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This is the submitted version of a paper published in .

Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

Remes, P. (2016)

Plotinus on Starting-Points of Reasoning

Chôra, 14: 29-57

<https://doi.org/10.5840/chora2016144>

Access to the published version may require subscription.

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.

Permanent link to this version:

<http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:uu:diva-387506>

Plotinus on Starting Points of Reasoning

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There are a few interesting instances where Plotinus seems to argue from human experience or common way to conceive of something towards knowledge or deeper understanding of that same conception. In these passages, Plotinus treats certain pre-philosophical concepts as reliable or promising starting-points, and not as vulgar misconceptions. These suggestions, although perhaps few in number, are, so I claim, crucial for understanding Plotinus' epistemology and philosophical psychology. Their significance is in providing a glimpse on how Plotinus himself, in the act of philosophizing, conceives of the passage from an unclear understanding of something (perhaps a pre-concept of some sort) to a better, philosophical view of that same concept. We also get to see which are the sources of this passage: the role of data given to us in sense-perception, as well as innate conceptual content and innate cognitive dispositions. The concern of this paper is not in analyzing Plotinus' few and very terse theoretical remarks on dialectic, e.g. in I.3. *On Dialectic*. I will appeal to that text only in a very general fashion. What I hope to unravel, instead, is some of his methodology relevant for this thematic, so to speak, in action. We will be looking at instances where Plotinus treats a philosophically interesting theme, and launches the investigation from an everyday experience or commonly used concept, sometimes even highlighting this methodology at the same time as he is using it.

This bottom-up approach shows something that previous research has not revealed. It does not treat Plotinus methodology in an abstract manner, silently assuming that either all or some concepts behave in the same way. Rather, it exposes a group of particular concepts Plotinus is interested in the contexts of additionally highlighting his methodology. Intriguingly, the group does not include typical species or essences, nor ordinary universals like, colours, for instance. The methodological remarks encountered appear in the inquiries concerning the concepts of freedom, oneness, time and eternity, as well as good and evil - a list perhaps not very unified, but absolutely focal for the Neoplatonic hierarchy of being.

My main sources will be the *Enneads*, but as regards the last, moral discussion, I will conclude with a complementing discussion of Proclus.

Background

According to one reading, there is an abyss within Platonism, an abyss dividing true knowledge – the perfect, non-temporal and infallible intellection of true objects of knowledge, the real beings or Platonic forms – and ordinary thinking, which is discursive, fallible, and exploits perceptual contents. Arguably, this makes cognitive passage from the latter to the former discontinuous and explanatorily mysterious, and thus compromises the whole point of postulating the Forms in the first place. This kind of abyss can result from at least two different concerns. In an influential interpretation like that of Dominic Scott,¹ Plato’s own take on perception is very negative. Perception is on the whole unreliable as far as the structure of the cosmos and being is concerned. Cognitive development is not acquired through polishing or improving unclear concepts and data acquired through sense-perception. Rather, knowledge-acquisition supposes a radical discontinuity. It involves a realization that contents given to us by perception are for the most part deceptive, and ought to be abandoned in order to grasp true beings. Scott’s interpretation, while not unanimously accepted,² is close to the school book interpretation of Plato, limiting knowledge to the *a priori*, and disdaining any empirical information.³ A similar reading of Plotinus is often explicitly or implicitly implied in general expositions of his thinking. This might be a result of the idea of ‘reversion’ (*epistrophê*). The soul’s ultimate moment of self-improvement is attained not by gradual accumulation of knowledge, but by reversion towards its source, towards intuitive, inward-directed contemplation. Perceptible objects of thinking and their mental representations are replaced by intelligibles, implying a change both in direction and possibly even content. Moreover, this kind of thinking is non-representational and non-discursive, and thereby potentially structurally different from ordinary, discursive thought.⁴

¹ Dominic Scott 2007 *Recollection and Experience. Plato's Theory of Learning and Its Successors*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. [Number of page?]

² There are reasons to think that the connection of the perceivable and the intellectual or higher is closer, and that cognitive development proceeds from the former to the latter. See e.g. the ladder of beauty in the *Symposium* (210a-212c). It has also been suggested that at least some kind of knowledge (and not just opinion or belief) of the sensibles is possible: see Gail Fine 1978 “Knowledge and Belief in *Republic V*,” *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*, 60, 121-139; 1990/1999 “Knowledge and Belief in *Republic 5–7*,” in S. Everson (ed.), *Cambridge Companions to Ancient Thought, 1: Epistemology*, Cambridge University Press, pp. 85-115; reprinted in G. Fine (ed.) *Plato 1: Metaphysics and Epistemology*, Oxford University Press, pp. 215-246.

³ Scott’s view is, of course, much more subtle, and takes the Platonic philosophical project to its bitter end: knowledge is exclusively something philosophers engage in, while other people manage to live their lives with something less than infallible knowledge.

⁴ Whether thinking about the objects of the intellect always implies a unity of this sort with them is an open question. For different kinds of cognition more generally, see Emilsson 1996 ‘Cognition and Its Object’ in Gerson, L. P. (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 217-249; for a general view that highlights reversion and discontinuity, see e.g. R. T. Wallis’ admirable, still in many ways up-to-date introduction to Neoplatonism: R. T. Wallis 1972 [2nd ed. 1995] *Neoplatonism*, London, Duckworth, e.g. p. 79.

The question of the roles of experience versus *a priori* knowledge has recently been revived within scholarship on concepts in Platonism. Christopher Helmig’s monograph 2012 *Forms and Concepts: Concept Formation in*

In another variant of Platonism, perceptual contents are deemed as reliable in transmitting us the real structure of being. Platonists, after all, consider the sensible universe as an image, or unfolding, of real beings, the Forms. Forms are introduced to explain the intelligibility of the sensible realm, and cannot thereby be entirely cut off from the sensible, nor inefficient in explaining its structure and activities. The changing, perceivable world approximates the forms.⁵ Following the L. P. Gerson's⁶ interpretation Plotinus is, depending on how exactly one uses the word, either a direct or an indirect realist when it comes to sense-perception.⁷ The conceptual framework human beings build up by judging their perceptual input carves the nature at its joints because of the way in which perception naturally – when functioning as it should – transmits to the soul intelligible formal structures in matter. The abyss in Gerson's reading cannot thereby be metaphysical: there is a link between the intelligible as such (the forms) and sensible intelligible structures in matter, and through the latter there is a link between human perceptual power and intelligible forms. But this leaves open the possibility of a purely epistemic gap: in such a reading, infallible intellection (something like the peripatetic agent intellect) should be a cognition of unity that admits no divisions like those governing our conceptualization of sensible nature, or, actually, any discursive language. As such, it cannot regulate nor give rise to ordinary conceptual thinking. Discursive reason, temporal and fallible as it is, makes use of concepts that are formed empirically. Thereby the story of how human beings acquire concepts and reason about the stable structures of the cosmos is, broadly taken, Aristotelian in spirit: they abstract structures of being from perceptual information. Importantly, however, according to this interpretation,

the Platonic Tradition, Berlin & Boston: De Gruyter provides a careful, provoking and detailed study on what concepts are in antiquity and how the Platonist understand their acquisition. It also offers a full list of relevant previous literature on the topic. Helmig defends a non-Aristotelian reading of the Neoplatonists' views, emphasising the way in which the soul possesses innate concepts or *logoi*. It will later become clear in which respect my interpretation differs from his (partly in interpretation, but mostly perhaps in emphasis). One of his main contenders is Stephen Gersh, in whose interpretation Proclus divides concepts into two different kinds, one of which is a result of abstraction: S. Gersh 1978 *From Iamblichus to Eriugena. An Investigation of the Prehistory and Evolution of the Pseudo-Dionysian Tradition*, Leiden: Brill, esp. at p. 109. Both of these authors concentrate on Proclus rather than Plotinus. I will below come back to Helmig's reading of Plotinus.

⁵ For this view, presented as main stream in newer general introductions and companions, see e.g. Deborah K. W. Modrak 2009 "Plato: A Theory of Perception or a Nod to Sensation" in Hugh. H. Benson (ed.) *A Companion to Plato*, Malden and Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, pp. 133-145, e.g. at p. 137: "In the *Republic*, perception is a starting-point for a cognitive process that, when successful, terminates in the apprehension of ideal objects."; or T. Chappell 2012 "Perception and Sensation", in Gerald A. Press (ed.) *The Continuum Companion to Plato*, London and New York: Continuum, pp. 225-227.

⁶ 1994 *Plotinus. The Arguments of the Philosophers*, London: Routledge, ch. 8.

