώσαν γῆν κτλ.». («not only rational but irrational living things, and the power of growth in plants, and the earth which brings them forth»)

²⁶ Cf. *Ibid.*, I, 15: «καὶ πρᾶξις πᾶσα εἰς θεωρίαν τὴν σπουδὴν ἔχειν κτλ.». («and every action is a series effort towards contemplation»).

Plotinus' thought. While a quick look at the *Lexicon Plotinianum*²⁷ would show us that the word *θεωρία* appeared already in treatises that precede III 8, in no other place of the *Enneads* does this word play such a systemic central role. The very way in which Plotinus introduces it, a daring joke which sounds like a provocative paradox, is an indication that the fruitfulness of this concept with all its implications must have dawned on him at a certain point of his thought experience as something that he had never thought before in terms as clear as the ones he uses in III 8²⁸. A testament of this is also the perplexity that scholars are caught into regarding the possible origin of this concept, that it to say the possible influences it might have arose from. Its importance, in any case, is undeniable: under the light it sheds, the entirety of Plotinus' system – to look at it the way Bergson himself does – shows its inner necessity and coherence. For, through it the relation between the two poles of Plotinus' thought, the One and matter, is brought to a level of cogency that it does not have elsewhere in the *Enneads*.

When Bergson speaks of the ultimate principle in Plotinus, he seems to refer to the Intellect, in a certain way assimilating the One into it. In other words, It is as if Bergson subsumed the One in the Intellect, which he describes as a fixed order²⁹. This characterization is surely true as for the Intellect, however we can wonder whether it is also fitting for the reality that Plotinus tries to think when he says «One». This question can also be posed in these terms: in which way should the word «principle» be understood when used by Plotinus in reference to the One? Of course, such a question opens up an enormous field for reflection and as such it cannot be fully answered here. I would then keep myself to a brief indication.

By subsuming the One under the Intellect, Bergson gives an implicit interpretation of the way in which Plotinus tries to think the principle. In this interpretation the principle of Plotinus comes out as ultimately coincident with that of Aristotle, i.e. an unmoved mover, fixed in its perfection which is its absolute actuality. However, does Plotinus think in this terms of the principle? Is actuality the ultimate word to be said about it? In reality, the difference

²⁷ Cf. *Lexicon Plotinianum*, edited by J.H. Sleeman and G. Pollet, Leiden 1980, *s.v.*

²⁸ Rivers of ink have been shed on the problem regarding the relation of Plotinus with Gnosticism, but – to my knowledge – none of those studies has taken seriously into consideration the concept of *θεωρία*, as it appears here. It would be interesting, then, to investigate whether with this concept Plotinus was consciously building a perspective that not only gainsaid the creationist idea proper to both Christianity and Gnosticism (which for Plotinus and his circle were ultimately the same thing), but did so by going beyond *any* idea of productivity based on a fixed relation between a cause and an effect, the former thought of as actuality, the latter as mere potentiality. What Plotinus points to is an acting potentiality, or more appropriately put in Latin *actuosa potentia*.

²⁹ Cf. H. Bergson, *L'évolution créatrice*, cit., pp. 323-325, especially: «Cette conception qui transparaît de plus en plus sous les raisonnements des philosophes grecs à mesure qu'on va de Platon à Plotin, nous la formulérions ainsi: *La position d'une réalité implique la position simultanée de tous les degrés de réalité intermédiaires entre elle et le pur néant*»; and what A. François says in n. 128 p. 510.

