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Plotinus' Account of the Cognitive Powers of the Soul: Sense Perception and Discursive Thought

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Abstract This paper focuses on Plotinus' account of the soul's cognitive powers of sense perception and discursive thought, with particular reference to the treatises 3. 6 [26], 4. 4 [28] and 5. 3 [49] of the *Enneads*. Part 1 of the paper discusses Plotinus' direct realism in perception. Parts 2 and 3 focus on Plotinus' account of knowledge in *Enneads* 5. 3 [49] 2–3. Plotinus there argues that we make judgements regarding how the external world is by means of discursive reasoning. This latter claim, however, is in tension with what Plotinus argues elsewhere regarding our perceptual apprehension of the external world (3. 6 [26] 1; 4. 4 [28] 23). This puzzle is addressed in Part 3 of the paper, which investigates Plotinus' view that there exist some sense perceptions of which we are unaware. Finally, Part 4 looks at Plotinus' understanding of Plato's famous wax block analogy, in 5. 3 (49). The overall conclusion of the paper is that Plotinus' account of knowledge is radically different from that of the Cartesian tradition.

Keywords Plotinus · Sense perception · Discursive thought · Direct realism · Consciousness

1 Plotinus' Perceptual Realism

Plotinus holds apparently conflicting views on sense perception (*aisthêsis*): some passages appear to commit him to direct realism, whereas others lend themselves to a representational reading. It is difficult to work out a consistent picture of Plotinus' views; scholars are unsurprisingly divided on this issue. Eyjólfur K. Emilsson for example has developed an influential direct realist reading of Plotinus' theory, according to which we directly perceive things *as they are*; there are no mental entities mediating our grasp of the extra-mental world. Accordingly, things exist by themselves (see 4. 6 [41] 1. 31: *auta ta pragmata*),[1] independently of any perceiving subject, and they exist with the qualities they are perceived to have. Vision, for example, is "a direct apprehension of the quality of a distant object" and colors are "objective features of bodies" (Emilsson 1988, pp.79, 52).[2] Sara Magrin on the other hand has put forward an alternative interpretation; in a recent article, she argues that for Plotinus not only the extra-mental world, but *our mental states too* are objects of enquiry, and of them too we can make true or false assertions:

> The soul in sensation receives the representation of a sensible thing. This representation is the way in which the form of a body becomes present to the soul […] Nowhere does Plotinus suggest that reason judges external objects. […] Reason examines only and exclusively the content of sensory representations (Magrin 2010, pp. 282–284, 290).

If Magrin is right, Plotinus could thus be thought to be a precursor of those who hold a Representationalist Theory of Mind (RTMs for short), to borrow an expression by Jerry Fodor. As Fodor puts it,

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[1] References to Plotinus' treatises follow standard conventions and include: the number of the *Ennead*, the number of the treatise, its position according to the chronological order, the number of the chapter and the lines according to P. Henry and H.-R. Schwyzer's Oxford edition (*editio minor*). Translations are generally taken from AH Armstrong's Loeb edition (with some slight changes).

[2] As in many other ancient and contemporary accounts, vision has a privileged status in Plotinus' analysis of perception. However, his focus on vision is not completely exclusive: hearing, e.g., is briefly discussed in 4. 5 [29] 5.

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> What RTMs have in common is the idea that mind-world relations […] are mediated by mental particulars that exhibit both semantic and causal properties ('Ideas' in Hume's vocabulary; 'concepts' and 'mental representations' in the vocabulary of thoroughly modern cognitive psychologists) (Fodor 2000, p.105 n. 5).

If so, Plotinus' "philosophy of mind"[3] would be of great historical significance, since RTMs provide the basis of much contemporary cognitive psychology (Marraffa 2003, pp. 3 ff.).

Magrin's reading of Plotinus is ingenious, and there is much to learn from it. In this paper I will however argue, *contra* Magrin, that there is no textual evidence that in fact justifies the ascription of *any kind* of RTM to Plotinus. But before developing my own line of argument, I will first flesh out in more detail the debate between those who interpret Plotinus as a direct realist and those who take him to be a representationalist. Emilsson's and Magrin's views will be my points of reference for each of the two sides of the debate.

On Magrin's interpretation, Plotinus holds that the content of our sense perception (e.g. the red of an apple) is by no means an objective feature of the extra-mental world. Rather, it depends on the way in which the relevant dispositional powers of the objects in the world (the apple in this case) interact with the perceiver (see below, n. 26 and 27). Sensible qualities are, then, *relative to the perceiver* and sensory reports are as such "undecidable", that is, we cannot give them a truth value.[4]

On the other side of the debate there are those who hold, like Emilsson, that Plotinus is a direct realist with respect to perception: the content of our perceptions are objective features of objects in the world, which *do not depend* on the way we perceive things (thus, the apple's red color that we perceive is an objective, extra-mental feature of that apple). Emilsson's account is open to improvement, but—at least in my view—remains the most persuasive; and in this paper I will argue in its support.

For reasons of brevity, I will not here provide any detailed account of Plotinus' theory of sense perception; I will only recall some salient features of it that are particularly relevant to the present discussion. In 3. 6 [26] 1. 1–3 Plotinus holds that perception is an activity of the soul (*psuchê*) that consists in "taking in" features of the world as well as making a judgement (*krisis*) about them—in the sense that I will explain in a moment. The words *krinein* and *krisis* are often connected in ancient philosophical thought with sense perception (see e.g. Aristotle, *On the Soul*, 3. 2. 426 b 10–21) and do not necessarily entail the idea of a judgement that may be true or false. Rather, they may simply suggest that the soul picks out, from the perceptual content received from the senses, objects or features of objects in the external environment (Emilsson 1988, p. 122). I submit, however, that this is not exactly what Plotinus meant when using the term "judgement" (*krisis*) in his account of perception. By equating sense perception with a judgement (*krisis*), Plotinus suggests that sense perception is a (low level) kind of *cognition* that involves an active power of the soul, and that this should be distinguished from a merely passive affection of the soul.[5]

More precisely, as he argues in 4. 4 [28] 23, sense perception for Plotinus is a psycho-physical phenomenon in which the soul plays an active part, while the sense-organs of the (ensouled) body undergo an affection[6] through which they receive qualities or sensible forms (*morphê*: 4. 4 [28] 23. 20–21) inherent in bodies. Regrettably, Plotinus does not clearly explain how this process comes about,[7] and what it consists of. There are textual reasons why it does not seem correct to attribute to Plotinus the view that sensory assimilation of a perceptible quality in the world is a mere physical change in the sense organ. But what view we can plausibly attribute to Plotinus remains an open question.[8] This much is clear, however: the key notion in Plotinus' theory of perception is that of "assimilation" (*omoiôthênai*: 4. 4 [28] 23.6 ff.). Plotinus regards the soul and the body as heterogeneous entities: the former is material and extended, whereas the latter is immaterial and without extension (see e.g. 4. 3 [27] 1).[9]

[3] As I see it, this expression should be used with caution, for Plotinus' notion of "soul" is different from our post-Cartesian notion of "mind", even though there are overlaps between the two: see below, n. 9.

[4] On "undecidable representations", see below, n. 26. One shouldn't, however think, on the basis of the notion of "undecidable" introduced by Plotinus, that he is a sceptic; on the contrary, his answer to scepticism is close to that of Descartes. Magrin puts it in a nutshell thus: "It is because sensory reports are 'undecidable' that we are led to 'turn inside' and look for some a priori notions in the mind. And it is because these notions turn out to be 'obscure' in their own way that we have to proceed further until we reach *Nous*, in which every doubt is answered" (Magrin 2010, p. 294).

[5] Significantly, Plotinus holds that no form of cognition is a mere affection of the soul: see 3. 6 [26] 1. 10–11; 4. 6 [41] 2; 6. 1 [42] 20. 26–32.

[6] See Emilsson (1988, pp. 67–93).

[7] Although it is clear that his *sumpatheia* theory plays a very important role in this theory: see 4. 5 [29] 2–3 (Emilsson 1988, pp. 47–61).

[8] According to Emilsson (1988, p. 66, 74 ff.) colors, for instance, phenomenally come into existence in our eyes, but this does not entail that the latter literally take on the colors seen; see Magrin (2010, p. 281 n. 77) for criticism of this view.

[9] In this paper I generally refrain from using the word "mind". Plotinus' dualism between individual soul and body may indeed be compared in many respects to Descartes' dualism between mind and extension (see Emilsson 1988, pp. 145–148), but prudence is advised (for further discussion see Chiaradonna 2012). For example, according to Plotinus our individual soul and the universal soul that acts as a cosmological principle are closely connected and this fact plays an important role in his theory of knowledge. Soul is not limited to human beings: according to Plotinus even stones are ensouled (see 6. 7 [38] 11. 24–31). These aspects of Plotinus' theory are obviously as a different as can be from Descartes' philosophical approach.

Plotinus soul-body dualism makes it impossible for the soul as such to be assimilated to corporeal qualities such as colors or shapes inherent in bodies (see 4. 4 [28] 23. 8–15); the soul cannot passively take in physical imprints that come from bodies (3. 6 [26] 1. 9–11). In order for sense perception to take place, then, something intermediate between the soul and the body must be introduced. Plotinus ascribes this very intermediate status to the qualities perceived by sense organs (4. 4 [28] 23. 19–32). Sensory affection, Plotinus writes,

> lies between the sensible and the intelligible, a proportional mean (*meson analogon*) somehow linking the extremes to each other, with the capacity both of receiving and of transmitting information, suitable to be assimilated to each of the extremes (4. 4 [28] 23. 25–29).