⁷ After the publication of Gerson's view, there has been a controversy over Plotinus' possible realism: in his 1988 book (*Plotinus on Sense-Perception*, Oxford: Oxford University Press), E. K. Emilsson presents Plotinus as a direct realist. The objects of perception are the things in the external world. This view has been challenged by S. Magrin (2010) "Sensation and Scepticism in Plotinus," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 39, 249–297, who presents Plotinus, rather as a precursor of representationalist theories of perception and cognition.

while perception may reveal the true structures of cosmos, it does not for Plotinus qualify as knowledge, for knowledge is always unmediated. Only the intellect's identity with the intelligibles yields infallibility.

This interpretation is one thinkable expression of the famous double nature of the Plotinian soul, as a being with both intellectual and embodied activities. But it saddles Plotinus with a view of cognition that is radically discontinuous, and makes talk of knowledge-acquisition as a gradual process awkward.⁸ It also leaves it unclear why there would be an ontological connection without some epistemic consequences. Scholars who want to resist it draw attention to the passages that rather seem to testify of a relationship between discursive reason and intellection. For instance, Plotinus states that the reasoning power, while getting its powers of discrimination from the Intellect and the intelligibles, works on material acquired through sense-perception.⁹ In between unaffected soul in possession of knowledge on the one hand, and the external object of sense-perception on the other, he postulates a power, something that is capable of being affected and assimilated by the external object, but which is not pure reception. It is a mediating entity or level of soul, something that assimilates to information from external objects, but is also receptive of that which comes from higher principles governing knowledge:

Since also when the soul sees the visible object from a distance, however much it is a form that comes to it, that which reaches it, though it starts by being in a way without parts, end in the substrate of the form as colour and shape, when the soul sees all that is there outside. There cannot, then, be nothing but these two things, the external object and the soul: since the soul would not be affected; but there must be a third thing which will be affected, and this is that which will receive the form. This must be jointly subject to like affections and of one matter with the sense-object, and it must be this which is affected and the other principle which knows...

IV.4 [28] 23.20–25; 23.32.¹⁰

⁸ There is a parallel discussion in contemporary philosophizing about concepts: what is the relationship of intuitive concepts formed by infants and children with scientific concepts? Many would like to see scientific concepts as having some continuity with common sense explanation (e.g. Nancy J. Nersessian 1992 "How Do Scientists Think: Capturing the dynamics of conceptual change in science", in Giere, R. N. (ed.) *Cognitive Models of Science*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 3-45), whereas others point out that meta-conceptual reflection radically changes the nature of scientific concepts (e.g. Elisabeth S. Spelke 1991: "Physical Knowledge of Infancy: Reflections on Piaget's theory", in S. Carey & R. Gelman (eds.), *Epigenesis of mind: Studies in biology and cognition*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, pp. 133-169.)

⁹ E.g. V.3.2-7-10; V.3.4, 1-4. See also Annamaria Schiaparelli 2009 'Plotinus on Dialectic', *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 91: 253-287, at 284. That the Neoplatonic understanding of cognitive development is gradual rather than episodic is also argued, on a general level, by Helmig 2012 - see e.g. p. 28.

¹⁰ See further E. K. Emilsson 1988, e.g. p. 71; R. Chiaradonna, "Plotin, la mémoire et la connaissance des intelligibles", *Philosophie antique*, 9 (2009), pp. 5-33; "Plotinus' Account of the Cognitive Powers of the Soul: Sense-Perception and Discursive Thought". *Topoi* 31 (2012) 191-207. The Neoplatonists are preceded by the

Perception is described as a result of co-operation between reception of content that comes from outside and of powers or principles that make knowledge possible.

Note that perception already involves some kind of a priori organizational capacity, something that enables the soul to discriminate the unity of a perceived thing into colour and shape. The issue is connected to the Platonic theory of recollection. In Plotinus' case, we have a somewhat curious situation: on the one hand, he rarely uses the term 'recollection' (*anamnēsis*, a term that is not always clearly used by Plotinus in the technical Platonic meaning). This has led some interpreters to conclude that he abandoned the theory of recollection understood as retrieval of conceptual content that is innate or acquired before birth.¹¹ On the other hand, there is no denying that Plotinus believes the soul to possess intelligible contents: the structural principles that organize matter (*logoi*; e.g. I.1.8.6-8; IV.6.3.5; VI.2.5.10-14). According to some scholars, these forming-principles are directly involved in learning and acquiring knowledge, even in perceptual judgments. It might therefore be too hasty to dismiss recollection in Plotinus – rather, we might say that it is discussed under other headings.¹²

While broadly sympathetic to the idea that intelligible principles have a role to play in both concept-formation and concept-clarification according to Plotinus, I will deviate from how this role is conceived by the scholars drawing attention to it. First, I see the exclusive opposition of empiricism and innatism as a misleading interpretative framework. In late antiquity, the whole discussion is set on a stage where Aristotelian and Hellenistic theories – namely those of perception as reception and concept-formation as abstraction – are already common ground. Platonists offer their theories as alternatives to partly or purely empiricist theories of either Aristotelian, Stoic or Epicurean varieties,¹³ and criticise but not completely

Timaeus, which postulates sameness and difference inside the soul (starting with 35a-b), as its innate powers or concepts, without which the soul cannot make sense of sense-perceptions.

The translations of the *Enneads* are originally those of A. Armstrong, but I have sometimes taken great liberties at modifying them.

¹¹ Phillip Merlan 1969 *Monopsychism, Mysticism, Metaconsciousness. Problems of the Soul in the Neoaristotelian and Neoplatonic Tradition*, second edition, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.; H. Blumenthal 1971 *Plotinus' Psychology: His Doctrines of the Embodied Soul*, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, pp. 96-97 suggested that recollection is replaced by the doctrine of the undescended soul. For a useful survey of this discussion, see Helmig 2012, pp. 196-197.

¹² That Plotinus does indeed have a theory of recollection, and one that is directly connected with his view of *koinai ennoiai*, see John Phillips 1987 "Stoic 'Common Notions' in Plotinus", *Dionysius* 11: 33-52; Helmig 2012, chapter 3. For concepts and perceptual judgements, see Emilsson 1988: pp. 136-137, who does not make any claims about recollection.

¹³ Note also that it is less than clear what Plato himself thought about these issues. Only some of the dialogues seem to testify of content innatism (possibly *Phaedo*), whereas other passages suggest disposition innatism (perhaps *Meno*). In any case, the role of perception as triggering innate tendencies is recognized, e.g. in the

reject them.¹⁴ Rather, the question concerns the exact, subtle role of innate powers, as well as of their content, in thinking, and the ways in which innately possessed dispositions or contents co-operate with perceptual information.¹⁵

It is sometimes said that perception does not deliver any content in the Platonic picture, but merely triggers the recollection of that which is already possessed or unconsciously known. Do we understand what this ‘triggering’¹⁶ is? What lies behind this metaphor? In the case of Plotinus, using innate conceptual content in learning (or recollection) is explained through a material metaphor, one that Plato already used, that of ‘fitting’: capturing the right conception of a thing is like fitting (*sunarmottô*) a shape into another, similar one, and finding its model, standard or rule (*kanôn*; I.6.3.3-5; Plato, *Theaetetus* 191a-196c). But to use this as answer to the question of the nature of recollective learning is equally problematic. Besides trying to explain a suggestive metaphor through another suggestive metaphor, it raises the problems already indicated in the *Theaetetus*: correct judgements are cases of fitting a simple perceived object with its correct simple mental equivalent, and the model of false-judgement becomes that of simple mismatch. The model of cognition offered is atomic, leaving out more complex cognitive errors.¹⁷ Moreover, as Emilsson has perceptively noted, trying to explain perceptual judgements through the metaphor would mean that every normal perceptual judgement involves recollecting or

Timaeus. I will return, below, to the varieties of innatism and the question of Plotinus' position within that variety.