between Aristotle and Plotinus regarding the question of the principle is all played out on the correlatively dichotomic couple actuality-potentiality. For Plotinus the One is absolute potentiality, ἡ τῶν πάντων δύναμις, as such source of anything that is *qua* fixed in a form, but in itself it is before any fixity. The One is the totally undetermined coming before any determination and making any determination possible. As such, the One can be described as a will that is totally unbound, precisely because it stands before any determination. This doctrine regarding the principle, radically different from the understanding of it that Greek philosophers has elaborated in the course of centuries, is put forth by Plotinus in *Enn.* VI 8. There the discussion centers directly on the problem of freedom, which is analyzed according to the concepts of τὸ ἐφ' ἡμῖν, «that which depends on us», τὸ ἀντεξούσιον, which indicates the «being in command of one's own powers», and finally τὸ ἐκούσιον, which is «what corresponds to our will». Plotinus thinks that while the first concept points to the fact that we are limited, in that there are things that are outside of our control and even those actions of ours, of which we are masters, can in reality be the fruit of ignorance, the second concept points to an absolute freedom, not impeded either by external obstacles or by our own ignorance. The example he brings to elucidate the first point is the case of Oedipus: it was surely in his power to kill the man, but the action is not totally his own, because he did not know that that man was his father. As a consequence, the real ἀντεξούσιον is there only when there is also the ἐκούσιον, in which the will tends by its own inner inclination *always* to what is known to be good and right. In this sense, the absolute power of the One, which to be such needs to be an absolute freedom, is *de facto* already and from the beginning bound to something that in a way transcends it, i.e. what is known to be good.

Bergson acutely notes this point and what it entails: if out of the One the Intellect is produced, then this production such as it is appears to be necessitated by the Intellect, which had to be that way, since it is the best way³⁰. Hence, we have the problematic view, whereby the absolute freedom of an originary, unbound *will* is already bound by an inner necessity manifested in the appearance of the Intellect. The fixity of the Intellect casts its shadow on the One itself: what by its own nature thrusts us to conceive it as unbounded and undetermined potentiality, pure free will, is tied back into the determination of an already fixed order, based on knowledge. Here, the most profound trait of Platonism resurfaces and determines the course of Plotinus' thought, namely intellectualism, as Bergson duly notes.

However, we find in Plotinus' thought a need to think the principle as the ultimately potentiality; this very same need animates his thought on matter. For, only because of this matter can be the ultimately undetermined, what offers the possibility for things to appear as fixed in and by a form³¹. The world can be

³⁰ Cf. H. Bergson, *L'évolution du problème*, cit., pp. 198-199.

³¹ Cf. *Enn.* II 4.15, 16-20: «οὐ τοίνυν συμβεβηκὸς τῇ ὕλῃ τὸ ἄπειρον· αὐτὴ τοίνυν τὸ ἄπειρον. Ἐπεὶ καὶ ἐν τοῖς νοητοῖς ἡ ὕλη τὸ ἄπειρον καὶ εἴη ἂν γενηθὲν ἐκ τῆς τοῦ ἐνὸς ἀπειρίας ἢ δυνάμεως ἢ τοῦ ἀεί, οὐκ οὕσης ἐν ἐκείνῳ ἀπειρίας ἀλλὰ ποιούντος» («so the unlimited is not an

what it is, i.e. a κόσμος – either an intelligible or a material one – only because there is a reality out of which any form emerges and on which it operates as form. If we pause to reflect on the fact that for Plotinus the «out of which» is clearly the One, while the «on which» is just as clearly matter, then it would seem that the fact that both the One and matter are characterized by being conceived as ultimate potentiality points to them being the two extremes of a same line. A line which descends from the peak of power of the One itself into the exhaustion of that very power, which is matter. In other words, Plotinus seems to think reality as a continuous flow of energy, which actualizes itself in different forms, resulting into a fixed order (κόσμος), as it goes. It would even seem that the difference in liveliness between the noetic world of the Intellect and the one down here is a direct result of the difference of power, which decreases in terms of generativity as it proceeds from the One: intelligible matter, the one on which the intelligible world rests, is more fecund than matter down here, on which our world rests³².

One could raise the objection here that precisely this point goes in the direction pointed out by Bergson, namely that *qua* final end of the linear out-flowing that starts from the plenitude of the One, matter is then conceived by Plotinus as nothingness, or at least we can conclude that. This objection, however, does not take into account an essential feature of Plotinus' thinking, i.e. its being centered on the idea of circularity: what flows out has to flow in again, hence that outbound energy necessarily is also inbound. Consequently, what gives direction to and informs Plotinus' thought is not a scheme characterized by a line between two poles, one positive the other negative; but a circularity, where the main element, which Plotinus' thought strives to grasp, is conceived of as the ultimately undetermined, because the ultimate potentiality coming before and enabling any actuality to be there.