This intermediate status makes it possible for the perceived qualities to "bridge the gap" between the soul (that which judges: *to krinon*) and the extra-mental entities that are objects of perception (that which is judged: *to krinomenon*), by analogy with the way a ruler (*kanôn*) allows a connection between the straightness of the soul and the straightness embodied in the wood (4. 4 [28] 23. 37–43). Thus, sense perception is an act of judgement on the part of the soul—an activity the soul actively engages in, which concerns the sensory affection of the ensouled sense organs. But there is more to perceptual content than mere sensory affections. When we (i.e. our soul), for example, perceive a human being (see 5. 3 [49] 3. 1) or a face (4. 7 [2] 6.7–8), we are not merely perceiving an aggregate of sensible qualities such as colors and shapes (see e.g. 6. 3 [15] 15. 35–36). In addition to perceiving colors and shapes, we also identify these colors and shapes as a certain complex object. This *conceptual* content is what makes sense perception a cognitive act, one which sensory affections alone are incapable of explaining.[10]

Plotinus argues that

> the act [of vision] is not an alteration but simultaneously approaches what it has (*hama prosêlthe pros ho echei*)" (3. 6 [26] 2. 35–36, transl. Armstrong; see Emilsson 1988, pp. 133–134).

Obscure as it may be,[11] this claim appears to suggest that sense perception entails the activation of some cognitive content the soul already has in itself (see below, Part 3). Although never overtly stated by Plotinus, this interpretation is reinforced by passages such as 6. 7 [38]. 7. 25–31, where sense perceptions are equated to a lower form of intellection (see also the account of perception in 6. 7 [38] 6. 1–11; and below, Part 3). Since Plotinus appears to rule out the possibility that perceptual judgements may involve any inferential process (6. 3 [44] 18. 8–13), these judgements should probably be conceived as acts through which our soul immediately *realizes* that the qualities perceived via sensory affections belong to, and qualify, a certain *object*. On this point I endorse Emilsson's view that.

> To see the book is to realize that a given colour in one's visual field demarcates a book. To see that the book is violet is to realize that the color in one's visual field that demarcated the book is violet. What Plotinus has in mind by "judgement" in the context of perception must be something like this (Emilsson 1988, pp. 144–145).

By such judgements (e.g. "this is a book"), the soul appears to activate some a priori cognitive content, thereby identifying the sensory affection with a form the soul has already within itself. Thus, the affection of the perceived form/quality eventually "becomes a form" (4. 4 [28] 23. 32), i.e. is identified with a form in the true sense that defines a thing's nature (Emilsson 1988, p. 71).

The account of Plotinus' theory of perception just given in outline faces some difficulties, however. To begin with, it is worth emphasizing that Plotinus does nowhere explicitly argue that sense perceptions entail the "awakening" of latent innate forms in the soul. That it does is a plausible inference from some significant passages in Plotinus' writings, although we need to bear in mind that a key text such as 3. 6 [26] 2. 35–36 does not provide any decisive confirmation. Certainly in 5. 3 [49] 2–3 Plotinus talks about the imprints or traces of the intelligible forms in us (see below, Part 2), and assigns a crucial role to this innate cognitive content (with the interpretative *caveat* that in that context Plotinus focuses on discursive reasoning, and not on perception as such). Notwithstanding this textual under-determination, I submit that it is plausible to think that Plotinus' account of sense perception entails the activation of latent inborn forms.

Yet, further questions are to be addressed. Plotinus assumes that the forms in us and those in nature are the same

[10] Plotinus' analysis of perception is limited to human beings; hence, nowhere does he address the problem of how to conceive the cognitive power of perception in relation to irrational animals. For a possible Plotinian approach to this problem, see Emilsson (1988, pp. 137–138).

[11] See the discussion in Fleet (1996, p. 97). The Greek text is *hê de energeia estin ouk alloiôsis, all'hama prosêlthe pros ho echei tên ousian*. Theiler (followed in Henry and Schwyzer's *editio minor*) deleted the words words *tên ousian* as a wrongly inserted correction from the line above. In their first edition of Plotinus (*editio maior*) Henry and Schwyzer explained *tên ousian* as an accusative of respect. Fleet (1996, p. 7) retains this suggestion and translates as follows: "its actuality is not a change in character (since at one and the same time it approaches that to which it is essentially related […])". According to this translation, Plotinus is simply claiming that sight is an *energeia* different from qualitative change (an obvious allusion to Aristotle, *On the Soul* 2. 5; see Kalligas 2004, p. 469).

(see below, n. 22); thus, we may well argue that sense perceptions of all natural beings entail the activation of inborn forms. But what about the perception of an artifact such as e.g. a book? The existence of an inborn form of the book in us seems problematic, to say the least.[12] There are a few things to be noted in response to this question. Firstly, even if we reject the existence of (inborn) forms of artifacts, this does not entail that there is no intelligible principle corresponding to them. In 5. 9 [5], 11. 13–17, Plotinus claims that productive arts such as building and carpentry, "in so far as they make use of proportions", make use of intelligible principles. Thus, even if there is no "form of the book" as such, one may still argue that the empirical production of books entails the activation of intelligible, formal, a priori content. The metaphysical status of artifacts is derivative if compared to that of natural beings; consequently, the cognitive grasp of artifacts is derivative, but still entails the activation of inborn forms. For example, we may need a priori notions in order to learn that objects of a certain kind are books (i.e. are shaped in a certain way, performs certain functions etc.), even if there is no innate form of the book as such in us. The concept of an artifact can be understood as a combination of natural concepts. Secondly: whatever answer we may give to the problem of artifacts, Plotinus himself shows little (if any) concern with these questions.[13] He has no hesitation in extending the number of our a priori concepts, so he can allow that our soul has in itself everything (*ta panta*) as if written in it (5. 3 [49], 4. 21–22; see also 4. 6 [41] 3. 1–8: the soul is *logos pantôn*).[14] This may indeed strike us as an exceedingly counter-intuitive assumption, but this is Plotinus's stance on the matter.

Another controversial issue is that of the intermediate status of the perceived quality: one may wonder what that precisely means. Again, Plotinus is all but clear on this point. The perceived qualities are neither intelligible forms (for, they retain something of what is corporeal: we perceive corporeal things as extended in space); nor physical and corporeal features (for, if this were the case, the incorporeal soul could not have access to them.) Building on Plotinus' remarks, I suggest that qualities present in sensory affections may reasonably be regarded as the *same* corporeal qualities of the external bodies in a different *mode of existence*, i.e. without mass and matter. As Emilsson puts it: "what our sense-organs come to have in perception is really a quality of the external body, ontologically transformed as to be accessible to our souls" (Emilsson 1988, p. 143). The notion of "mode of existence" is crucial in this context. It entails that qualities are something like structures that can be instantiated in various places (on the multiple instantiation of qualities, see 4. 2 [4] 1. 34 ff.) and in entities with different features. The same structure is present both in the external body and in the ensouled sense organ. The soul metaphorically speaking "gets in touch" with this structure once it is purified of the specific features that characterize its bodily corporeal mode of existence. (As noted above, there are no physical imprints in our soul: see 3. 6 [26] 1. 1–8; 4. 4 [28] 23.15–19; 4. 5 [29] 2. 50–56; 3. 10–13; 4. 6 [41] 1. 14–40).

In sum, notwithstanding the possibility of other alternative interpretations of the difficult passages mentioned so far, I submit that on the most straightforward reading Plotinus has a realist view of sense perception and regards perceptual qualities as objective features of the extra-mental world. Plotinus ascribes features such as colors and shapes to the things themselves, without suggesting in any way that these features depend on the way in which things are perceived by the soul (e.g. 4. 2 [4] 2. 38–41; 6. 4 [22] 1. 17–23). Plotinus regards sensible qualities as "images" or "imitations" (*mimêmata*: 6. 3 [44] 15. 36), but in doing so he clearly (and unsurprisingly for a Platonist) aims to present qualities in bodies as imitations of their essential enforming principles (i.e. the *logoi* that stem from the universal soul).[15] Qualities, then, are images because they are low and metaphysically derived entities that are causally dependent on higher metaphysical principles. Yet, this has nothing to do with the idea that qualities depend on the way in which extra-mental bodies appear to us: bodies are images *in themselves,* and sensible qualities are imitations of a higher essential structure that cannot be perceived but only grasped through reason (see Emilsson 2010, pp. 70–75). Plotinus dubs that of bodies an "apparent reality" (*dokousa hupostasis*: see 6. 3 [44] 10. 11–12).[16] Once more, however, nothing suggests a representational reading of this expression.[17] Plotinus is simply (and, again, most predictably for a follower of Plato) claiming that

[12] Forms of artifacts are mentioned in two famous passages from Plato (see *Republic* 10. 596 c ff. and *Cratylus* 389 c), but ancient Platonists generally rejected their existence: see d'Hoine (2006).

[13] Plotinus' scanty remarks on the status of artifacts are discussed in Kalligas (2011, pp. 774–777).

[14] More on this below, Part 3.

[15] For further details on this famous (and controversial) theory see Kalligas (2011).

[16] Magrin (2010) is perfectly right in claiming that here Plotinus "does not contrast the subjective affection an object produces on the sense-organs with the sensible object itself". Her further conclusion that "this is not because he is not interested in skeptical issues, but because for him there is no sensible object that, *qua* sensible, could be such or such by itself" is, however unwarranted in my view, unless (by adopting a radically different perspective) one takes "by itself" to mean something else, namely that while sensible things have *objective* features such as colors and shapes, these do not define what a thing is in itself, since its essence is a formal intelligible principle.

[17] As I see it, the same holds for the occurence of *dokousa hupostasis* in 5. 5 [32] 1.14–15, though the interpretation of this chapter is controversial: see n. 23.

bodies are only apparently real, i.e. that they misleadingly appear as what is real in the proper sense, whereas they are mere images of their intelligible essential causes. Plotinus' description of sensible features as "images", therefore, does not generally entail any representational perspective.