¹⁴ Here, I differ from Helmig 2012, mainly as regards emphasis: I agree that the Platonists do not believe that people abstract concepts from experience, if abstraction is understood as an inductive process, in which no part of content is derived-from inside. What I disagree with, however, is the exclusive two-fold distinction of abstraction vs. *a priori* knowledge or innate concepts – a juxtaposition that Helmig himself also sometimes avoids, e.g. when admitting that Aristotelian concept-formation does not proceed merely empirically, at p. 21. For Platonists, perception has a role to play in concept-formation: sometimes as something that triggers one's becoming conscious of an innate content (see Thomas Johansen 2004 *Plato's Natural Philosophy: A Study of the Timaeus-Critias*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, at 168-175; Helmig 2012, p. 22), sometimes in yielding also some content, or even a preliminary concept. I have argued that the latter is the view present in Plato's *Timaeus* 47a1–7; b6–c4: numbers begun to get conceptualized in a process of human beings' perceiving the motions of the heavenly bodies, and the differences in the length of their revolutions. For my reading of Plato's *Timaeus*, see Pauliina Remes 2014 ‘Interaction between the External Body and the Perceiver in the *Timaeus*’, Silva, J. F. & Yrjönsuuri, M (eds.) *Active Perception in the History of Philosophy*, Studies in the History of the Philosophy of Mind 14, Springer, pp. 9-30.

¹⁵ In the forthcoming 2017 *Plotinus*, The Routledge Philosophers, E. K. Emilsson argues that there is nothing hindering - and indeed some passages suggesting - that some concepts in Plotinus are empirically formed (e.g. the concepts of artefacts).

¹⁶ Plotinus uses similar metaphors in the context of something like recollection: those of 'awakening', 'stirring up', e.g. in VI.6.4.24 *anakeinein* is used to describe how the soul arouses itself to the idea of number "from the difference in sensible things"; in IV.6.3.5.15 *egeirein*; in V.5.11.21 *exegeirein* as clearly a part of a sleeping and waking metaphor, waking up to the intelligible.

¹⁷ This is well brought out by, among others, M. M. McCabe 1994 *Plato's Individuals*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, pp. 152-156.

engaging the Intellect.¹⁸ Whether or not the intelligible principles are involved in some way already in ordinary perceptual judgements is a contentious issue,¹⁹ but even if one postulated an intelligible involvement in perception, this involvement has to be at least to some extent different from the philosophical concept-clarification, which tries to 'get it right' in a more pregnant sense of the term.

In this article, then, we will be looking at starting points of knowledge for Plotinus in two senses of priority, the temporal priority and the epistemic fundamentality: From where does philosophical inquiry start? What are its starting points and mental resources? In this discussion, concept-acquisition and concept-clarification are central. Thereby, two preliminary distinctions are in order. First, by concepts is here meant a mental or psychic entity that is relatively stable, shareable and universal, and that can be expressed also in language.²⁰ Some concepts are also conceptions: they can communicate a theoretical view to which they belong. The ancient theory of concepts is teleological: certain concepts can deliver the right conception of a thing, that is, grasp the truth, or the essence of a thing. This leads us to the second distinction: concepts can be – and often are – incomplete or preliminary, before their philosophical sharpening, a sharpening that in certain cases can grasp what really exists.²¹ The focus here will not be mainly on pure perception, or the lowest levels of everyday concept-formation. Admittedly, some of the texts discussed seem to refer to a long process that starts from perception. There is perhaps an overlap, in the sources, between concept-formation and philosophical concept-sharpening – an issue best kept in mind when going through the evidence. The primary focus in this article is, however, the later phase of cognitive development: the phase where philosophical inquiry starts, that is, aiming to improve the dim concept that one has about a certain phenomenon or thing. Questions about innatism are related to this inquiry in so far as Platonists, Plotinus included, are committed to the idea that the capacity of reasoning and philosophising presuppose cognitive powers or concepts, or, at least, some innate dispositions to develop such powers or concepts. While giving a role to perception, Platonists would never suggest that mind could be a blank slate before experiencing the world, nor consider that it is a purely receptive power.

Within the context of ancient philosophy, there are two relevant discussions that will constitute the frame of our analysis: dialectic and the debate over the role and function of

¹⁸ Emilsson 1988, p. 135.

¹⁹ E.g. Emilsson 1988 held this view, but has revised it in the forthcoming 2017, chapter 8.

²⁰ As Helmig 2012, 14 points out, there is a variety of Greek terms that can be translated as a concept (*axioma*, *archê*, *eidos*, (*koine*) *ennoia*, *epinoia*, *noêma*, *ennoêma*, *logos*, *katholou*, *prolepsis*, etc.). In the text passages to be presented below, especially the words *logos* and *ennoia* will surface.

²¹ Here I am much indebted to Helmig 2012, pp. 13-23.

common notions (*koinai ennoiai*). These present two different, but crucial attempts at explaining starting points of knowledge and the cognitive development from unclear notions to philosophical knowledge. Moreover, both dialectical skill (*dialektikê technê*) and ‘common concept’/notion (although more often just concept/notion *ennoia*) are used by Plotinus in the texts we will encounter, and so it seems that he positions himself in these discussions. Let me therefore say a few words on these two themes and their relevance for the topic at hand.

Dialectic and common notions

As regards dialectic, there are two major influences upon Plotinus, Platonic and Aristotelian. In the context of Plato exegesis, the word 'dialectic' can be understood both broadly, as his overall methodology of philosophizing, or more narrowly, as the technique of division and collection that he outlines especially in the *Sophist* and the *Phaedrus*. The aim of dialectic is to provide a definition of the essence of a thing, through locating it in the classification system of the species and genera to which it belongs. For the purposes of this paper, the latter aspect is more interesting. Plotinus seems to think that the task of dialectic is to chart the whole of the intelligible structure of the cosmos in this manner, by identifying what things really exist, and how they are related to one another (I.3).²² Further, Plotinus' exposition of dialectic involves an ambiguity between describing it as a full grasp of real beings in all their interconnections – i.e. full possession of ontological truth, or complete knowledge – and presenting it as an activity or science that is relevant for how we speak of things. According to this latter picture, dialectic moves from unclear ideas to a higher conception of the whole intelligible system, and back down again, to a reformed, better grasp of the individual notions from which one started. (I.3.4.) He may have thought that the two senses of dialectic are connected, but their mutual relationship is not explicated in any detail.

In the beginning of many treatises within the *Enneads*, Plotinus further subscribes to the Aristotelian idea of dialectic as an activity that starts with *endoxa*: the proper place to launch an investigation are the venerable opinions of earlier thinkers, opinions that often crystallize main disagreements and promising philosophical possibilities to understand phenomena within a given thematic. Like Aristotle, Plotinus does not settle with any of the

²² For dialectic in Plotinus, see Schiaparelli *ibid*.

given opinions, but elaborates his own alternative. In his case, this alternative is often a development of earlier Platonic positions, or at least not in strict juxtaposition with them.²³

One of the main questions of Platonic dialectic is the question of how even a skilful dividing and collecting can provide the right sort of concepts, that is, if and how it arrives at essences and how it can "carve nature at joints (*Phaedrus* 265e)".²⁴ Plotinus does not doubt that, if properly used, this skill will engage intelligible structures: it is a *hexis* that gets its powers from the intellect. This *hexis* is not perfectly actualized, until a fair amount of collecting and dividing has been done. (I.3.5.1-3). Yet it is not clear how this 'engaging' happens, that is, how the connections between the way we speak and the way that things truly are, are made. Sometimes, Plotinus uses the metaphorical terminology of fitting, adapting or harmonizing, even though epistemologically this might not be very satisfactory:

It [soul?] did not have the realities themselves, but impressions (*tupoi*) of them; so it must bring the impressions into harmony (*epharmosai*) with the true realities of which they are impressions. (I.2.4.23-25.)

Grasping truth is explained as hitting with a simple object at a right intelligible reality. But how do we know which impression grasps or harmonizes with the right intelligible? What *accounts for* hitting right?

It is perhaps not surprising that dialectic was accompanied by another theory, a theory which refers to the innate resources of the mind, and gives at least a partial explanation for the soul's innate tendency to grasp essential, true being. Beside the Platonic *anamnêsis*, in late antiquity the doctrine of common notions was used to answer some problems about 'hitting it right'. The doctrine was originally Stoic and empiricist. Within Stoicism, its epistemic role was crucial. The human mind was understood as naturally inclined to form certain notions out of perceptual input. This is a dispositional theory of innatism, given that children, for example, were not thought to possess these notions before becoming fully rational creatures. More generally, Stoics considered that, before experience, mind was a *tabula rasa*, with no innate content, but disposed to naturally form certain conceptions as soon as the animal started perceiving. Knowledge-acquisition depended on these notions in two different ways: First, the task of philosophy was to articulate the non-clear content of these notions. Second,

²³ See e.g. Stephen Strange 1994 "Plotinus on the Nature of Eternity and Time", in Lawrence P. Schrenk (ed.) *Aristotle in Late Antiquity*, Studies in Philosophy and the History of Philosophy 27. Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1994, pp. 22–53.