How does the concept of θεωρία interact with the reality of that energy that flows from the One down to its last sparkling in matter? On this point, the thought of Plotinus becomes most obscure, but precisely because of this also most interesting: it is as if the very insight that Plotinus has in a way grasped exceeds the capacity of the words he tries to express it into. The problem Plotinus is facing is this: on the one hand, it is clear that if we push the dichotomy actuality-potentiality to its ultimate consequences, we cannot but say that the ultimate foundation of reality is not the formal perfection of actuality, but the indefinite unboundedness of potentiality; on the other, we see that reality appears to us

incidental attribute of matter; Matter itself, then is the unlimited. For in the intelligible world, too, matter is the unlimited, and it would be produced from the unlimitedness or the power or the everlastingness of the One; Unlimitedness is not in the One, but the One produces it»).

³² Cf. *Enn.* II 4.5, 15-18: «ἡ μὲν γὰρ θεία λαβοῦσα τὸ ὀρίζον αὐτὴν ζωὴν ὀρισμένην καὶ νοεράν ἔχει, ἡ δὲ ὀρισμένον μὲν τι γίγνεται, οὐ μὴν ζῶν οὐδὲ νοεῶν, ἀλλὰ νεκρὸν κεκοσμημένον» («The divine matter when it receives that which defines it has a defined and intelligent life, but the matter of this world becomes something defined, but not alive or thinking, a decorated corpse»).

as an order of forms; how does form, any form, emerge out of that indefinite unboundedness?

To answer this question Plotinus recurs to an image: the Intellect, before being Intellect, but still just as intelligible matter in its flowing out of the One turns on itself (ἐπιστροφή). This *act* whereby it sees itself through the light of the One constitutes this intelligible matter as Intellect. This act is the establishment and fixing of that perfect actuality that is the Intellect, and it runs always parallel and concomitantly with the unbound potentiality of the One: because of this, using words such as «before» or «after» is inappropriate, as this act has no beginning nor end, and those are expressions that the human mind has to make recourse to in its attempt to explain to itself the emergence of reality. Moreover, this act, perennial unfolding of the perfect actuality of the Intellect out of the unbound potentiality of the One, happens in and through *silence* (σιωπή), word (λόγος) emerging only in the interrogating reason of man. The world-soul, which constitutes the origin of nature (φύσις), while proceeding in its flowing out of the Intellect – much like this latter flows out of the One – turns on itself and gazes upon the Intellect, whose forms it grasps in their totality: out of this act of vision, i.e. θεωρία, the world of physical forms emerges, at once mirror of the perfection of the Intellect and final stage of the outflowing potentiality proceeding from the One.

This process happens in silence, because it is not through an act of discursive reasoning that the world-soul grasps the forms (λόγοι) of the Intellect, but rather through an immediate act of vision. It is only in the inquisitive, discursive reasoning of man that the first sound breaks out, and together with it the stepping out of the act of production finally takes place. Plotinus points this out in the dialogue that he imagines between a man and nature itself, where to the questions of man regarding why (τίνος ἕνεκα) nature creates, it answers:

ἐχρῆν μὴ ἐρωτᾶν, ἀλλὰ συνιέναι καὶ αὐτὸν σιωπῆ, ὥσπερ ἐγὼ σιωπῶ καὶ οὐκ εἶθισμαι λέγειν. Τί οὖν συνιέναι; ὅτι τὸ γενόμενόν ἐστι θέαμα ἐμόν, σιώπησις, καὶ φύσει γενόμενον θεώρημα, καὶ μοι γενομένη ἐκ θεωρίας τῆς ὠδὶ τῆν φύσιν ἔχειν φιλοθεάμονα ὑπάρχειν. Καὶ τὸ θεωροῦν μου θεώρημα ποιεῖ, ὥσπερ οἱ γεωμέτραι θεωροῦντες γράφουσιν· ἀλλ' ἐμοῦ μὴ γραφούσης, θεωρούσης δέ, ὑφίστανται αἱ τῶν σωμάτων γραμμαὶ ὥσπερ ἐκπίπτουσαι³³.

