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ARTICLE

ΝΟΥΣ, ΝΟΗΣΙΣ, ΝΟΕΙΝ and derivatives, in Plato's Philosophy

Irley Fernandes Franco ⁱ

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1427-7970>

irley.franco@gmail.com.br

ⁱ Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro-RJ, Brasil

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Abstract: The article shows that several studies on the meaning of νοῦς, νόησις, νοεῖν, and derivatives in pre-Platonic literature, especially in Homer, but also in some pre-Socratic thinkers, have concluded that these terms are never used in strictly abstract situations, but, on the contrary, always appear linked to emotions connected to concrete events. Plato is certainly the main “author” to be studied when it comes to the use of this terminology in cognitive functions. Indeed, he was the first to systematize a specialized

vocabulary for these functions, and emphatically use these terms in passages of the Middle dialogues, when, according to Aristotle's account of his Philosophy, in *Metaphysics* A 6, unlike Socrates, he began to suppose that the essence (οὐσία) of things is not in the things themselves, but lies beyond them, thus creating a separation (χωρισμός) which will be the fundamental source of all the difficulties concerning the "Theory of Ideas". After hypothesizing the existence of the Ideas, abstract entities he considered more real than material ones, he created a special type of apprehension capable of capturing invisible, intelligible entities, νόησις, thus introducing a new dimension of reality: a previously non-existent, invisible, and radically abstract one. Based on these assumptions, the article ends by raising a series of questions to be addressed in a future approach to the same subject.

Keywords: ΝΟΥΣ, ΝΟΗΣΙΣ, ΝΟΕΙΝ, Plato, Χωρισμός

Non pas que la parole soit imparfaite, et en face du visible dans un déficit qu'elle s'efforcerait en vain de rattraper. Ils sont irréductibles l'un à l'autre : on a beau dire ce qu'on voit, ce qu'on voit ne loge jamais dans ce qu'on dit, et on a beau faire voir, par des images, des métaphores, des comparaisons, ce qu'on est en train de dire, le lieu où elles resplendissent n'est pas celui que déploient les yeux, mais celui que définissent les successions de la syntaxe.

(Foucault, 1966, p. 25)¹

¹*"It is not that words are imperfect, or that, when confronted by the visible, they prove insuperably inadequate. Neither can be reduced to the other's terms: it is in vain that we say what we see; what we see never resides in what we say. And it is in vain that we attempt to show, by the use of images, metaphors, or similes, what we are saying; the space where they achieve their splendour is not that deployed by our eyes but that defined by the sequential elements of syntax."* (Foucault, 2005, p. 10)

On the meaning of νοῦς, νόησις, νοεῖν, and derivatives, very little has been published in the specialized literature. In a draft text entitled “*Some Aspects of Nous and Noesis in Plato*”, Lloyd P. Gerson also complains about the fact that *scholars* generally replace “translation” with “explanation” when it comes to language that concerns cognitive functions, as is the case.² Plato is certainly the main “author” to be studied when it comes to this terminology, since he is the first to systematize a specialized vocabulary for cognitive functions with an emphasis on these terms, which are precisely the ones we are interested in. What exactly each of these terms means in Plato's philosophy, however, is what we need to ask ourselves right from the start, since — as Gerson also says in the article quoted above — the translations into current languages don't seem to clarify anything. On the contrary, when they are translated, their translations only serve as *placeholders*, *i.e.*, spaces reserved for an account of their real meanings, which is never realized.³

A second problem adds to the difficulty of this variety of translations, whose meanings are not explained in the *Dialogues*: the fact that the words in this group have been used in pre-Platonic texts, since at least Homer, in meanings that are often antagonistic to those that many interpreters suggest are similar to the meanings found in Plato. However, our central thesis is opposed to that of these interpreters: we believe that Plato introduced, through this terminology, a previously non-existent dimension of the invisible, a dimension of the purely abstract, a dimension that we boldly assume to be at the origin of what we understand today as “*thought*”.

To overcome this second difficulty and show that before Plato there was no notion of the radical abstract meaning, inaugurated by

² In his “draft” published on the Internet, Lloyd does not clarify, but I believe that this draft is a preparation for the article (Gerson, 2023).

³ For example, νοῦς, in Plato, can be translated as “mind”, “reason”, “intellect”, etc., and the activity that corresponds to it, νόησις, as “intellection”, “intellective intuition”, “comprehension”, “understanding”, “thought”, etc., all these terms being within the same semantic field, that of cognition, even though the meaning and value of each of them is not completely clarified in the *Dialogues*.

the Platonic notion of Idea and by a type of affection capable of grasping it, we will first use the rigorous analysis of Kurt von Fritz (1945), who dedicated three rare and exquisite articles to the study of the meanings contained in this terminology.⁴ Needless to say, von Fritz provoked a lot of controversy among interpreters by developing the opposite hypothesis to theirs, that the dimension of a completely abstract reality did not exist before Plato.⁵ Νοῦς, νόησις, νοεῖν, especially in Homer, are not used in strictly abstract situations, but, on the contrary, always appear linked to emotions connected to concrete events.