²⁴ The literature on dialectic is extensive, let me here give one rather recent exposition, one that explains this perplexity by arguing that sophist is not the kind of thing that can be defined, that is, not a proper *technê* at all. The same article also usefully guides and classifies earlier research: Lesley Brown (2010) 'Definition and Division in the Sophist', in David Charles (ed.) *Definition in Greek Philosophy*, Oxford 2010, pp. 151-171.

they could be used as criteria of truth: one could prove other notions false, by showing them incompatible with these common notions.

Yet, not any notions formed by an adult human mind deserved this status. 'Common notions' were literally thought to be common to every healthy human mind, thus capturing the spirit of the semi-rhetorical and philosophical arguments from *consensus hominum* or *consensus omnium*.²⁵ The role of common notions in Stoic epistemology is a matter of some controversy. One might with good reason question both: on empirical grounds, the existence of notions that truly are shared by all human beings²⁶ and, from an epistemic point of view, the possibility of distinguishing them from other notions shared by humans. What would be the criterion of recognizing something as a criterion of truth? Furthermore, it was pointed out already in antiquity that the Stoics' own theories contained many conceptions that were central for their own system, yet neither commonly shared nor natural to every human being.²⁷

The theory is less implausible if one restricts it, that is, if it is not understood to explain the general phenomenon of concept-formation. There are at least two suggestions in the literature to move away from a wide use, and to confine the theory in a philosophically motivated way. According to Robert Todd, Stoic common notions have three features: a) they are shared by all humans; b) they are general, in the technical sense of being generalizations the mind makes, based on data provided by impressions (*phantasiai*); and c) they serve as proofs in theories.²⁸ The text passage on which Todd builds his case is Chrysippus' theory of mixtures as presented to us by Alexander Aphrodisias, involving gathering and systematization of different cases where bodies are linked by juncture, blended, mixed, or fused together.²⁹ This suggestion restricts common notions to theoretical concepts generalized from impressions and used as parts of a wider theory-formation. The theory is thus different from that of preconceptions (*prolēpseis*): naturally formed simple concepts, which enjoy, as it were, phenomenal truth, rather than a role within a theoretical system.

²⁵ The classic article is Robert B. Todd (1973) "The Stoic Common Notions: A Re-examination and Reinterpretation", *Symbolae Osloensis* 48: 45-75, with some eminent predecessors, e.g. F. H. Sandbach 1930 "Ennoia and Prolepsis in the Stoic Theory of Knowledge", *Classical Quarterly* 24, pp. 44-51; Louis Bréhier 1951 *Chrysippe et l'ancien Stoicisme*, p. 65ff.

²⁶ A relativist-sceptical challenge; see e.g. Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Professors* 8.331a-332a=LS40T.

²⁷ Plutarch, *Moralia, On Common Conceptions* 1060A=LS40R. See also the discussion of Charles Brittain 2005 "Common Sense. Concepts, Definition and Meaning in and out of the Stoa", in D. Frede & B. Inwood (eds.) *Language and Learning*. Proceedings of the Symposium Hellenisticum 2001, pp. 165-209.

²⁸ Todd *ibid.* p. 54.

²⁹ *De mixtione* 217.2-32=SVF II 473, p. 154.23-155.24.

Another way to restrict the application of the term relates to its extension: unlike the case of mixture, most examples in the Stoic sources – especially the examples that date to later Stoic phases – concern either the innate ethical notions of good and bad, or the notion of innate belief in god(s). As Epictetus puts it: "For which of us would not agree that the good is beneficial, that it is choice-worthy and to be pursued and sought after in all situations? And which of us would not agree that the just is fine and appropriate?"³⁰ The natural formation of concepts having to do with good and evil is grounded in the Stoic theory of fundamental animal tendencies or inclinations: every animal has an innate tendency to recognize and go after that which is beneficial to it, as well as to recognize and avoid harmful things. The evaluative disposition of every experience lies at the heart of the formation of later, more developed notions of (ethical) good and bad. In a slightly more complex manner, our inborn natural sociality towards our parents leads into a formation of a concept of a divine parent or god.³¹ Again, the role of common notions is not to explain the formation of any possible concept, but rather the formation of a fairly restricted group of notions, deriving from our inborn, natural inclinations.

The original motivation of the present article was to bring together the passages where Plotinus starts an inquiry from a non-critical conception and appeals to human case or experience of a phenomenon as a starting point for a more theoretical understanding. Yet, gathering those passages, I soon realised that they track approximately the same places where Plotinus uses the notion of 'conception' (*ennoia*). He uses the full notion of 'common concept/notion', *koinê ennoia*, very rarely,³² as in the case of the concept of 'one and the same' to be discussed below. Usually, as in the passage with which we will start, he speaks only of notions or concepts (*ennoiai*). This usage is not very usual either, which may be an indication that he is borrowing it from other sources and it is no central part of his own theory building. But it is equally possible that the term is technical for him, and that he is consciously using it without the emphatic 'common' for some reason or another. The question then becomes whether he is using the term for the same philosophical purposes than the Stoics.

That the term does not refer to an everyday term, roughly designating whatever people happen to think, seems to be suggested for example in I.8.3.12, where Plotinus speaks of an *ennoia* of evil. There, *ennoia* appears after a fair bit of philosophical work in the previous

³⁰ *Dissertationes* 1.22.1, trans. Tuominen. Epictetus is talking here about preconceptions (*prolēpseis*), conceptions that the mind forms out of its natural disposition. See also LS 39E.

³¹ Matt Jackson-McCabe "The Stoic Theory of Implanted Preconceptions", *Phronesis* 49, pp. 323-47.

³² There is one place, on matter, in which he does speak of common *logos*, and immediately after uses the term *ennoia* (II.4.1.)

passages, and seems to designate a relatively technical understanding of evil (evil as "unmeasuredness in relation to measure ... limitlessness in relation to formative principle, and perpetual neediness in relation to what is self-sufficient" lines 13-15). Similarly, he once speaks of an *ennoia* of nature, meaning a philosophical position on nature, namely the sort of position that understands matter as substrate (II.4.1.3). Are we to think of the term as capturing always a philosophical concept obtained through a lot of argumentation? Or can it be a concept directly and naturally endowed/formed? Is there an innate component, and if so, how does it enter into the picture?

According to John Phillips,³³ Plotinus adopts the term from the Stoics, but changes it to the point of inversion: for Phillips, Plotinian common notions are not inarticulate conceptions to be used and further developed or sharpened. Rather, they are the fully formed ideas operative in *anamnêsis*, and reached through introspection. In my interpretation, intelligible principles do have a role to play, but I will deny that Plotinus would use *ennoia* for an idea or form grasped fully in introspection. Beside allowing for human experience and sense-perception having a role to play in learning and often talking about *ennoia* as an entity within a linguistic usage, my divergence from Phillips concerns methodology: while Phillips connects passages that mention *ennoia* with those that treat *anamnesis*, I have opted for gathering all the passages that I know where Plotinus describes the beginnings of an inquiry, often also using the term of *ennoia*. Despite the philosophical affinities, this study does not reveal any direct, explicit, or perhaps even necessary connection to *anamnêsis*. Where I do agree with Phillips, again, is that Plotinus' passages do not testify of a general theory of formation of concepts. By surveying the cases where he starts an inquiry into a concept from a common notion of it, we will, in fact, find a very limited (although perhaps not complete) group: freedom, unity, eternity and time, goodness and evil.

1. 'Up to us' or freedom

One of the clearest examples of cases where Plotinus stresses that inquiry has to start from the human experience or thinking activity appears in the *Treatise VI.8 On Free Will and the Will of the One* (39).³⁴ In order to be able to say anything about freedom or 'being in our

³³ Phillips 1987 already mentioned above.