Some further observations corroborate the proposed interpretation of Plotinus as a direct realist. If qualities in bodies were causally responsible for our subjective representations of them, we should ascribe some causal power to material things in themselves. The issue as to whether there is any "horizontal" causality in Plotinus' physical world is a controversial one (see e.g. Lee 1999; for accounts of the ongoing debate see Linguiti 2009, Arruzza 2011). In most cases Plotinus argues that only intelligible principles are causally active, whereas bodies and enmattered forms as such are incapable of exerting any proper causal power on something else: hence, he famously claims that forms in bodies are "dead", i.e. causally inert (see 3. 8 [30] 2. 30–32; 2. 4 [12] 5.18; "life" is a defining feature of Plotinus' intelligible causes: e.g. 1. 4 [46] 3. 33–40; 6. 7 [38] 8. 26–27). Thus, to be faithful to Plotinus it is best to avoid any talk about corporeal objects "causing" some kind of reaction in the perceivers (*contra* Magrin 2010, p. 284). Magrin argues to the contrary, that (as she puts it) intelligible formal principles, according to Plotinus, engender a sort of dispositional power in bodies to appear in a certain way (e.g. white) to perceivers endowed with suitable sense-organs (Magrin 2010, pp. 279–280). This is an intriguing hypothesis, but there is in my view simply no textual evidence that Plotinus conceived of qualities inherent in bodies (and even *essential* qualities of bodies, if indeed this notion makes any sense in his metaphysics)[18] as powers of this kind. Plotinus emphasizes that (real intelligible) beings and their lower sensible images are "homonymous", where this Aristotelian expression (*Categories* 1. 1 a 1–2) means that real beings and what depends on them are heterogeneous entities with no shared feature or property (see 6. 1 [42] 1. 15–30). Significantly, Plotinus does not employ this vocabulary when talking about perception of sensible qualities. In fact, the example of the ruler in 4. 4 [28] 23. 37–43 (whatever its possible sources)[19] suggests a different conclusion: that one and the same property or structure (straightness) is instantiated both in the soul and in the wood (that are in entities with different modes of existence). The ruler (which corresponds to the affection of the sense-organ by an external sensible quality) acts precisely as an intermediary that somehow bridges the gap between the different *modes of existence* of the same objective structure or content. According to what Dominik Perler has shown when focusing on Aquinas' theory of knowledge, the claim that one and the same form is instantiated in various places and exists both in the soul and in the extra-mental world does not entail any representationalist conclusion. Quite the contrary; a natural and plausible way of understanding this claim is to take it as an expression of direct realism:

> The immediate object of the intellect are the forms, which do not become present unless the intellect uses cognitive means that are produced on the basis of sensory input. It is obvious that such a version of direct realism is founded upon a strong metaphysical thesis, namely the thesis that things have a form (regardless of whether or not it is grasped) which, in the extra-mental world, is compounded with a matter, but can be detached from it. […] The crucial point is that of one and the same form (or nature) that can exist both in the extramental world and in the intellect (Perler 2000, p. 113).

Aquinas relies on Aristotle's views on sense perception and thought in the *De anima* and Plotinus is certainly close to the same general philosophical theory.[20] Thus, what an intentional state such as sense perception consists in is the "taking in" of a form that is the same, whether inside or outside the mind. It is worth emphasizing here again what distinguishes this account from RTMs: according to Plotinus sense perception is not directed at mental entities that have themselves some properties and are causally connected with the extra-mental world. Rather, for Plotinus sense perception is directed at the very forms or structures that exist in the extra-mental world, which are "taken in" by us in an incorporeal mode of existence.[21]

[18] In 2. 6 [17] 2. 20–26, Plotinus regards the essential constituent qualities of bodies as activities that stem from the intelligible forming principles. This passage, however, should be taken with prudence. It does not suggest that Plotinus endorsed any form of physical essentialism: see Chiaradonna (2006 and ForthcomingA).

[19] The *kanôn* analogy obviously recalls Hellenistic debates on the criterion. However, prudence is advised: for this kind of vocabulary was of widespread use in late authors (see Striker 1996, p. 33: "traditional metaphor") and the problem of the criterion plays no role in Plotinus' account of knowledge (see Chiaradonna 2012). In 5. 3 [49] 3. 8 Plotinus designates with the word *kanôn* the inborn imprint of the good in us (see below, Part 3). This occurrence should not be

Footnote 19 continued
used in order to clarify the metaphor in 4. 4 [28] 23, where the ruler analogy explains the role of a posteriori affections in the sense organs. Plotinus could well use the same traditional metaphor in different treatises and in different contexts, in order to convey different ideas.

[20] His account of the form we receive through sense perception is actually similar to that of Alexander of Aphrodisias: see his *On the Soul* (83. 13–22 Bruns) and Emilsson (1988, p. 92).

[21] Plotinus' theory is closer to Aristotle's views on perceptible forms than to Plato's thesis that bodies have their perceptual qualities in virtue of the geometric shapes of their constituent particles (see *Timaeus*, 61d–62a). As we shall see below, Plotinus refers to Plato's shapes in 3. 6 [26] 12, but this reference is not intended to explain how perception comes about. Obviously Plotinus does not aim to

This, however, is only part of the story since, as noted above, according to Plotinus sense perception does not only require that we take sensible forms in us, but also that our soul activates its internal (and probably innate) cognitive content. This thesis is crucially connected to Plotinus' gradualist account of knowledge: by progressing from sense perception to intellectual knowledge, we come to grasp realities higher than sensible forms and this entails the awakening of an inborn cognitive content (see below, Part 3 of this paper). Thus, from Plotinus' direct realist approach it follows that sense perception is the first step in our cognitive processes. Essential forms cannot be grasped by perception for the very simple reason that Plotinus (unlike Aristotle and the Peripatetics) does not believe that genuine essential forms exist in bodies (e.g. 6. 3 [44] 8 and 15). Hence, for Plotinus we come to grasp the metaphysical principles of reality not through abstraction, but by "awakening" the inborn forms in our soul, on the assumption that the forms in our soul and those in nature are in fact *the same* forms (Emilsson 1988, p. 134; see e. g. 5. 1 [10] 10. 5–7; 1. 1 [53] 8. 6–8).[22]

I now turn to briefly consider textual evidence that might be taken to undermine the interpretation I have been defending. There are two famous chapters of the *Enneads* (5. 5 [32] 1; 1. 1 [53] 7) where Plotinus seemingly claims that sense perception is not directed at things themselves, but at internal representations or images of them. I will not discuss these passages in detail here, since I focused on them elsewhere (Chiaradonna 2012); but I submit that these (indeed somewhat problematic) texts do not undermine the interpretation of Plotinus as a direct realist.[23] Magrin puts forward 3. 6 [26] 12. 12 ff. as additional evidence in favor of her representationalist reading of Plotinus' theory of sense perception. When focusing on the relation between impassive matter and the forms (*schêmata*) appearing on it, Plotinus alludes to the passage from the *Timaeus* where Plato holds that bodies acquire sensory qualities in virtue of the geometric shapes of their constituent particles (for example, the heat of fire consists in the experience of sharpness produced by its pyramids in our flesh (*Timaeus*, 61d–62a)[24]: "He [*scil*. Plato] therefore framed a hypothesis that it is by shapes that matter produces affections in ensouled bodies, although matter itself has none of those affections" (3. 6 [26] 12.12–14, transl. Fleet modified).[25] Additionally, some lines below (3. 6 [26] 12.21), Plotinus refers to Democritus' statement "color by convention and other things by convention" (Frr. 9 and 125 D.-K.). One might be tempted to suppose that Plato's *schêmata* are somewhat related to Democritus' atomic shapes and to Plato's elementary figures. Magrin ascribes actually paramount importance to this passage and comments thus:

> It follows that Plotinus reads Democritus' claim that colour, sweet, etc. are "by convention" as meaning

Footnote 21 continued
replace Plato with Aristotle. Significantly, the discussion of perception in 4. 4 [28] 23 opens with a clear echo of *Timaeus* 50 e, since Plotinus describes the soul's reception of the sensible forms with the same verb (*apomattein*/*apomattesthai*) used by Plato when he claims that the receptacle is stamped with the copies of the forms (Magrin 2010, pp. 281–282). Plotinus' account of visual transmission is closely dependent on that given in the *Timaeus* (Emilsson 1988, pp. 57–58) and Plotinus certainly regarded his views as an interpretation of Plato. Here as elsewhere, however, Plotinus uses concepts drawn from Aristotle's theories in order to make sense of Plato's general views: for further discussion on this, see Chiaradonna (2011a).

[22] This might certainly strike us as an odd assumption, but it depends on Plotinus' metaphysical premises. For Plotinus our soul is closely connected to the universal soul, which in turn is the principle that gives form to matter through the *logoi*. For Plotinus holds that in a sense all souls are one (see his treatise 4. 9 [8]). And all forms (both those in us and those in nature) ultimately depend on the Intellect (*Nous*), i.e. the second principle in Plotinus' metaphysical hierarchy (Plotinus' first and absolutely simple metaphysical principle, the One, is famously above thought and essence), which displays both the highest kind of reality and the highest kind of thought. Hence, the cosmological and cognitive function of forms are part of the same account of reality.

[23] Hence I disagree with Emilsson (2007, p. 129), who sees these passages as problematic for his overall view and explains away the reference to sense perception in 1. 7 [53] 7. 9–12 as a generic one, which in fact includes memory and discursive thinking. As I see it, the representationalist account of perception in 5. 5 [32] 1 can easily be explained through the specific context of this passage, where Plotinus outlines the Intellect's non discursive way of thinking by contrasting this kind of thought, whose objects are perfectly internal, to lower forms of cognition whose objects are external. Hence, he remarks that sense perception only grasps an "image" of the thing (1.18). Furthermore, it is at least possible that here "image" should be taken in its technical ontological sense ("reflection", in the sense according to which an ontologically posterior item is said to be a reflection of an ontologically prior one) and not be rendered as "subjective appearance" (see Emilsson 1988, pp. 118–121). In 1. 1 [53] 7.9–12 Plotinus claims that the "soul's power of sense perception need not be a perception of sense-objects, but rather it must be receptive of the impressions produced by sensation on the living being: these are already intelligible entities". As I see it, these lines can well be read in a deflationary way that does not entail any strong representationalist conclusion: Plotinus may simply refer to the incorporeal *mode of existence* of perceptual forms in our soul, and this (despite the difference in emphasis) would be compatible with his account in 4. 4 [28] 23. For further details, see Chiaradonna 2012.

[24] This reference was rightly noted by Kalligas (2004, p. 498). However, Plotinus' most obvious reference in the chapter as a whole is Plato's description of the receptacle in *Tim*. 50c–51b, where there is still no mention of the elementary triangles. See Fleet (1996, pp. 210–211).