What is central here is the divergence between discursive reason (διάνοια), which operates through rationalization (λογισμός) and understands any production as the fruit of a deliberation established on a previously thought out plan (the finalism of the «τίμος ἕνεκα») on the one hand, and the spontaneity of

³³ *Enn.* III 8.4, 3-10 («You ought not to ask, but to understand in silence, you, too, just as I am silent and not in the habit of talking. Understand what, then? That what comes into being is what I see in my silence, an object of contemplation which comes to be naturally, and that I, originating from this sort of contemplation have a contemplative nature. And my act of contemplation makes what it contemplates, as the geometers draw their figures while they contemplate. But I do not draw, but as I contemplate, the lines which bound bodies come to be as if they fell from my contemplation»).

nature, whose production is the result of the overflowing abundance of the act of θεωρία. Man is not completely extraneous to this productive act, on the contrary in the arts it becomes manifest that when man produces and does so unimpeded, it is because his productive act is immediately in touch with the reality it gazes upon; whereas, it is precisely when this immediateness is interrupted or somehow impeded that discursive reason has to intervene, of which πρᾶξις, understood as governed by deliberation because of a weakening of the act of θεωρία, is the direct manifestation³⁴. Hence, the productive activity of man can, in a way, be seen as the last sparkling of the originary productive energy emanating from the One, as it appears in the case of the productive activity of craftsmen³⁵.

The distinction between θεωρία and πρᾶξις, then, is not so much one between a dimension of fixed contemplation and one of action³⁶, but rather one demarcating two levels of productivity: the former, the one of θεωρία, characterized by an operation which does not run on deliberation and because of this produces spontaneously and in the most powerful way; the latter, the one of human πρᾶξις, govern by deliberation and discursive reasoning, which however intervene *only* when man, in his producing, loses contact with the immediateness of his vision. Θεωρία is the immediate act of vision through which reality is generated, and in so far as this act is immediate deliberation and discursive thought are extraneous to it; πρᾶξις, instead, is that productive act, which appears once the energy of θεωρία is either impeded or has reached its final exhaustion. Thus, θεωρία, *qua* creative activity finds its point of arrival and static end in the production of physical realities on the one hand, and one last sparkle in the creative production of the human being on the other, although this latter is already characterized by deliberative and discursive reason.

The way in which the concept of θεωρία works within Plotinus' thought is reminiscent to some points in Bergson: on the one hand, his distinction is somewhat similar to the one that Bergson establishes between «instinct» and «intelligence», while the fact that the productive activity of θεωρία ends up in the fixity of sensible objects in nature is reminiscent of the way in which he talks about physical nature on the other.

In *L'évolution créatrice* we read: «[...] instinct et intelligence sont deux développements divergents d'un même principe qui, dans un cas, reste intérieur à lui même, dans l'autre cas s'extériorise et s'absorbe dans l'utilisation de la

³⁴ *Enn. ibid.*, 25-47.

³⁵ On this point Plotinus goes against and beyond Plato's condemnation of the arts as third level *imitations* of reality, suggesting even that the great artist corrects the shortcomings of reality by gazing upon the eternal model: cf. *Enn.* V 8.1, 32-40, a passage all the more interesting in relation to what is said in III 8, if we keep in mind that V 8 is the treatise that comes right after III 8 and that before Porphyry's editorial cutting formed together with it the so-called *Großschrift*, for which cf. R. Harder, *Eine neue schrift Plotins*, «Hermes», LXXI, 1936, 1, pp. 1-10, followed by V. Cilento, *Plotino. Paideia antignostica: ricostruzione d'un unico scritto da Enneadi III 8, V 8, V 5, II 9*, Florence 1971; Cf. also P. Kalligas, Πλωτίνου. Ἐννεὰς Δευτέρα, Athens 1997, pp. 326-335.