³⁴ In some other places, Plotinus does seem to take the human experience as some sort of starting-point, in what I have thought of as a proto-transcendental argument: since the human mind exhibits the capacity of self-knowledge or introspection, the Intellect must also have it, i.e. there has to be a principle that explains this phenomenon. *Enn.* II.9.1.43-50. And similarly about self-awareness or *sunaisthêsis*: IV.4.24.21-25.

power', we have to start from the same notion and phenomenon as it appears to ourselves. He starts the treatise by wondering whether the notion of "in their/our power" or "up to us" is something that is suitable for discussion about gods or the summit of his own metaphysical hierarchy, the One. Having raised different general questions, he makes the following methodological remark that is also programmatic for the treatise:

But for the present we must postpone these issues, and first investigate about ourselves (*eph' hêmôn autôn*), as is the habit of an investigation (*zêtein ethos*), whether anything happens to be in our power/up to us. First we must investigate (*zêtêteon*) what can it possibly mean to say that something is in "in our power" (*eph' hemin*); that is, what is the concept/notion (*ennoia*) of such a thing? For in this way it might come to be known whether it is fitting to transfer it to the gods... When we speak of "being in our power", what is it that we think and why are we investigating? (*Enneads* VI.8.1.14-19; 21-22)

This passage affirms that inquiry starts from human case, for two different, but presumably connected reasons: first, it seems that inquiries generally start from a case that is familiar to us, that is, a human experience (since we are not gods, this is what is available to us). Second, we start from the concept or word³⁵ that we have of the phenomenon, from what we mean by it ("what it is to *say/call* something '*eph' hêmîn*'"). The concept we have, presumably, is grounded in our experience, creating a connection between the two reasons. Plotinus' overall point can be interpreted either weakly or strongly: either that it is customary to start investigation from our own case, or, more strongly, that the proper, good way to engage in investigation is to start from our own case. According to the first suggestion, he would follow a traditional way, a mere *ethos*, to conduct an investigation; according to the latter, he would claim the rightness or superiority of such an approach. The normative emphasis of what we should and should not do (*zêtêteon*) when investigating suggests that the point made is not merely about following some custom of research, but that he thinks this, further, is the proper or right way to approach the issue. It is also well known that for the ancients to follow a custom is a promising, rather than conservative, way to approach issues. If this is the right interpretation, Plotinus suggests broadly the Aristotelian manner of starting an inquiry, namely from that which is more familiar to us, and advancing to that which is more familiar by nature (e.g. *Met.* Z3, 1029b3-10). Given that we are not gods, we cannot inquire directly about whether or not they are free in any sense of the term. We must first try

³⁵ Georges Leroux 1990 *Plotin. Traité sur la liberté et volonté de l'Un*, Paris: Vrin, p. 235, emphasizes that the notion of *ennoia* is reserved for the exercise of thinking that is a reflection of language, a level of discussion lower than any potential true grasp of the One, which is beyond linguistic analysis.

to understand the phenomenon of something being "in someone's power/up to him". And to understand this, we must consider the phenomenon in our own case: what is the conception or notion that we have of it, and what we try to capture by using the concept. The point of the methodological remark is one about the order of investigation: we must start with something of which we already have some experience, and analyse the concepts that we use of it.

This text does not tell us whether the notion more readily available to us, namely human freedom, is natural or innate to us. On one possible interpretation, this would be the preliminary natural concept of freedom, of what it means to have things in one's own power, and to do them unhindered. This notion need not be entirely clear for its user, but it would be more than a disposition: it would be an innate, *a priori* concept. This reading is compatible with the text, but perhaps another reading is more natural: if we had, in our use, a full *a priori* concept, why would we need a philosophical-linguistic analysis of what we mean by the term, and of whether we think anything is in our power? Had he been searching for such a thing, one would also expect him to issue a call for an inward turn, introspection and turning away from our own experiences. Instead, he takes up language we use of this phenomenon, and goes on, after the quoted passage, to talk about desires and other things that enslave us, and cases where we are not, in fact, free. It seems likely that he might think that the human familiarity of being sometimes hindered in one's pursuits, and the opposite experiences of choice and voluntary action, trigger the disposition to formulate this concept. Whatever the status of this concept, it seems clear that the fact that we master its usage in an adequate way does not mean we really necessarily and properly understand the phenomenon. We must first restrain ourselves from applying it to things foreign to us, and to try and pin down its meaning in a context more familiar to us, namely our own case. Having done that, there is further Plotinian philosophy to be done to understand the phenomenon.

In this text, then, an *ennoia* of '*eph' hêmin*' is the pre-reflected or pre-philosophical concept we have, and not a recollected conception nor something that implies a perfect knowledge of the phenomenon in question. It seems to be a result of human experience and every-day concept-formation and -usage, and certainly something that has to be clarified before more inquiry into its correct philosophical application can be done.

2. One and the same

A clear optimism as regards the disposition of human mind of grasping something important naturally- or a priorically - right may be expressed in Plotinus' treatise *On the Presence of Being, One and the Same, Everywhere as a Whole* II (VI.5 [23]). The general point within the two treatises on this topic is to argue for a specific understanding of that which is incorporeal, in the spirit of answering the problem presented in Plato's *Parmenides* and the trouble of trying to think of a universal or general concept - and for the Platonists a universal, or, better, a Form, in its relation to its multiple of usages/instantiations. (*Parm.* 131b). Plotinus goes to great lengths in explicating the *sui generis* presence of incorporeal being (both intelligible and hypernoetic: the presence of the One) as the presence of one and the same everywhere as a whole. For any universal, when it is present in some particular, it is present not partly, but fully, as one and the same whole. The passage of interest here comes in the beginning of the second treatise on this topic, in which Plotinus starts by claiming that such a notion – a notion that some people might take as theoretical or non-natural – is in fact common to the human mind:

That what is *one and the same in number* (*arithmō*) is present everywhere as a whole is said to be a kind of common notion (*koinê tis ennoia*), whenever all [human beings] speak, moved naturally (*autophuōs*) to do so, of god in each one of us as one and the same. And if no one asked them how this is, and did not wish to rationally inspect their opinion, they would posit this, and this being actual in their discursive reason, and halting at one, would also somehow be bound to same, and would not want to be detached from it. And this is the firmest principle of all, which our souls cry out, as it were, not summed up from individual instances (*kathekasta*), but preceding all the individuals... (VI.5.1.1-11)

Plotinus illustrates the incorporeal presence of being by making use of earlier, especially Stoic, arguments for a conception of god as common to every human mind. Note, first, that this is 'a kind of' (*tis*) common notion, and, second, that he does not mean to infer from this the existence of God, but the concept of the 'presence of one and the same in everywhere'. The idea seems to be to use the common conception of god as an instance of the presence of being everywhere as a whole. If a person, relatively unreflectively, talks about god, that person naturally shares the notion (*ennoia*) of that kind of being as present everywhere, rather than divided as a magnitude. Such a notion is accepted by all who have a concept of god, says Plotinus. Believing in god and the notions of "presence in everywhere as a whole" go naturally together. (VI.5.4.3-13). Perhaps Plotinus even thinks this sharing of a common concept speaks in favour of a god as he understands it, as something One, self-same and numerically single. In their positing naturally the notion of god, people attach themselves to a

thought about something that is (paradigmatically) one, and self-same with itself, regardless of the instances of different people thinking about the same object. Self-same unity, shared by many different people, is a principle, a notion that cannot be summed from several instances. Now, one might of course argue that this does not follow, that it is possible for two people to think about the same cat, but that the cat is an individual in the world, represented in their minds, and clearly not wholly present in any mind. The force of the argument must come from the kind of concept thought: god is taken in the sense of something that has numerical unity, but is also a paradigmatic incorporeal and universal, the sort of thing that is not located in any place, but present everywhere, as a whole.

We can set aside the exact form of this argument and whether it presupposes what it sets out to show. Here I am interested in what is been claimed about mental resources and starting-points for inquiry. Plotinus appeals to a non-Aristotelian order of primacy: regarding oneness, we do not first grasp individual things belonging, say, to some species (individual instances of essences), and then abstract a concept of numerical unity and self-sameness. Rather, the grasp of 'one', a notion of unity self-same with itself, is prior, and something that the soul is equipped and inclined to grasp before any individual instances. The universal presence of being everywhere – while a notion that may look strange and unfamiliar to human minds used to thinking about particular corporeal things and their being limited by spatial extension – is nonetheless not entirely foreign to the human mind, and thus not purely speculative. In the ordinary people's thinking about god, this kind of conceptual truth, universal presence of being everywhere as a whole, is being naturally established. Such a possibility, of actually thinking about the very same universal unity is, further, an inclination of the souls (the soul's 'crying out' for this unity).