[25] At 12.13 I retain *empsuchois* with the MSS. Fleet's emendation *apsuchois* is in my view unconvincing. As the parallel with *Tim*. 61d–62a suggests, here Plotinus focuses on the matter's capacity to produce affections in perceivers. Accordingly, Plotinus argues that sensory qualities depend on the "shapes in matter", which affect the perceiver but do not properly belong to matter in itself. Thus, it is only "by convention" that we ascribe these qualities to matter.

> that we "believe" things to possess these qualities, whereas in fact they have none of them. Hence, for Plotinus, Democritus holds that sensible qualities are merely subjective appearances, in the sense of illusions to which nothing corresponds in the world (Magrin 2010, p. 263).

If I understand her well, Magrin argues that Plotinus shares with Democritus the thesis that sensible qualities are merely subjective representations; they are not "in things" and they have no connection with intelligible principles. However, Magrin also claims that Plotinus is not committed to any form of scepticism since for Plotinus there are essential formal principles (the *logoi*) that are causally responsible for the way in which bodies appear to us.[26] Our soul is perfectly capable of grasping perceptually the real structure of the world; for sense perception activates in us a priori conceptual content that is metaphysically dependent on the intelligible forms in the Intellect. Thus, by reflecting on our sensory representations we are brought closer to the truth and have access to the essence of things (Magrin 2010, pp. 288–292). Accordingly, sensible qualities are indeed merely appearances, but sense perception can yield grasp of how things really are in the world.[27] I agree with Magrin's conclusion that according to Plotinus sense perception entails the activation of an a priori formal content (although I do not agree with the way in which she conceives of the list of our a priori notions: see Part 3). However, I do not share her view that for Plotinus sensible qualities are in themselves merely subjective appearances.

As I see it, Magrin does not read 3. 6 [26] 12 correctly, for a reason she herself points to (but discards)[28]: in this chapter, Plotinus does not focus on the relation between bodies (or "things") and qualities, but rather on the relation between prime matter and qualities. In that context, Plotinus aims to show that Plato regarded matter (i.e. the receptacle in the *Timaeus*) as impassive and unaffected by qualities; Democritus' sentence is quoted in order to make this point clear. According to Plotinus, what we usually claim about matter in general is a mere convention: in reality, matter has no shape, no quality and does not undergo any alteration. The whole argument has simply *nothing* to do with the issue of perceptual realism, since according to Plotinus it is perfectly true that bodies (or things) have colors and shapes; he certainly does not regard their concrete qualitative structure as conventional or subjective. When focusing on the nature of prime matter Plotinus refers indeed to Plato's "hypothetical" account of sensible qualities in *Timaeus* 61 d ff. The account, however, is modified by Plotinus in one crucial respect. According to Plato, perceptual qualities are caused by the agency of the *bodies'* elementary shapes on us (thus e.g. heat results from the agency of the fire's pyramids on our flesh). According to Plotinus' version of Plato's hypothesis, by contrast, *matter*, which in itself is without quality, can produce affections "by means of the shapes" (*schêmata*), i.e. via the images of the forms that appear in matter and are somehow "in it", although matter remains impassive and does not really receive these forms.[29] Plato's hypothesis concerns the relation between the bodies' elementary geometrical shapes and perceptual qualities; Plotinus' use of Plato's hypothesis concerns the relation between prime unqualified matter and the "shapes" that somehow are "in it".

Plotinus does not explain precisely the nature of the *schêmata* in matter. As noted above, his allusion to *Timaeus* 61 d ff. could indeed be taken to suggest that he is building on Plato's theory of elementary geometrical forms and opposing the real rational structure of bodies to their secondary sensible qualities. Magrin writes:

> Even though Plotinus is indeed discussing the nature of the receptacle, he examines the relation between the receptacle and qualities starting from *Tim*. 61 c 3–64 a 1, where what is at stake are the qualities of soulless bodies. Thus, his focus is on matter as the substrate of bodies and, in my view, this is why he points out that we believe sensible things and not merely matter in general to have this or that quality (Magrin 2010, p. 263 n. 42).

But, as I see it, Magrin's conclusion is unwarranted. It is worth emphasizing that Plotinus here is definitely not rejecting the belief that things or bodies have this or that quality. What he is rejecting is the belief that things or bodies have this or that quality *because matter has this or that quality*. Thus, Plotinus is replacing Plato's distinction between the geometrical shapes of bodies and their perceptual qualities with a distinction between unqualified matter and the shapes within it. To the best of my knowledge, Plato's theory of elementary triangles simply

[26] See Magrin (2010, p. 264): "Bracket the *logoi*, he [scil. Plotinus] suggests, and all there is around you is merely a subjective appearence, to which nothing corresponds in the world". I should add that Plotinus' talk of "undecidable representations" in 3. 6 [26] 4. 21 concerns the genesis of "fear" in the soul and has no immediate connection with the issue of the cognitive value of representations (rather, Plotinus takes issues with the Stoic theory of passions). Magrin's parallel with Hellenistic epistemological debates is unpersuasive in my view (see Magrin 2010, p. 270).

[27] "[…] we could not perceive things the way we do, unless we were somehow naturally predisposed towards them in certain ways by latent a priori notions" (Magrin 2010, p. 284).

[28] See Magrin (2010, p. 263 n. 42).

[29] Hence, Plotinus illustrates by his famous use of the mirror analogy in 3. 6 [26] 7 and 13 the way in which forms exist in matter without involving any affection on its part.

plays no role in Plotinus' account of the physical world, which is certainly based on the *Timaeus*, but significantly leaves out the mathematical and geometrical background of this dialogue.[30] This fact is simply overlooked in Magrin's account.

A close reading of Plotinus' text shows that he does not equate the shapes in matter with Democritus' atomic shapes (which, *pace* Magrin, play no role in Plotinus' argument).[31] Rather, the status of shapes in matter is equated with that of *secondary* and perceptual qualities such as colors, since according to Plotinus they are *all* "conventional" (to use Democritus' expression):

> But since matter has no shape, not even size, how could one even homonymously say that the presence of shape in any degree was an alteration? Thus in this instance it would not be perverse to use the term "colour by convention" or to claim that "other things exist by convention", because the underlying nature "has" nothing in the way that it is usually thought to (3. 6 [26] 12. 19–24, transl. Fleet).

It is then only by convention—i.e. according to common linguistic usage with no real ground—that we believe that general matter has *shapes and colors*. Here the words "shape (*schêma*)", "size (*megethos*)" and "color (*chroiê*/*chroa*/*chrôma*)" denote the whole set of a body's *perceptual* qualities, which are in bodies but not in matter. This is all but unusual in Plotinus (on "shapes and colors", see 1. 6 [1] 5. 9; 3. 6 [26] 9. 27; 4. 7 [2] 10. 3; 5. 3 [49] 8. 3; 6. 2 [43] 4. 20–21; 6. 3 [44] 10. 12–13; 6. 3 [44] 15. 33–35; these are obvious echoes of such Platonic passages as *Phaedrus* 247 c; *Phaedo* 100 d; *Sophist* 251 a). Plotinus' sensible qualities are indeed mere images of the real formal principles; but this in no way entails that they have a merely conventional or subjective status.

2 Sense Perception, Reasoning, Recollection

A good starting point for discussing the relation between sense perception and rational, discursive thought is 5. 3 [49] 2:

> [A] We could say at once that its perceptive faculty (*to aisthêtikon*)[32] is perceptive only of what is external; for even if there is a concomitant awareness of what goes inside the body, yet even here the apprehension is of something outside the perceptive faculty; for it perceives the affections in its body by its own agency (*huph'heautou*), but the reasoning faculty (*to logizomenon*) in the soul makes its judgement (*epikrisin*), derived from the representations (*phantasmata*) present to it which come from sense perception, but combining and dividing them; [B] and, as for the things which come to it from Intellect, it observes what one might call their imprints (*hoion tous tupous*), and has the same power also in dealing with these; [C] and it continues to acquire understanding as if by recognising the new and recently arrived impressions and fitting (*epharmozon*) them to those which have been long within it. This process is what we should call the 'recollections' (*anamnêseis*) of the soul (5. 3 [49] 2. 2–14).

In the lines above Plotinus outlines the mode of cognition of an individual embodied soul, whose activity is centred on the rational discursive faculty, i.e. that faculty which is the conscious centre of our ordinary cognitive activity and which "we" identify with.[33] The passage can be divided into three parts. The first part ([A] = 5. 3 [49] 2. 2–9) offers a cursory account of sense perception, and sets out the reasoning faculty (*to logizomenon*)[34] as the capacity of "combining" or "dividing" contents derived from sense perception. The second part ([B] = 2. 9–11) focuses on the formal content of the reasoning faculty and on its relation with the Intellect. Finally, the third part ([C] = 2. 11–14) describes the discursive soul's capacity to recollect.[35]

[30] See Chiaradonna (ForthcomingB).

[31] I should add that by referring to Democritus Plotinus is simply quoting a well known *adagium* and there is simply no indication that he made any use of Democritus' theory of knowledge. Magrin's conclusions on the Democritean background of 3. 6 [26] seem to me exaggerated. For example, at 3. 6 [26] 6 Plotinus claims that being is not "as most people believe", namely sensible, since being is truly intelligible. Magrin (2010, pp. 265–266) notes: "In the light of his use of B 9/125 in 3. 6. 12, it is natural to suggest that his claim too reflects a Democritean influence". This conclusion is unpersuasive, since the distinction between truth and what the *polloi* believe is an obvious Platonic commonplace.

[32] The translation of *to aisthêtikon* and *to logizomenon* raises some slight problems. Unlike Armstrong, I prefer avoiding the word "part", since Plotinus rejects the idea that soul can be divided into separate parts as if it were a body or a quantitative entity: see 4. 2 [4] 2. 4–11; 4. 3 [27] 2. 23–30. On Plotinus' attitude towards Plato's tripartition of the soul see Tieleman (1998).