³⁶ As Bergson suggests, cf. *L'évolution du problème*, cit., 199-200; a point he reiterates in *De la position des problèmes*, in *La pensée et le mouvant*, Paris 2013, p. 92.

matière brute...»³⁷. The couple instinct-intelligence is, thus, characterized by interiorization for the former and exteriorization for the latter, as we find also in Plotinus, in whose thought nature produces from within itself through the act of vision, whereas human *πρᾶξις* is an act of exteriorization, due to the inability of man to fully grasp within himself his object of vision. This dichotomy in Plotinus is evident already in the opposing couple *σιωπή* of nature on the one hand, *λογισμός* of man on the other. By seeing in instinct the way in which nature operates, a way all comprised within an «inside» interior to the operation itself, Bergson fully embraces the concept of *σμπάθεια*, Stoic in origin but already embraced by Plotinus³⁸. More importantly, as a consequence of this embracing, Bergson deepens his critic of the Aristotelian understanding of life, based as it is on the idea of a linear and ascending ladder which from the inanimate goes to the animated, and within this latter sphere from the vegetative to the rational passing by the irrational. In rejecting this perspective Bergson's thought is, I think, somewhat in line with Plotinus' intuition that everything is *θεωρία*: for, this assertion breaks already the Aristotelian perspective and its fundamentally ascensional linearity. Man is not the only depositary of *θεωρία*, as Aristotle says, but he participates into it as any other living thing, in fact as the totality of nature; however, in him this takes a particular form, i.e. *λογισμός*, which by default puts man in an *outside* in relation to the working of nature, which is all immersed in its own *inside*. However, the difference between Bergson and Plotinus is to be found within this very alignment. For, Plotinus sees in the exteriorization of man's activity due to his being bound to discursive reasoning a weakening of *θεωρία*, whereas in the ability man has through his intelligence to manipulate inanimate matter, through which he gets outside of the circle of instinct, Bergson sees the instantiation of freedom:

[l'instrument fabriqué intelligemment] pour chaque besoin qu'il satisfait, il crée un besoin nouveau, et ainsi, au lieu de fermer, comme l'instinct, le cercle d'action où l'animal va se mouvoir automatiquement, il ouvre à cette activité un champ indéfini où il la pousse de plus en plus loin et *la fait de plus en plus libre*³⁹.

Moreover, a deeper difference between Plotinus and Bergson lays also in the very understanding of the working of nature, as this passage makes clear:

C'est sur la forme même de la vie, au contraire, qu'est moulé l'instinct. [...] Si la conscience qui sommeille en lui se réveillait, s'il s'intériorisait en connaissance au lieu de s'extérioriser en action, s'il nous savions l'interroger et s'il pouvait répondre, il nous livrerait les secrets les plus intimes de la vie. [...] nous ne saurions dire [...] où l'organisation finit et où l'instinct commence⁴⁰.

³⁷ Cf. H. Bergson, *L'évolution créatrice*, cit., pp. 168-169.

³⁸ For the development on *σμπάθεια*, cf. H. Bergson, *L'évolution créatrice*, cit., pp. 169-177.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 142, the italic is mine.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 166. We might notice, moreover, how this passage sounds similar to the way in which Plotinus speaks of nature in III 8.4: for, instinct just as nature is silent and it operates

For, Plotinus thinks that nature makes out of a model, what here Bergson calls «organization», even though this making does not imply planning and thus rationalizing (λογισμός), whereas Bergson sees in «instinct» not only the continuation of what is already organized, as if it followed a model, but instead every time the accomplishment of an unpredictable act of creation. This is why Bergson can speak of an imperceptible line, surely a line almost impossible to even think, which divides «organisation» from «instinct». However, underlining the concept of «organisation», Bergson stresses also the fact that instinct leads to a circle of automatic behavior, whereby the organisms caught in it tend to repeat the same acts all over again from one generation to the next. Opposite to this stands the freedom of intelligence, which represents precisely a breaking out from the circle of instinct. In turn, the line of contact between intelligence on the one hand, and instinct, hence the organization of the material world on the other, can be found in the fact that if for its part human intelligence works mathematically and geometrically, materiality and its organization is in its turn «lestée de géométrie»⁴¹.