3. Eternity and time

A set of concepts that Plotinus also thinks are relatively easily formed or accessed by the human mind, yet in need of more careful reflection, are 'time' and 'eternity':

Eternity and time, we say, are two different things, the one belonging to the sphere of the nature which lasts forever, the other to that of becoming and of this universe: and at once, and as if by a fairly collective application of our concept of them (*tais tês ennoias athroôterais epibolais*), we think that we have a clear and distinct (*enarges*) experience of them in our souls, as we are always speaking of them and using their names on every occasion. Of course, when we try to concentrate on them and, so to speak,

to get close to them, we find again that our thought runs into difficulties; we consider the statements of the ancient philosophers about them, who differ from one another... (III.7.1.1-10)

The human mind forms a notion of 'eternity' or 'time' in an act of collective apprehension (*epibolê* is technical terminology of both the Epicureans and Plotinus).³⁶ The immediacy and easiness of our usage of these terms suggests that we understand them clearly. This, however, is not the case. Once one tries to understand them, one realizes how hard it is to pin down their meaning, of which also the differing opinions of the past philosophers testifies. Plotinus suggests, then, an Aristotelian dialectical procedure, one of starting the inspection from the opinions of earlier philosophers. But he also raises the question of what the mind must possess, in order to start on that dialectical path. For as the paradox of inquiry suggests, one cannot inquire into something that one does not know anything about (*Meno* 80d-e) – an issue that the controversy between the Stoics and the Sceptics had revived in the context of the theory of common concepts. The text of Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Professors* 8.331a-332a=LS40T already referred to earlier, starts by admitting that the idea of investigation implies that there is some concept or conception from which the inquiry can start.

In Plotinus' view, there is a story to be told about how these notions came to be in the human mind in the first place, enabling the questions philosophers ask about them. And for this purpose he uses something like the Stoic theory of common notions:

Now, if the blessed men of ancient times had said nothing about time, we should have to take eternity as our starting point [this he has already discussed in some detail in the previous sub-chapters] and link our subsequent account of time with it, stating what we think about it and trying to make the opinion we express agree with the notion of time that we have acquired (*peirômenous tê ennoia autou hên kektêmetha epharmozein tèn legomenên hup' hêmôn doxan*);³⁷ but, as it is, we must first take the most

³⁶ There is a controversy over how to translate this bit, between Phillips 1987 on the one side and Strange 1994 as well as Robbert van den Berg (2009 "As we are always speaking of them and using their names on every occasion. Plotinus, *Enn.* III.7 [45]: Language, experience and the philosophy of time in Neoplatonism", in Riccardo Chiaradonna and Franco Trabatttoni (eds.), *Physics and Philosophy of Nature in Greek Neoplatonism*. *Philosophia antiqua* 115. Leiden/Boston: Brill, pp. 101-120) who emphasize the Epicurean root of the term *athroa epibolê*. I side with Strange and van den Berg, and especially the latter who further believes that the concept of time is not intuited but abstracted but suggest that Plotinus does not think that such a collective apprehension made on the basis of perception is primarily misleading. Yes, it is in need of much clarification and philosophical analysis, but not a bad starting point for inquiry.

³⁷ Here I differ from not just the translation but the interpretation of the logic of the passage: Armstrong seems to take the *ennoia* as some kind of inner awareness. I can see that the terminology of fitting or harmonizing, used elsewhere also for recollective purposes, may make such an interpretation natural. For me, that reading, however, makes no sense: if such an inner, perhaps recollective awareness was possible for us, why engage with the *endoxa* and fall back with earlier opinions at all? In my reading the point is, rather, that the human mind has

important statements about it and consider whether our own account will agree with any of them.
(III.7.7.11-18)

If there had not been already centuries of philosophizing about the time, Plotinus contends, one would have to start the inquiry by taking the mind's naturally formed notions of time as one's starting-point, and trying to find a theory that would most closely fit with it, express it. In this, using what we understand about eternity would be a useful resource. As it is, however, since the matter has already been discussed by several predecessors, one can start by categorizing and inspecting the already well-argued opinions. And this latter task is what Plotinus will take up subsequent to this passage.

The question that now arises is how exactly we have come to have these notions in the first place. Are they innate concepts or contents, are they abstracted concepts, or has the mind a disposition to form them? As regards eternity, the text does not provide a straightforward answer. Plotinus claims, on the one hand, that for us to grasp both time and eternity, we must have a 'share' of them. Having an understanding or grasp (*sunesis*) of them means there has to be some contact with them (*ephaptomenô*) – perhaps referring to the human soul's or intellect's origin in the hypostatic levels of eternity and time. On the other hand, such an innate or natural "contact" does not mean we would have a ready understanding of, say, eternity. Quite the contrary, Plotinus suggests that we have a better grasp (*gnônai*) of what it means to be in eternity and in time once we understand what time is, and therefore the road of the inquiry must proceed downwards, from eternity to time, and especially in the way time itself "came down" (III.7.7.1-11). This launches an investigation into the relationship of time and movement, and different views of that relationship expressed by his predecessors. Much later in the treatise, Plotinus seems to state as his own view that, while time is not a creation of our own souls, we need to perceive movement in order to formulate a concept of time:

The heavenly circuit [the circular motions of the heavenly bodies], therefore, shows time, in which it is. But time itself cannot have something in which it is, but it must first of all be itself what it is, that in which other things move and stand still evenly and regularly; it can be manifested (*emphainesthai*) to us by something set in order, and exhibited (*prophainesthai*) to us so that we can form a concept (*ennoia*) of it, but it cannot be brought into existence by the ordered thing, whether in rest or in motion; but a thing in

acquired a notion of time (as we shall see below, as a result of a combination of a mind disposed to making such a conception, and affected by perceiving change), one that it can try and to express in propositions and arguments, perhaps using the notion of eternity as a help. This, however, is an arduous task, and it is therefore helpful to look at the already well-conceptualized theories of the matter. This reading of the passage makes sense of inspecting the *endoxa* as something more useful than mere non-necessary investigative habit.

motion will give a better acquaintance (*gnôrisis*) with it, for motion more effectively moves our minds to get to know time than rest, and it is easier to know how long something has been moving than how long it has stood still. (III.7.13.1-10)

In Plotinus's view, time itself has an ontological standing, independent of any movement. Recalling Plato's *Timaeus* (47a1–7; b6–c4) he does seem to think, however, that the human concept of time is formed with the help of perceiving movement, the regular movement of the heavenly bodies being the best objects for this purpose. The point Plato makes in the *Timaeus* concerns the notion of number: the human mind would never have learned numbers were there not have been regular movements of the stars.³⁸ Plotinus point is similar, although not quite the same: the human mind apprehends temporal succession and their respective lengths by apprehending movements. The text does not explicitly deny that the mind could have obtained the notion of time without having been exposed to movement, but it does seem to emphasize the role of perception in triggering a natural concept of time. The manifestation of time to us [=human beings], Plotinus suggests, is in the way that it orders perceivable movement in a particular way. The concept of time, then, would seem to be *a posteriori*.³⁹

4. Good and evil

While the notion of *ennoia* does not come up in the contexts where Plotinus talks about goodness, there are indications that Plotinus did think of the ability of recognizing good and evil as innate. We have already noted the two times when he talks about an *ennoia* of evil in passing. In V.3.3, when describing the different steps involved when a person sees and recognizes another person – in the example Socrates – he writes:

...and if it [sense-perception/soul?] says whether he is good, its remark originates in what it knows through sense-perception, but what it says it has already from itself, since it has the norm of the good in

³⁸ Plotinus comments upon this when starting his inquiry on number, and says that according to Plato, the *ennoia* of number came to human beings through inspecting the alteration of day and night. VI.6.4.12-17.

³⁹ van den Berg 2009 insists, plausibly, that there is much philosophical work to be done in order move from common or every-day concepts to essential definitions, and that this work is done with the help of metaphysical principles, which means principles not exhaustively or primarily abstracted from perception. I am in much agreement with him, although wish to emphasize that common notions or pre-concepts are, in my reading of Plotinus, primarily not untrustworthy, but informative. E. K. Emilsson suggested another kind of possible function for Plotinus of *ennoia*: a pure theoretical argument may not produce conviction, and thereby an appeal to shared notions might fulfill this kind of role. This is an interesting idea that I cannot study here further. In principle, my line is that such a further function is entirely possible, even perhaps likely, but that for it to fulfill this role, the *ennoia* in question has to have something to build on, that is, not to be misleading or entirely uninformative.

itself (*par' hautês an echoi kanona echousa tou agathou par' hautê*). How does it have the good in itself? Because it is like the good (*agathoeidês*), and is strengthened for the perception of this kind of thing by Intellect illuminating (*epilampontos*) it: for this is the pure part of the soul and receives the reflection of the intellect coming down upon it. (V.3.3.6-13)