[33] Plotinus makes extensive use of the pronoun "we" (*hêmeis*) in order to designate a certain state of the soul, i.e. that state which we identify with (see Plato, *Albiciades* 128 e). Ordinarily, it is discursive soul that has this position and acts as the unifying centre of our faculties: see Chiaradonna (2008); Aubry (2008) (with different interpretations). See too Remes (2007). This, however, is not Plotinus' last word on our cognitive identity, since the highest aspect of our soul exerts a non-discursive kind of thought. This thought activity is ordinarily unconscious, but in certain privileged conditions (which define the philosopher's cognitive state) we can become aware of it. See below, the end of this contribution.

[34] On *logismos* and cognate expressions in Plotinus, see Blumenthal (1971, pp. 100–105).

[35] An alternative *divisio textus* is also possible: first Plotinus focuses on perception (5. 3 [49] 2. 2–6), then on the reasoning faculty (2. 7–11) and finally on recollection (2. 11–14). Something of the sort is

Unlike what happens in 3. 6 [26], here Plotinus does not equate sense perceptions with judgements (more on this below). However, his remarks fit well with the account of sense perception given in Part 1 of this essay. In the text presently under consideration Plotinus argues that sense perception is directed at bodies—i.e. entities "external" (*exô*) to the soul—and is a spontaneous activity of the soul. This is suggested by the clause that the soul perceives "by its own agency" (*huph' heautou*) the affections in the bodies.[36] As noted above, the soul does not undergo any affection and only bodies can be passive; whereas the soul's sense perception of the affections in bodies does not involve any passivity on its part. Plotinus' account of the cognitive contents in the soul, as given in 5. 3 [49] 2, also includes *phantasmata*, i.e. images or representations that come from sense perception and are "internal" to the soul.[37] In 5. 3 [49] 2 Plotinus merely qualifies *phantasmata* as derived from sense perception, and does not connect them with any specific faculty of representation (*phantasia*). The role of *phantasia* in knowledge is, however, extensively discussed elsewhere (4. 3 [27] 26–27; 4. 4 [28] 8), and *phantasia* as such is mentioned in the following chapter 5. 3 [49] 3. This omission in 5. 3 [49] 2 is hardly significant: the account of sense perception in this chapter is cursory to say the least, and Plotinus may well be speaking of broadly "sense perception" intending to refer at once to sense perception and to *phantasia*.[38]

The reasoning soul operates on the perceptual contents in a specific way, that is, "by combining and dividing them": this is what Plotinus calls the "judgement" or "evaluation" (*epikrisis*: 5. 3 [49] 2. 8; see 1. 1 [53] 9. 11 and 18) of the representations derived from sense perception. Thus, rational *epikrisis* is posterior to sense perception *stricto sensu*, the latter being apprehension of the extramental reality. Our embodied discursive reason has the capacity of analyzing representations by combining and dividing them[39]; it elucidates the relations between them and shows their mutual connections; and finally, it makes judgements and conscious inferences (see Remes 2007, pp. 135–149).[40] Significantly, this does not involve any kind of RTM, since representations (*phantasmata*) are for Plotinus ultimately internalized sense perceptions, and sense perceptions are conceived of in a direct realist way. Their objects are nothing but the sensible forms "out there", which are taken in by the soul. Accordingly, Plotinus (*pace* Magrin 2010, p. 290) is perfectly happy to claim that reason is directed at "external things" (5. 3 [49] 4. 15–16).

Section [A] stops here: nothing has yet been said about the apprehension of forms or essences, and discursive reasoning is sketchily set out as an operation of the discursive soul based on a priori capacities and directed at a posteriori content derived from sense perception. As noted above, Plotinus appears to suggest elsewhere that sense perception actually entails the "awakening" of inborn forms, but this fact does not emerge in the summary account of 5. 3 [49] 2. Section [B] = 2. 9–11, however, focuses on a further capacity of the soul or, rather, on a further domain where the soul applies its competency of dividing and combining: here Plotinus introduces innate cognitive content, but without reference to his theory of perception. The discursive soul, he writes, can process things that come from the Intellect (*tôn ek tou nou iontôn*). This intellectual (non-perceptual) content is present in the soul in the form of "imprints" (*hoion tous tupous*). As the occurrence of *hoion* shows clearly, the term "imprint"

Footnote 35 continued
found in Morel (2002, pp. 209–210). This division is indeed perfectly legitimate, but fails perhaps to lend adequate emphasis to Plotinus' view that the reasoning faculty is receptive of both perceptual contents and contents that come from Intellect (see also 5. 3 [49] 2. 24–25; 3.26–40). The present division is intended to elucidate this double relation of discursive thought with perception (step [A]) and Intellect (step [B]).

[36] I follow Armstrong's translation. See also Ham (2000, pp. 49 and 106: "c'est par elle-même qu'elle les perçoit"); Morel (2002, p. 210 n. 2) etc. A different (and in my view less convincing) translation is that of Oosthout (1991, p. 82: "underneath itself").

[37] Here I follow the account given by Emilsson (1988, pp. 110–111). Sensory judgements leave a representation of what has been perceived in the soul: representations are the objects of the representative faculty (*phantasia*). Thus, "representation is, so to speak, the perception of things that have been internalized by the soul". Building on 4. 3 [27] 29, Emilsson suggests that the act of sense perception and the original apprehension of the image by the faculty of representation are simultaneous: perception is directed at an external object, but apprehends its object by means of a judgement that is itself simultaneously apprehended by the faculty of representation. On *phantasia* in Plotinus see also Remes (2007, pp. 111–119) and the in-depth discussion in King (2009, pp. 4–13 and *passim*). King argues that *phantasia* should be translated with "representation" (rather than "imagination"). He claims that Aristotle and Plotinus regard *phantasia* as a propositional and, thus, conceptual capacity, which cannot (merely) be equated with the preservation of images or pictures in the soul (on Plotinus, see King 2009, p. 183). As King himself recognizes, however, sometimes Plotinus comes very close to suggesting that representation is a kind of image of the thought: see 4. 3 [30] 30. 3–4.

[38] The sketchy outline in 5. 3 [49] 2 has aptly been characterized as an "economical" version of the theory we find in the following chapter 5. 3 [49] 3 (see Morel 2002, p. 68).

[39] This is a clear allusion to Plato's dialectical methods as outlined in *Phaedrus* 266 b.

[40] As argued by Remes (2007, pp. 145–146), the soul's innate discursive capacity of combining and dividing is probably based on the intelligible notions of sameness and difference, which the soul draws from the Intellect (sameness and difference are actually two of the "supreme genera" that form the basic structure of Plotinus' Intellect according to his exegesis of Plato's *Sophist*: see 6. 2 [43] 8). This is a plausible suggestion, but the supreme genera are not mentioned in 5. 3 [49] 2 and 3.

should not be taken in its literal meaning: obviously, our soul does not receive material imprints that stem from the intelligible forms. Here as elsewhere in Plotinus, *tupos* is used according to a broad, non-physical meaning: the term conveys the idea that the discursive soul receives content within itself that comes from something else.[41] The soul is certainly an incorporeal substance and cannot undergo any physical change or affection; yet, it cannot take its cognitive content from itself. Unlike the non-discursive and self-reflexive Intellect, discursive reason operates with its capacities upon contents received from elsewhere (and this reception does not entail any physical change or passivity in the soul).[42]

Our individual soul, then, is doubly receptive: it receives contents that come both from sense perception and from the Intellect, and it accesses the forms through their imprints.[43] Thus, the discursive soul processes information derived from two different sources (see 5. 3 [49] 2. 25–26). The following chapter (5. 3 [49] 3) develops this account further and includes some famous lines on our discursive self:

> The activities of Intellect are from above in the same way that those of sense perception are from below; we are this, the principal part of the soul, middle between two powers, a worse and a better, the worse that of sense perception, the better that of Intellect (5. 3 [49] 3. 36–40).

These remarks lead to the third Section of the passage quoted above: [C] = 5. 3 [49] 2. 11–14. After focusing on the capacity the discursive soul has to operate, by combining and dividing, on both the representations derived from sense perception and the imprints that stem from Intellect, Plotinus singles out a further capacity, which is the synthesis of those outlined in [A] and [B]. Plotinus draws a contrast between impressions that have long been in the soul (*tois en autôi ek palaiou tupois*) and recent ones (*tous neous kai arti hekontas*). According to his explanation, the discursive soul is able to recognize the new impressions and fits them in with (*epharmozon*) those already present in it. This process is identified with the "recollections" (*anamnêseis*) of the soul. The "old" impressions are most plausibly identical to the inborn imprints that come from the Intellect, whereas the new impressions are clearly the internalized sense perceptions of external sensible objects.[44] Recollection is nothing but the capacity of the soul to fit or connect the representations derived from sense perception with its inborn imprints of forms. In the following chapter (5. 3 [49]. 3) Plotinus claims that predicative judgements such as "Socrates is good" instantiate this capacity of the soul (5. 3 [49] 3. 6–9).

3 Perceptual Judgements and Discursive Judgements: Problems of Demarcation

As noted above, in 5. [49] 2–3 Plotinus does not present sense perception as a kind of judgement; furthermore, he claims that discursive reasoning formulates a judgement (*epikrisis*) on representations derived from sense perception. This account is apparently at odds with that of 3. 6 [26] 1. Two different solutions have been proposed. According to Emilsson, the account of 5. 3 [49] is perfectly compatible with the theory of perceptual judgements set out in 3. 6 [26]. In his view, the *epikrisis* of the discursive soul is a subsequent evaluation of, and should carefully be distinguished from, original sense perception. For example, our discursive soul evaluates by *epikrisis* that *kriseis* such as "the oar is bent (i.e. in water)" are in fact errors, and this entails that judgements such as these can count as sense perceptions (Emilsson 1988, p. 123). Emilsson's interpretation is indeed supported by 1. 1 [53] 9. 11–13, where Plotinus argues that "the perception of the common entity[45] sees falsely before reason passes an evaluation (*epikrinai*)" (transl. Emilsson). However, perceptual errors do not figure in the agenda of 5. 3 [49] 2–3 and Emilsson's solution is somewhat *ad hoc*, since the fact remains that no mention of perceptual judgements is made in 5. 3 [49] 2–3.