In reality, the two thinkers seem to coincide more than they differ. For, while both agree in rejecting any pretense on the part of rationalizing discourse, Plotinus cannot but see in nature the reproduction of a fixed model, although this very model is thought of as dynamically characterized by outflowing of the potentiality that is the One; Bergson sees the operation of nature as ultimately not bound by any fixed model, but rather as a *free creative act*. However, Plotinus is limited, as we noticed above, following a notation of Bergson, by the fundamental intellectualism of the Platonic and Aristotelian traditions: the strength of his reasoning leads him to postulate the principle, the One, as absolute potentiality, but then he immediately falls back on the idea that even this absolute potentiality, which per se should be thought of as totally unbound, responds to what it knows to be good (as we saw, when touching on the concept of «ἐκούσιον»). For Bergson, instead, freedom is the absolute potency of a *will*, which manifests itself in the *élan vital*: the forward going creative act of an instinct, which is bound as for its provenance, but unbound as for its proceeding. However, if the forward-looking freedom has to truly unfold, one has to be able to go back to that first *élan*, and accomplishing this is precisely the task of philosophy:

Sa tâche propre [*scil.* de la philosophie] ne serait-elle pas, au contraire, de remonter la pente que la physique descend, de ramener la matière à ses origines, et de constituer progressivement une cosmologie qui serait, si l'on peut parler ainsi, une psychologie retournée?⁴²

through a kind of sleeping state, out of which one would wish to be able to wake it up in order to interrogate it.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 221, where the famous image of the «poupées de liège» appears.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 209; it is also worth noticing the expression «la pente de la physique» similar to the «la pente de la nature» used in *L'évolution du problème*, cit., p. 127 (for which cf. the note 199 by A. François, p. 357): the nature Bergson speaks about there is the Aristotelian one, already understood and caught within the schemes of physics and mathematics.

Does not this coincide with the task that Plotinus assigns to philosophy through his concept of θεωρία? For, while θεωρία describes the way in which everything comes to be, i.e. how production happens starting from the One, it also represents the direction the individual has to take, in order to go beyond the limits of discursive thought to attain unification with the principle of all reality, at whose level total freedom is to be found. This freedom is total because it coincides with an absolute will. On this point, the two philosophers are in perfect agreement, even though Plotinus falls back in the old Platonic and Aristotelian intellectualism, as we have seen above. Ultimately, both philosophers understand reality as the unfolding of freedom, but in turn freedom is declined as *will*⁴³.

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⁴³This conclusion opens up a new question, which is impossible to address here, but which is worth to point out: What is thought through the word «will» in Bergson? This question articulates itself in this way: Is this «will» the same thing that gets explicitly formulated for the first time in Nietzsche? If so, are we to establish a link between Bergson and Nietzsche, to then find traces of what in that link is thought in thinkers of the past, such as Plotinus? Or through the One of Plotinus something else is being thought, which finds in the «will» just a more or less convenient expression? J. Beaufret, *Dialogue avec Heidegger. Approche de Heidegger*, Paris 1974, pp. 218 and 220 notices that the *durée* is «création continue d'imprévisible nouveauté», quoting H. Bergson himself; to then add what Valéry says: «le nouveau est, par définition, la partie périssable des choses»; hence, the *durée* is a «substantialité» ou une «solidité supérieure». Through the One is Plotinus aiming at this superior substantiality? Or is he thinking of something else, something that remains hidden within the *plis* of the language he inherited from Plato and Aristotle? Maybe, a beginning of an answer to these questions might come from reflecting on the ποιεῖν of the One, which does and remains *other* from what it does, yet being present to it.