There are two ways to read the passage. On one reading, perceiving goodness seems something perhaps even more fundamental – or elementary – than having a concept of something. According to Plotinus, there would be a property, 'goodness' exemplified by a particular, Socrates, directly perceived by sense-perception. This property or feature is not merely transmitted by sense-perception to our rational faculty which would then make a judgement about it. Rather, sense-perception by itself would be able to recognize the property. This is in line with Plotinus' overall theory of perception according to which perception not only receives, but makes initial judgements about the things it informs about. It has discriminative power, and produces contents to which truth and falsehood apply.⁴⁰ This reading would be close to some contemporary claims about human perception being attuned to moral content.⁴¹ Without or before the need of inference or of propositional judgement, sense-perception grasps the goodness of Socrates. On an alternative reading, the subject of the passage is the soul rather than the perceptual power. If so, while sense-perception is capable of making simple perceptual judgements, when it comes to assessing the goodness, a rule or norm of good is needed, and this is to be found deeper - or higher - in the soul, in its rational ability, ultimately guided and governed by the Intellect.⁴²

Whether between the object and the perceptual power, or between the object and the rational soul, this attunement is explained, in a way rather typical in antiquity, through the principle of attraction of like by the like: because the soul's power has in itself a form of goodness, it can recognize its likeness. Interestingly, Plotinus is here using the term *kanôn*, 'yardstick' or 'measuring-device', a term that was the title of a whole (lost) book of Epicurus that stated the central bits of his epistemology. In the epicurean epistemology, the role of this criterion of truth is typically given to perception or to preconceptions synthesized out of several perceptions (see LS 17 with comments). Unlike Epicurus, Plotinus insists that the attunement or canon which the soul's power has is dependent upon the Intellect. The intellectual, higher power 'illuminates' or strengthens the powers of sense-perception and

⁴⁰ See Emilsson 1988.

⁴¹ It is suggested within cognitive science that experiments prove the existence of some kind of attunement: Ana Gantman 2015 "Moral Perception", *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 19(11), p. 631.

⁴² This is the type of reading provided in the already mentioned E. K. Emilsson forthcoming 2017, ch. 8.

discursive reasoning, enabling the recognition. What exactly is involved in this kind of illumination is not explained, but we may conclude at least the following: in Plotinus' view, moral perception cannot happen without some kind of innately endowed attunement. To act in moral situations, one needs to be attuned to moral qualities in them, but this attunement is innate to the human mind.

Although it should not be expected that different Neoplatonists agreed on everything, yet, on the topic of regarding common notions, it is interesting and helpful to have a look at Proclus, who elaborates on the way that they feature in moral reasoning. His analysis presents, as it were, the next phase of moral judging. Proclus does not comment on moral perception, but explains the origin of falsehood operative in certain kind of syllogisms that result in false conclusions.⁴³ In this discussion, he brings together, explicitly, common notions and the pair of concepts of 'good' and 'bad'.

In Proclus view, erroneous judgements can, and usually do, involve a true major premiss, while the minor, given by perception and imagination, and "affected by irrational emotions", is false, and makes the conclusion false (*in Alc.* I 104.18-21). He gives two examples that illuminate his thinking of common notions. According to the first, Alcibiades reasons falsely, like this:

1 The happy man doesn't need anything.

2 I am happy because I have [beautiful] body, [good] family, [plenty of] friends and wealth.⁴⁴

Therefore, I need nothing (*in Alc.* I 104.9-15)

According to Proclus, a common and unperverted notion (*koinê kai adiastrôphos ennoia*) of happiness reveals it as self-sufficiency (*autarkeia*; *in Alc.* I 104.8-9). Thereby the major premiss gets it right. Alcibiades goes wrong, rather, in thinking that the abundance of material things and social relations and influence that he has makes him happy. He misplaces, so to speak, the origin of *eudaimonia*, and draws from that the conclusion that he is not in need of anything (any guidance whatsoever).

The other example runs like this: "So you will find both the lover of pleasure and the lover of money deceived on this account; the one posit pleasure, the other money as the good, but that

⁴³ The context is his discussion of Alcibiades, the young ambitious wannabe-politician that Socrates tried to tutor into virtue and self-knowledge. The youth was not all bad, he had an interest in philosophy, and some right tendencies, as can be testified in Plato's *Symposium*. The reader of the dialogue *Alcibiades I* that Proclus is commenting knows, however, that relatively soon after Socrates' death Alcibiades turned into a ruthless politician, who changed political sides as suited his own benefit, to ultimately die as a double agent in the hands of Persians.

⁴⁴ This is my construal - in the text 1 and 2 come in reverse order.

every good is desirable (*epheton*) is the common premiss of both of them." (*in Alc.* I 104.15-18). Proclus is rather unclear as to what exactly is the faulty minor premiss and what the false conclusion. The argument could be reconstructed as:

Major premiss: Every good is desirable

Minor premiss: Money/pleasure is desirable

Conclusion: Money/pleasure is good

Now this reading seems natural if we take the verbal adjective *epheton* in an obligatory sense: "should be desired", thus locating the faulty minor premiss in our perceptual and bodily experiences of what is and is not desirable, and deriving from that something about what kinds of things are in fact good. There is a problem, however, reading the argument like this: it seems that it is not only the minor premiss that is faulty, but that the conclusion does not follow: even if every good is desirable, there could be desirable things that are not good. For the argument to work, we would have to implement the first, major premiss, into something like "Every good and only good is desirable."

Another option is to read this as follows:

Major premiss: Every good is desirable

Minor premiss: Money/pleasure is good

Conclusion: Money/pleasure is desirable

This is a valid argument, but makes less clear what the emotively wrong assumption is: we seem to recognize certain things as good wrongly, and hold them as desirable because of that misidentification, rather than the other way around. This is perhaps understandable if we look at the Greek word for desirable: here it is not the Platonic word for bodily desires (*epithymia*) but rather a word used for example to describe the highest principle as most perfect and desirable (*to epheton*). The argument would thereby be about how we mistake money or pleasure as a thing most or truly desirable, or in a sense "naturally desirable".

Be that as it may, what concerns us here is especially the major premisses: a conception of happiness as a perfect state in which one feels no further need or deficiencies is, according to Proclus, a conception that arises from a common notion, and is connected to reason (*logos*; 104.19-20). It is inbuilt in the notion of happiness (*eudaimonia*) that it is a state of fulfilment, and therefore a state of self-sufficiency. Similarly he holds that the conception of good involves the idea that what is good is also desired – a good that is in no way desirable is not a good.

Proclus' remarks are quite interesting, for they seem to appeal to some kind of analytic truth: of course, he does not put it in this manner, but one is inclined to interpret this as a

point about the meaning of the concepts used: if one grasps and is able to use the notion of *eudaimonia* and *agathon*, one will naturally connect them to self-sufficiency and desirability, respectively. For Proclus, this is not merely a point about the way we use these words, but is connected to the way things really are. Alcibiades has "a natural predisposition (*phusikê paraskeuê*) towards the beautiful", but this predisposition is "inchoate and inarticulate and falls short of true virtue" (I 102.2-4). That is, there is in his major premises a grain of good and right conception, one that Socrates in the dialogue tries to make use of, and articulate. This grain is expressed in common concepts/notions. Olympiodorus, in commenting the same dialogue, and in full possession of Proclus' commentary, states that we know some common conceptions/notions without any need of demonstration.⁴⁵ But note also that whatever is innate in our moral conceptions is not some kind of rule-book of right behaviour, as sometimes seems to be suggested when contrasting Aristotelian moral theory as situational and experience-based to Platonic ethics as some sort of rule- or principle following), but a very general point about central moral conceptions, their meaning, to be used or misused in syllogisms.⁴⁶

To conclude

The collection of passages here may to some eyes seem arbitrary: it runs from Plotinus to Proclus, from moral perception to philosophical discussions on such metaphysical concepts as time, eternity and freedom, and gathers together passages that speak of notions/conceptions, common notions, and canons/measuring sticks of truth. I hope that some red threads start to emerge, however. The overall thematic underlying the article is the way that inquiry precedes from unclear concepts to philosophically reflected concepts – conceptions that grasp the true nature of things. This interest clearly overlaps with Plotinus' use of the term *ennoia*, once *koinê ennoia*, to be picked and more articulated later, by Proclus and Olympiodorus. Plotinus' examples of something like common notions chart the same problematic area as the Stoic usage, namely the question of the interplay between perception, experience, concept-usage and some innate tendency of "getting it right" with certain

⁴⁵ Olympiodorus, *Commentary on Alcibiades* 18.3-4. See *Gorgias* 474b-476a. See also François Renaud and Harold Tarrant 2015 *The Platonic Alcibiades I: The Dialogue and its Ancient Reception*, Cambridge University Press, p. 216; François Renaud 2003 "Commettre l'injustice est pire que la subir (Gorg. 474-476)", in *Le Gorgias*, ed. G. Samama, Paris, pp. 49-58.