Significantly, scholars such as Pauliina Remes and Laurent Lavaud rely on these very chapters in order to reject, or at least qualify, Emilsson's interpretation. Remes prudently remarks that.

> Perhaps perception does have some powers with which to make preliminary judgements, whereas reason is primarily engaged in more complex ones,

[41] On *tupos* in Plotinus see Emilsson (1988, pp. 77–78); Morel (2002, pp. 213–214); King (2009, p. 110).

[42] If we were to use non-Plotinian terminology, we might say that discursive reason is an ectypal kind of intellect, whereas the non-discursive Intellect is archetypal. See on this Emilsson (2007, pp. 177–213, chapt. 4: *Discursive and Non-discursive Thought*).

[43] See Ham (2000, p. 108).

[44] See e.g. Ham (2000, p. 109). Gerson (1994, pp. 177–180) holds a different view: he does not think that discursive soul has access to forms independently of sense perception. In his view, Plotinus develops a quasi- abstractionist Aristotelianising account of the knowledge of essences (something which fits well with Gerson's neo-thomist overall reading of Plotinus). Thus, Gerson claims that "old impressions" are derived from sense perception as well as new ones. This interpretation has repeatedly (and in my view convincingly) been criticized: see Lavaud (2006) and Remes (2007). For further details, see Chiaradonna (2010).

[45] This is Emilsson's rendering of *koinê aisthêsis*: see Emilsson (1988): "*hê koinê aisthêsis* here means 'the perception of the common entity', i.e. of the compound of soul and body'".

> but I doubt whether perception wholly independently of reason would have any power of true judgement (Remes 2007, p. 145 n. 75).

Lavaud goes even further: he regards that of 5. 3 [49] as Plotinus' most reliable account of the powers of sense perception and discursive reasoning. According to Lavaud, when Plotinus calls sense perception a *krisis* in 3. 6 [26], he employs *aisthêsis* in a broad sense that also includes judgements made by discursive reason. As he puts it, judgements are always made by *dianoia* and this is what "accomplishes" the process of sense perception. Thus, the three steps distinguished in 5. 3 [49] 2 (sense perception, discursive judgement and recollection) should in fact be regarded as complementary aspects of the *same* process, i.e. that process through which discursive reason applies its a priori forms to sheer sense data and identifies the perceived qualities (colour, size, density) with a certain structured physical object (Lavaud 2006, pp. 40–43). This interpretation is ingenious, and Lavaud actually provides one of the best available accounts of 5. 3 [49] 2; yet I cannot share his conclusion. First, he accords unqualified privilege to Plotinus' account in 5. 3 [49], whereas his reading of 3. 6 [26] is unpersuasive: in 3. 6 [26] 1 there is simply no hint that Plotinus is taking "sense perception" in a broad sense and that *krisis* is actually made by discursive reason. Furthermore, Lavaud's interpretation starts off from the unwarranted assumption that sense perception as such is unstructured, and limited to what Aristotle called the special sensibles. Plotinus certainly holds that special sensibles are somehow primary sense objects (2. 8 [35] 1. 13), but there is no indication that he understands sense perception so narrowly (see Emilsson 1988, p. 123 and Chiaradonna 2011b). For example, Plotinus plainly regards sense perception as capable of grasping complex objects (e.g. faces) as wholes: "For there is not one perception of the nose and another of the eyes, but one and the same perception of all together" (4. 7 [2] 6.7–8: note that in 6. 6 Plotinus claims that the soul has a single perception of many qualities in one thing: *pollai peri hen poiotêtes*; see also 4. 4 [28] 1. 23–24; 4. 5 [29] 3. 32–36).[46] In what follows I propose a reading that diverges from both that of Emilsson and that of Lavaud.

In 5. 3 [49] 3. 1–2 Plotinus claims that sense perception "sees a human being (*eiden anthrôpon*) and gives its impression to discursive reason".[47] Even though in these lines Plotinus does not describe sense perception as a form of judgement, he clearly assigns sense perception the power of grasping such a complex object as a human being. The power of *dianoia* is subsequent to the first perceptual identification of the object:

> (i) What does reason say? It will not say anything yet, but only knows and stops at that; (ii) unless perhaps it asks itself "Who is this?" if it has met the person before, and says, using memory to help it, that it is Socrates. (iii) And if it makes the details of this form explicit, it is taking to pieces what the power of representation gave it (5. 3 [49] 3. 2–6).

Generally speaking, this passage further specifies the sketchy account of 5. 3 [49] 2. 7–9 regarding the soul's *epikrisis*. It is, however, somewhat difficult to explain in detail the cognitive activities of the soul set out in these lines.[48] Plotinus argues that the discursive soul first recognizes what has been perceived ([i] = 3. 2–3): for instance, it will recognize a given human being, but not say anything and "stop at that". This obscure remark may be taken to suggest that the discursive soul initially merely *receives* contents provided by sense perception (see Ham 2000, p. 112: "La raison discursive n'est pas encore en action"). I would submit, however, a different interpretation: in addition to receiving some perceptual content, the discursive soul unfolds its peculiar power and recognizes the perceived content as (e.g.) an instance of the form "human being" (see Remes 2007, p. 144). While Plotinus says that sense perception "gives" its imprints to discursive reason, he does not simply claim that the latter receives the perceptual content: rather, he argues that *dianoia* "only knows" (*egnô*) the information provided by sense perception: this verb suggests that our discursive reason immediately processes the information received. In 5. 3 [49] 2. 7–8 Plotinus mentions the representations present in the soul and derived from sense perception; in 5. 3 [49] 3. 3 he refers to the mere "knowledge" of the imprints delivered from sense perception. The situation described in the two passages is basically the same and corresponds to the first activation of the discursive soul in relation to some perceptual content.

In this first step, the discursive soul has not yet been activated completely: the soul is directed at an intentional

[46] Lavaud's view corresponds not so much to that of Plotinus, as to that of the 2nd century AD Platonist philosopher Alcinous (*Handbook of Platonism* [*Didaskalikos*], 4. 155. 42–156. 5; 156. 8–10). The latter claimed that sense perception is only capable of discriminating single qualities (e.g. white), while their aggregate (*athroisma*—e.g. fire or honey) can only be judged by what Alcinous dubs *doxastikos logos*. Still, Plotinus' view differs considerably from that of Alcinous.

[47] *Phantasia* arguably plays a role in transmitting perceptual content from perception to discursive reason: see above n. 37. Significantly, Remes (2007, p. 144) paraphrases these lines as follows: "In perception, the perceptive faculty (together with *phantasia*) gives reason an image of a human being".

[48] I rely on the excellent discussion in Remes (2007, pp. 144–147).

content,[49] but does not yet formulate any judgement regarding it (it remains "silent", as Plotinus remarks). I suggest that in this step the discursive soul merely *realizes* that (e.g.) a human being has been perceived. Significantly, according to Plotinus there are sense perceptions that do not reach this threshold, and thus remain *unconscious* (see 4. 4 [28] 8. 9–34; 4. 9 [9] 2. 13–24). In my view, there is no need to regard unconscious sense perceptions as spurious sense perceptions that do not involve any activity on the soul's part and are limited to the sensory affections (*contra* Emilsson 1988, p. 87). Plotinus does not say that unconscious perceptions are perceptions only homonymously. Indeed, in 4. 4 [28] 8. 11–12 he opposes unconscious sense perceptions to what the soul receives "into itself" (*eis to eisô*), but here "soul" stands for "discursive soul" (*dianoia*: see 4. 4 [28] 8. 31). Nothing suggests that the unconscious, subliminal perception of an object is simply an aggregate of sensory qualities: rather, Plotinus assumes that the structured object is perceived as such (e.g. as a book, or as a human being), although "we" (i.e. our conscious discursive soul) do not realize that this unconscious perception is taking place. I submit, then, that consciousness coincides with a certain threshold of activity of our soul, which in 5. 3 [49] 3 Plotinus identifies with the first operation accomplished by *dianoia* on a sensory input. Through perception we grasp structured objects; but only some of these perceptions are consciously processed by the discursive soul. According to Plotinus some activities of our soul lie outside the domain of consciousness, since they may be situated either below consciousness (as in the case of unconscious sense perceptions) or above it (as in the case of the ordinarily unconscious intellectual and non-discursive knowledge of forms: see below Part 4). It is indeed of crucial importance that Plotinus does not regard our "mental" operations as immediately transparent to consciousness: consciousness only demarcates the boundaries of our *ordinary* cognitive activity, but in no way exhausts the cognitive powers of the soul. Consciousness and cognition are by no means equated and this is the main reason why, in my view, all parallels between Plotinus' and Descartes' epistemology (O'Meara 2000; Magrin 2010) should be taken with prudence.

As I see it, the difference between 3. 6 [26] and 5. 3 [49] should not be explained away: while the theory of perceptual judgements suggests that the perceptual act through which we see a human being is identical to the act through which we *realize* that we are seeing a human being (something which corresponds to the judgement "I see a human being"), the account in 5. 3 [49] distinguishes between the two operations: perception only "sees a human being", whereas *dianoia* realizes that a human being is being seen. Presumably, only a limited set of sense perceptions attain this degree of consciousness. The difference between the two accounts cannot be levelled: we should neither accord a privileged position to 3. 6 [26] against 5. 3 [49] (as Emilsson does) nor privilege 5. 3 [49] over 3. 6 [26] (as Lavaud does). This difference, however, does not entail any real contradiction between the two passages, once we understand that the boundaries between sense perception and discursive reasoning can indeed be fluid according to Plotinus. Rather than separate faculties of the soul, sense perception and discursive reason designate different levels of activity of the soul's cognitive powers according to a progressive scale. This continuous gradation of the soul's cognitive powers is what lies behind Plotinus' famous statement that "these sense perceptions here are dim intellections, but the intellections there are clear sense perceptions" (6. 7 [38] 7. 30–31). Additionally this helps explain why, in different contexts, the same operation (i.e. the immediate passing of judgement through which we consciously realize that an object has been perceived) can be ascribed to either perception as such or to discursive reasoning. As we shall see below, a similar problem of demarcation is raised by Plotinus' reference to the "pure part of the soul" in 5. 3 [49] 3. 11–12.