⁴⁶ Note that neither of Proclus' syllogisms seems a straightforward Aristotelian practical syllogism. The conclusion is not an action, nor even a direct advice on how to act. The first conclusion is a case of self-understanding, the second a point about different types of apparently good things.

concepts. In this discussion, Plotinus and his later followers share central Stoic concerns: the need for and idea of finding a natural propensity innate to the human soul to the formation of a limited group of basic concepts, and the idea that a concept shared naturally by all or many human beings is not yet a conception, nor a trustworthy criterion of truth, but is in need of hard philosophical work. Plotinus and his followers differ in their assessment on both the kind of innateness in question and partly also on the concepts discussed. Something divine and good appear on both lists, while other examples may deviate.

What I hope to have shown is, first, that the simple picture – offered not only in general expositions, but also in some of the available research according to which knowledge-acquisition would be a case of simple fitting perceptual data to an innately endowed, ready concepts – does not seem to get unequivocal support in these texts. Rather, it seems that in some cases considered above, the human mind comes naturally to formulate certain concepts that are not ready or intuited, but more or less unclear, depending upon the case; still, these concept function as good starting-points for conceptual clarification through dialectical inquiry into the real nature of things. Concepts suitable to play this role in dialectic are probably in the Stoic manner concepts that are widely shared by human beings.

Second, through the methodology of gathering and looking at different thematic discussions, an interesting aspect of the theory of pre-philosophical *ennoiai* and their philosophical articulation emerges. The concepts that Plotinus discusses present a group that Plotinus and the Neoplatonists think of as entirely fundamental. Some scholars have held that Plotinian application of the Stoic theory of common notions is the same as the Platonic recollection: they are the unexercised Platonic forms, or images of the Forms, the proper objects of *anamnêsis*.⁴⁷ While to assess this claim properly goes beyond what I attempt to do here, it must be noted that the examples that I have unearthed present a very short and limited selection. In none of the examples do we have such innate concepts as a horse, a human being, or two-footed – that is, normal general concepts that Plotinus would think of as capturing an ontologically real distinction within nature, and be among the ordinary Platonic forms, or objects of intellection. Rather, the selection is of quite abstract terms, and ones that are central, perhaps not coincidentally, for Plotinus' metaphysical system. On the top of that system, is the *One*, which is also *Good*, self-caused, and paradigmatically *free*. This is followed by the level of intelligible Platonic forms, which is marked by its being *eternal*, and

⁴⁷ Phillips 1987.

that, in turn, by the life and level of the soul, markedly *temporal*, which distinguishes it from the previous level of the eternal intelligibles.

There are some options as to why central features of metaphysics could coincide with the list of innately interesting terms. Perhaps Plotinus, indeed, adopts the Stoic idea of common notions in near of its Stoic meaning, namely as terms that are shared of by all human beings, because they have an innate or natural origin. But as in Stoicism, they have to be, further, terms that serve a certain role in the overall theory they feature as parts. They do not hit the truth by merely suggesting themselves naturally to the human mind, but also by having both a place within the cosmic system of which they form a part, and a reflected place in the general theory put forth by Plotinus. As an author with idealistic intuitions, Plotinus could also think that it is not a coincidence that terms central for the structure of being also share a particular place within cognition: they are more naturally developed by the human mind than some other concepts, because the human mind is naturally endowed to coincide and connect with being, even if not directly create it.

I also think that what is very striking is that whatever Plotinus thinks of the learning of ordinary concepts and coming to understand natural kind terms – terms in the acquisition of which inspecting the external world appears as useful – the methodology suggested for inquiry into these heavy metaphysical notions is not one of starting from introspection or intuition. The heaviest metaphysical notions seem to be first inspected on a human level of experience: freedom is first inquired as a phenomenon that has to do with human experiences of certain things being in our power and others not. Most inquiries we saw make use of Aristotelian dialectic, starting from things less than clear, but familiar to us, proceeding with inspecting the previous philosophical views about these matters, and only then arriving at the intelligible levels of knowledge, and thereby ultimately to intuition and identity with the intuited. (Plotinus methodology does have a role for introspective self-reversion, but it is not introduced as a methodological starting point in any of the contexts I have gone through. It is significant, rather, as a method of self-knowledge.)⁴⁸

A very unified picture does not emerge on whether we have an innate disposition to form these concepts, and which role, if any, the 'triggering' of experiences of the external world plays for the actualization of such a disposition. Of the cases discussed, oneness or unity seems to be privileged as a notion that somehow enforces itself upon the mind, a notion

⁴⁸ Although it must be said that transformative self-knowledge is not separate from knowledge as such. See Pauliina Remes forthcoming december 2016 "Self-Knowledge in Plotinus: Becoming Who You Are", U. Renz (ed.) *Self-Knowledge. A History*. Oxford Philosophical Concepts, OUP.

that we perhaps do not need to learn or abstract from experience, but somehow naturally yearn towards. Given the structure of Plotinus' overall philosophical system, this is not a surprising view to take, since he thinks everything comes from this overflowing unity and goodness, and gets its own unity and organization by inclining back towards it. But interestingly this is not the case with all the metaphysical concepts that he takes up. Time was introduced as something that might not appear to us at all if we did not experience movement and the particular way that time organizes movement into succession. The concept of time, then, seems *a posteriori*.

Does the concept of good, or that of happiness, arise naturally? And does it precede experience? That Plotinus believes that goodness is an essential part of either perception or ordinary judgements about perceived people, and Platonist were well aware of children's feel for what is, for instance, just and not just (e.g. *Alcibiades* 1 110b–111a), suggests that moral attunement is not a disposition people develop only through encountering difficult human situations, but something more deeply ingrained and readily available, although perhaps not in the form of a concept. Again, given the position that Plotinus gives to goodness at the summit of his philosophical system, to adopt this view is not surprising. But it should not lead us into thinking that every moral concept is innate in the sense of content innatism. Proclus' idea of shared ethical tendencies the philosophical purport and implications of which people misunderstand (like identifying self-sufficiency as valuable but thinking that wealth brings true self-sufficiency; or thinking that good is also desirable but believing that desire is a reliable guide to really good things) goes better together with the idea of dialectical improvement of a sound, general intuition, rather than with a belief in fully developed concepts grasped by the human mind.

Are we any closer in understanding how perception can 'trigger' or 'awaken' innate conceptual abilities? There is no clear theory propounded. What I have above, perhaps carelessly, called concept-clarification cannot be mere concept-articulation, if by such is meant not advancing, in some sense, beyond what is given by the senses, but just articulating the information given by them in more detail.⁴⁹ Not just Platonic-Plotinian holistic view of knowledge but any theory-constructing will involve the idea that a proper grasp of an individual concept requires a grasp of a whole network of concepts and their relations. Both Platonists and Aristotelians think that the understanding of this system requires understanding its ultimate *archai* - for Plotinus hypostases, forms and the primary kinds. Plotinus, further,

⁴⁹ Here I agree with van den Berg 2009 in his analysis of the concept of time.

seems to appeal to the presence of the Intellect in the reasoning capacity as its laws or rules, something without which it would not tend to producing right concepts, nor grasp goodness. But nothing in the evidence so far suggests that this theoretical understanding of a concept would invalidate or replace the pre-philosophical notion.

It might be that 'triggering' takes different forms, depending on which concept is in question. As for time, to formulate a concept of time, what is needed is orderly motion happening in time. In the case of perceiving goodness, the goodness of the individual Socrates was recognized by the like, the goodness in the soul and its perceptual power. In Proclus' development, experiences of or longing for happiness that would yield self-sufficiency, or pre-philosophical grasp of the link between goodness and desirability, both have a grain of truth. This is a result of our natural tendencies at work in the world, the way in which we are related to the things and goodness around us. As for freedom, although this is not explicit in the *Enneads*, it seems that one needs to both experience having things in one's power as well as to formulate and master a term, a linguistic item, that will serve as a basis for further inquiry and articulation. Finally, in the case of unity, what seems emphasized is the naturalness of that notion and the inner craving for it that the soul has.

The work for Plotinus' epistemology and cognitive psychology is only partly done – his more Aristotelian passages deserve a new scrutiny in the scholarship.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ I wish to thank Eyjólfur K Emilsson and Marilena Vlad for detailed comments, and the audience of the Uppsala&Stockholm joint seminar in theoretical philosophy, spring 2016, and especially my commentator, Gösta Grönroos, for useful critique on an earlier version of the paper.