In 5. 3 [49] 3. 3–4 (step [ii] in the passage quoted above) the second operation of discursive reason is set out as a sort of conversation of the soul with itself, something which is an obvious reference to Plato's *Sophist* 263 e.[50] According to Plotinus, this internal conversation is subsequent to the first conscious activation of the discursive soul: in relation to the conscious sense perception of an individual human being, reason asks itself "Who is this?", and uses the memory of previous sense perceptions in order to identify the perceived human being as, e.g., Socrates. What distinguishes the first operation of discursive soul (step [i]) from the second one (step [ii]: the conversation of the soul with itself) is not the fact that one is a silent activity and the

[49] One might want to characterize this intentional content as *propositional*. This is certainly a plausible suggestion, but I would recommend some prudence. The discursive soul through perception is actually directly acquainted with *objects*, i.e. forms and qualities instantiated in sensible things. Discursive soul unfolds the structure of these objects by making *statements* about them. Here a clear-cut distinction between objects and propositions may be somewhat misleading. It is worth quoting some very interesting remarks by David Sedley: "because Greek standardly uses the formulation 'I know X, what it is', the bare choice between acquaintance knowledge and propositional knowledge can easily mislead. For this typical case of Greek 'knowing' involves acquaintance ('I know X') but has an implicitly propositional content ('what it is') as well" (Sedley 2004, p. 121).

[50] In addition to this passage, the parallel with *Theaetetus,* 189 e is also noteworthy. As we shall see below, the *Theaetetus* (and in particular its section with the wax block analogy) lies behind the whole outline of discursive soul in 5. 3 [49] 2–3.

other expressed through speech. Significantly, when Plato presents thought as a conversation of the soul with itself, he makes it clear that this conversation happens "without voice". It is more than likely that the soul's activity described by Plotinus in step [ii] does not involve to any vocal speech either. What distinguishes the silent activity in step [i] from the conversation of the soul with itself in step [ii] is rather the fact that they are structured differently. Unlike step [i], step [ii] is based on a set of operations performed by the discursive soul on the sensory content. These operations obviously involve the capacities of combining and dividing outlined in 5. 3 [49] 2. 9 and are not limited to the immediate awareness that something has been perceived. Accordingly, in step [ii] the discursive soul establishes relations between the perceived content and other sense perceptions internalized in memory: thus discursive reason is not merely activated, but also performs its distinctive operations in relation to empirical contents. Accordingly, we do not merely realize that a human being has been perceived, but ask ourselves whom this human being may be. If we have already met him/her, we can make use of our empirical memory and reach the conclusion that this human being is Socrates.

The third step ([iii] = 5. 3 [49] 3. 5–6) entails that discursive soul makes the perceived "form" (*morphê*) explicit (*exelittoi*), and somehow analyzes the internalized sense perceptions. For a detailed commentary of these lines, I refer to Remes' account (Remes 2007, p. 145), which I follow closely. As noted above, the object of any individual act of sense perception is a complex whole. When e.g. we perceive a face, this is not through individually perceiving the nose, the eyes, etc.; rather, we see the face as a whole (see 4. 7 [2] 6. 1–10). Discursive reason is able to break down the content, derived from perception and internalized in *phantasia*, into its constituent parts. Thus, the constituent elements of the perceived wholes are distinguished and classified. For example, discursive reason can break down the single sense perception of a human being into its various parts (eyes, nose, mouth, legs, etc.) and compare them to those of other representations, in such a way as to attain a complex organized classification of the empirical cognitive content. Again, this clearly involves the capacities of combining and dividing set out in 5. 3 [49] 2. To sum up: discursive reason proceeds from the mere conscious awareness that a human being has been perceived (step [i]) to the identification of this human being as a certain individual that has previously been perceived (step [ii]); eventually, reason performs a full-fledged conceptual breakdown of the empirical content into its constituent parts (step [iii]). This increasing elaboration of sensory contents entails an increasing unfolding of the discursive soul's cognitive capacities.

Steps [i]–[iii] set out in 5. 3 [49] 3. 2–6 apparently only entail that discursive reason operates on a posteriori contents derived from sense perception. Indeed, Plotinus' claim that "sense perception sees a human being" is compatible with the hypothesis that sense perception makes use of the inborn form of a human being in order to grasp this structured object. However, alternative explanations which do not refer to any a priori formal content might be possible. For example, we might well grasp an aggregate of sensory qualities as a structured object only because it is similar to other objects we have previously perceived. Plotinus is initially silent on this issue (a slightly different account is provided in 1. 1 [53] 7. 15–17; see Aubry 2004, pp. 217–218). As we saw above, however, the existence of inborn imprints derived from the Intellect was explicitly mentioned in 5. 3 [49] 2. 9–19 and this issue is further developed in 5. 3 [49] 3 and in 5. 3 [49] 4, where Plotinus argues that the formal, conceptual content of discursive judgements is independent of perception. Immediately after describing the operations performed by the discursive soul on sensory contents, Plotinus claims that the discursive soul has a "norm of the good" in itself derived from the Intellect:

> … and if it (i.e. the discursive soul) says whether he (i.e. Socrates) is good, its remark originates in what it knows through sense perception, but what it says about this it has already from itself, since it has a norm of the good (*kanona agathou*) in itself (5. 3 [49] 3. 6–9).

Let us consider a judgement such as "Socrates is good". According to Plotinus, this judgement originates from what the discursive soul has learnt through perception (*ex hôn* […] *egnô dia tês aisthêseôs*). Probably this means that in judging whether Socrates is good we must rely on empirical knowledge regarding his moral character, his life, etc. We cannot have a priori knowledge of these facts. However, such empirical knowledge in no way suffices to explain our judgement, since the concept "good" does not originate from our a posteriori experience and cannot be based on the operations accomplished on perceived contents by the discursive reason. Instead, the notion of "good" should be conceived as a norm whose presence in us is independent of perception; this fact confirms that the discursive soul has an a priori access to forms (i.e. the imprints that come from Intellect set out in 5. 3 [49] 2. 9–10).

In mentioning the "norm of the good" Plotinus might well be suggesting that only a very limited set of privileged concepts have the status of a priori standards in us (see e.g. the remarks in Magrin 2010, pp. 285–286). I am however inclined to reject this reading: again, Plotinus is not as clear as we would like him to be on this issue, but in my view

there is no reason to confine the a priori forms in us to a limited set of concepts. As I see it, Plotinus singles out the concept "good" only in order to clearly explain the status of all the concepts used by discursive reason. Indeed, that of the good is an obvious example for a Platonist: significantly, Plato includes the good in the list of those concepts that cannot originate from sense perception and are grasped by the soul "alone and through itself" (*Theaetetus* 186 a). While it would be very difficult to draw up a list of Plotinus' a priori concepts in us (a list similar e.g. to that of the *koina* in Plato's *Theaetetus*), what he remarks about the good arguably holds true for all concepts used by discursive reason. This is suggested by 5. 3 [49] 4. 15–17, where Plotinus claims that reason judges what it judges "by the rules in itself which it has from Intellect"; furthermore, he argues that reason possesses everything as if written within it (see 5. 3 [49] 4. 15–17 e 21–22: *echon en heautôi* ta panta *hoion gegrammena*).[51] If this is the case, the whole theory of knowledge set out in 5. 3 [49] 2–3 allows for an anti-empiricist reading, according to which the activities of the discursive soul are ultimately nothing but the increasing activation of the a priori forms in us that come from the Intellect. While this activation takes place in relation to perceptual content, a posteriori input should be seen as a trigger for the cognitive process, rather than as its cause.

As a matter of fact, a priori forms are probably at work from the very beginning of the process; the more we progress in knowledge, the more we clearly grasp what was at work right from the start. For example, we start from the perception of a given human being and then analyze this perception; eventually we connect the empirical content with the a priori form in us and recognize that (e.g.) Socrates is an individual instance of the form *human being* with its defining properties. This is the kind of knowledge we can attain through a fully developed use of discursive reason. However, the form was already at work from the very start (most probably, we were only able to "see a human being" because the form of a human being was active in us), even though we only fully grasp it at the end of the progress. I am aware that this account is somewhat speculative and open to criticism; but it remains, in my view, the most plausible way to make sense of what Plotinus says in these chapters of the *Enneads*.

[51] As noted above, n. 13 this raises significant problems when we come to assess e.g. the status of concepts of artifacts, but Plotinus does not seem interested in tackling these questions. Building on 3. 7 [45] 1. 4 Van den Berg (2009) ingeniously argues that Plotinus accepts the existence of purely empirical concepts (e.g. the common notion of time used in everyday discourse). This suggestion is intriguing, but remains somewhat speculative. It is not clear to me that Plotinus' passage lends itself to this reading. My interpretation is rather closer to the one offered by Phillips (1987). I hope to come back to this issue in future publications.

4 Dematerializing the Wax Block

When discussing 5. 3 [49] 2, scholars have focused on Plotinus' vocabulary, which is certainly reminiscent of the earlier philosophical tradition. Plotinus' mention of "imprints" may indeed be seen to recall the Stoic theory of perception (see Morel 2002, pp. 213–214). It seems to me, however, that the most significant parallel is with Plato's *Theaetetus*: in particular, the section of the dialogue containing the wax block analogy (*Theaetetus* 191 c ff.).[52] As noted in Part 2 above, Plotinus' account of discursive knowledge in 5. 3 [49] 2 is based on two notions: that of "imprint" (*tupos*) and that of "fitting in with" (*epharmozô*). In 5. 3 [49] 2. 11–14 [C] Plotinus characterizes the understanding acquired by the discursive soul as kind of recollection, which takes place when the soul fits the new imprints with those already within it. All these notions are set out in the wax block section of the *Theaetetus*. Here Plato famously expounds (and eventually rejects) an account of knowledge and of judgement grounded in two operations. The first operation is the imprinting (*apotupousthai*, *Theaetetus* 191 d) of a signet ring in the soul, which is compared to a wax tablet: this occurs when we learn and memorize perceptions and thoughts. The second operation takes place when we attempt to "fit" (*prosharmosai*: 193 c) a new perception with the corresponding imprint in us, in order to identify the perceived object.[53] This analogy is eventually rejected (195 c ff.), since it can explain the falsity of judgements which connect perceptions with thoughts, but cannot explain those which involve connections among thoughts only (e.g. wrong calculations such as "seven and five is eleven").

Plotinus borrows the vocabulary used by Plato in the wax block analogy, with some crucial adaptations: he leaves out all its materialist connotations; he mentions the imprints and their mutual connection, but makes no mention of the wax tablet. As noted above, with the term *tupos* Plotinus designates the reception of cognitive contents; however, all material implications are carefully avoided since they would suggest that the soul by receiving these imprints undergoes a physical affection. Another important

[52] Significantly, it has been argued that Plato's *Theaetetus* also lies behind the Stoic theory: see Ioppolo (1990) and Long (2006, pp. 223–235). This may well explain the Stoic echoes in these lines from Plotinus. A parallel has occasionally been drawn between 5. 3 [49] 2 and Plato's *Theaetetus*: see Emilsson (1988); Aubry (2004, p. 217). For further discussion see now Van den Berg (2010). On Plotinus and the *Theaetetus*, see Bonazzi (2005).

[53] This is indeed a very sketchy account. For further details I will only refer to two very influential accounts: Burnyeat (1990, pp. 90–105) and Sedley (2004, pp. 134–140). It is disputed whether according to the wax tablet analogy errors only include misidentifications or also false predicative judgements: see Sedley (2004, p. 136).

feature of Plotinus' thought emerges through a comparison of these lines from Plotinus with *Theaetetus* 191 d, where Socrates offers a classification of the imprints that can be stored in the soul. These include "everything we wish to remember among the things we have seen or heard or *thought* of ourselves". Plotinus turns Socrates' claim that some imprints stem from thought into a key aspect of his account. Accordingly, he presents the discursive soul as receiving imprints from two different sources: on the one hand perception (5. 3 [49] 3. 2), and on the other the Intellect (2. 10). As explained in Part 2 above, soul operates on both kinds of impressions by combining and dividing them.

The status of the imprints derived from Intellect is further explained in 5. 3 [49] 3, where Plotinus focuses on the a priori norm of the good in the reasoning soul:

> How does it [i.e. the *dianoia*] have the good in itself? Because it is like the good [*agathoeides*, see Plato, *Republic* 6. 509 a] and is strengthened for the perception of this kind of thing by Intellect illuminating it: for this is the pure part of the soul (*to katharon tês psuchês touto*) and receives the traces (*ichnê*) of Intellect coming down upon it (5. 3 [49] 3. 9–12).

Reason is therefore illuminated by Intellect and in virtue of this fact receives the traces (*ichnê*) or imprints (*tupoi*) deriving from forms. Plotinus here somewhat obscurely refers to "what is pure in the soul (*to katharon tês psuchês*)". Plotinus famously claims that the highest part of each individual soul does not descend into the body: that it resides in the Intellect and shares its non-discursive way of thinking (something we are ordinarily unaware of). This is what Plotinus dubs "the Intellect in us" (5. 1 [10] 11. 6 and 5. 8 [31] 3. 17: *nous en hêmin*), which is certainly the most distinctive aspect of his theory of the self (see 4. 8 [6] 8. 1–3).[54] At first sight, the pure part of the soul might appear to coincide with the intellect within us: if this were the case, Plotinus would be arguing that the highest undescended part of the soul receives traces of the forms and that these act as norms in discursive judgements. This reading is however unconvincing. According to Plotinus the undescended soul does not simply receive traces deriving from the Intellect, but shares the latter's non-discursive thought activity (see 4. 8 [6] 1. 1–4; 6. 5 [23] 7. 1–8). There is, however, nothing to suggest that "what is pure in the soul" also participates in this distinctive activity of the Intellect.

In 5. 3 [49] 4. 13 Plotinus talks about the "better part of the soul" (*to tês psuchês ameinon*), which (as he argues by paraphrasing *Phaedrus* 246 e) is capable to be "winged for intellection". It seems to me that the "pure part of the soul" which receives traces of the forms and the "better part of the soul" which is winged for intellection can reasonably be taken to be the same thing.[55] In both cases, any straightforward identification with the "Intellect in us" is unlikely. However, it would also be implausible (and not in accord with Plotinus' general way of thinking: see 5. 1 [10] 3. 3–4) to introduce an intermediate aspect or part of our individual soul between the discursive soul and the intellect within us. The "pure" and "better" part of the soul should rather be seen as a certain state of our discursive soul, i.e. the highest state the discursive soul can attain. I suggest that this is not the Intellect within us (for if this were the case, the pure soul would share the Intellect's non-discursive knowledge rather than merely receive traces from it), but the state the discursive soul attains when its activity is directed upwards, i.e. towards the intelligible forms. This state is a sort of preliminary step towards the complete unification of our soul with the Intellect: once we reach this stage, we become "altogether other" (5. 3 [49] 4. 11–12) than what we are in our ordinary and discursive cognitive condition.[56]

If the present reading is correct, in 5. 3 [49] 2. 7–11 Plotinus is distinguishing three kinds of judgements made by the discursive soul. The first combines or divides empirical concepts taken from perception (for example: "this is Socrates": see 5. 3 [49] 3. 4–5, where there is a further parallel with *Theaetetus* 193 b–e). The second kind of judgement combines or divides thoughts derived from Intellect (suitable examples here would be calculations or discursive definitions of abstract concepts). The third kind of judgement is identified with the "recollections" of the discursive soul (5. 3 [49] 2. 11–14) and combines the two types of imprints: the example furnished by Plotinus in 5. 3 [49] 3. 6 ff. is "Socrates is good". Significantly, Plotinus presents recollection as the final result of the increasing understanding gained by the discursive soul (5. 3 [49] 2. 11), which is most likely based on its dialectical capacities. At the end of this process, the soul comes to connect the imprints derived from perception with those derived from Intellect (see Remes 2007, pp. 147–148) i.e. the inborn traces of the forms within us. As one might expect from a Platonist, Plotinus describes this as an act of "recollection". Our "memory" of the forms within us (in Plotinus' words, the imprints which have long been in our soul) are therefore connected to empirical content (see *Phaedo*

[54] There is a vast debate on Plotinus' theory of the undescended soul. I would only refer to Tornau Ch (2009), which includes an extensive discussion of previous scholarship.

[55] As I see it, the same holds for what Plotinus dubs *to psuchês theiotaton* in 5. 3 [49] 9. 1.

[56] In 5. 3 [49] 8. 37–57 Plotinus focuses on the transition between the mode of thought of the discursive soul directed towards Intellect and that of the soul which "becomes" Intellect: see Chiaradonna (2008).

75 a–b; *Phaedrus* 249 b). To sum up: by adopting the philosophical framework of the wax tablet analogy while stripping it of all material connotations, Plotinus assumes that there are inborn imprints in our soul that come from Intellect and are independent of perception; in consequence of this, he conceives of recollection as the operation through which empirical contents are linked to inborn traces of the forms within us.

This is Plotinus' last word on discursive knowledge, but not on knowledge *tout court*. In addition to the discursive recollection discussed in 5. 3 [49] 2. 11–14, Plotinus also examines a superior kind of recollection which involves not discursive traces of the forms, but the non-discursive knowledge of the Intellect "in us", i.e. our undescended soul (see 1. 2 [19] 4. 18–25; 4. 3 [27] 29. 7–16; 4. 3 [27] 30).[57] While discursive recollection is the highest kind of knowledge that can be attained by our ordinarily conscious self, non-discursive recollection involves the conscious activation of our highest, ordinarily unconscious, undescended self, which becomes the unifying centre of our soul's activities. This occurs at the end of the process of intellectual purification that defines the practice of philosophy. In virtue of the highest recollection, we come to know the forms adequately and not just through their traces in us.[58]

5 Conclusion

Plotinus' theories of perception and knowledge are closely connected to his metaphysics. It would be misleading, therefore, to focus exclusively on those features of Plotinus' views that are most attractive in the eyes of the contemporary reader: for they can be properly understood only within a wider context which is as remote from contemporary philosophy as can be. Plotinus' anti-corporealism; his view that true causes are incorporeal beings and bodies are images of their metaphysical principles; his intellectual mysticism, according to which non-discursive thought is the highest possible form of knowledge; and his hierarchy of metaphysical being are all aspects that are difficult (if not impossible) to incorporate within any contemporary philosophical account.

Interestingly, recent studies on Plotinus make use of contemporary philosophical notions, such as that of "emergent properties" (see Emilsson 2010, pp. 74–75). Even if we accept this approach—despite the problems it raises (see Chiaradonna 2012)—the overall meaning of Plotinus' "emergent properties" will be found to differ radically from that of contemporary accounts: according to Plotinus, *physical* properties should be seen as emergent, whereas basic properties are those that define mental and "spiritual" beings. Plotinus' dualism of properties and that of contemporary philosophers run in opposite directions.

Still, within his distinctive conceptual framework Plotinus develops a number of views that certainly recall some recent philosophical debates and are extremely interesting if viewed from a contemporary perspective. In this paper I singled out three main aspects of Plotinus' theory: (1) his direct realism regarding perception; (2) his view that sense perception is conceptually structured, and that there is no rigid boundary between sense perception (especially vision) and conceptual knowledge; (3) his view that some mental activities are unconscious, and that thought and consciousness are by no means identical. Despite some (rather superficial) similarities, Plotinus' approach to knowledge differs *toto caelo* from that of the Cartesian tradition.[59] Yet, Plotinus' pre-Cartesian approach to knowledge may prove extremely attractive in the present post-Cartesian philosophical climate.

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[57] On the two kinds of recollection, see Phillips (1987).

[58] On this mode of knowledge, see Chiaradonna (2012 and ForthcomingC).

[59] I develop this point in Chiaradonna (2012).

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