The fundamental meaning of the word νοεῖν in Homer is 'to realize' or 'to understand a situation' — says Fritz — [...] especially “when the recognition of an object leads to the understanding of a situation, especially a situation of a great emotional impact and importance. [...] From this fundamental meaning of νόος and νοεῖν that various derivative connotations developed, which can already be observed in Homer. (1945, p. 223.)

I summarize below Fritz's examples of these extensions of the meaning of νόος in Homer. It is interesting to note how much they already distance themselves from and at the same time, commend themselves to the later meanings that they will acquire first among the pre-Socratics and then, in the most radically abstract form, in Plato:

⁴ Kurt von Fritz. "ΝΟΥΣ and ΝΟΕΙΝ in the Homeric Poems", 1943; "ΝΟΥΣ, ΝΟΕΙΝ and their Derivatives in Pre-Socratic Philosophy (Excluding Anaxagoras), Part I: From the Beginnings to Parmenides", 1945; "ΝΟΥΣ, ΝΟΕΙΝ and their Derivatives in Pre-Socratic Philosophy (Excluding Anaxagoras), Part II: The Post-Parmenidean Period", 1946.

⁵ Contrary to what Joachim Boehme said in *Die Seele und das Ich im Homerischen Epos*, namely that νοῦς in Homer always means something purely intellectual (*rein intellektuell*), or, purely spiritual (*rein geistige*), that νοεῖν, moreover, can under no circumstances be identified with any kind of sensory perception and that νοῦς is always used in contrast to emotion, Fritz presents numerous examples in which both νοῦς and νοεῖν only appear in connection with strong emotions. Boehme is Fritz's main opponent in the articles mentioned.

1. The same situation can have different “meanings” for people of different characters and life circumstances. Hence, the notion that different people or nations have different νόοι. And because these different meanings evoke different reactions and typical reactions in certain people, νόος sometimes refers to a specific “attitude”;
2. A dangerous situation, or a situation that in some way deeply affects the individual who perceives it, often immediately evokes or suggests a “plan” for escaping or dealing with it. The vision of this *plan*, which projects the situation into the future, is then also considered a function of the νόος, so that the terms νόος and νοεῖν can acquire the meaning of “plan” or “planning”, giving us the impression that they have a more intellectual meaning. But when this happens, a volitional element enters into the concepts of νόος and νοεῖν, thus undoing what seemed to be a purely intellectual function. It should also be noted that, in Homer, the original intellectual function is not, as in Plato, opposed and restrictive, but is often the immediate cause of the violent emotion aroused⁶;
3. When the subject realizes the imminence of danger by correcting a previous inaccurate recognition, for example, the understanding that a person who appears in the form of an old woman is the goddess Aphrodite. In this case, the second

⁶ If we randomly take three passages from Canto III of the *Iliad* in which the verb νοεῖν occurs, we will find the following evidence: (1) Τὸν δ' ὡς οὖν ἐνόησεν (realized "mentally", became aware of) ἀρηΐφιλος Μενέλαος ἐρχόμενον προπάροιθεν ὀμίλου μακρὰ βιβάντα, ὥς τε λέων ἐχάρη (rejoiced, glad, verse 21 ff); (2) Τὸν δ' ὡς οὖν ἐνόησεν (as soon as he realized, realized) Ἀλέξανδρος θεοειδῆς ἐν προμάχοισι φανέντα, κατηπλήγη (panicked, disturbed) φίλον ἦτορ, verse 30 ff); (3) καὶ ῥ' ὡς οὖν ἐνόησε (mentally realizing) θεᾶς περικαλλέα δειρὴν στήθεά θ' ἰμερόντα καὶ ὄμματα μαρμαίροντα, θάμβησέν (astonished, alarmed, verse 396 ff). In all three cases, the verb is followed by a verb that expresses a violent emotion. This is the case in about ¼ of all the passages in which the verb νοεῖν occurs in Homer. If we add to these those cases in which it is not necessary to express the violent emotion caused, because it follows immediately from the situation, we find that not only ¼, but more than half of all passages with νοεῖν imply a violent emotion. (Fritz, 1943, p. 84).

and more correct identification of the object is not the result of a clearer vision of its physical form—which may remain that of an old woman—but rather of a deeper understanding of its real nature. This deeper *insight* is also considered a function of *vóoc*. Another example is the case where a person suddenly realizes that bad intentions are hidden behind an apparently friendly attitude, and so on;

4. In the cases described in 3, the implication is generally that the *vóoc*, which penetrates beyond the superficial appearance of things, discovers the real truth of those things. In situations like these, there cannot be different *vóoi*, but only one. And what is even more important is that from this sense of the term *vóoc* it seems to anticipate (albeit naively) the distinction that is supposed to be made later, in pre-Socratic philosophy, between a phenomenal world that we perceive through our senses, but which can be misleading, and a real world, which can be discovered behind the apparent phenomena⁷;
5. Another extension of the meaning of *vóoc*, closely linked to the cases described in both 2 and 3, is the *vóoc* that “makes distant things present”. In this context, *vóoc* seems to

⁷ We don't think, as Fritz seems to, that the pre-Socratic thinkers already divided the world into the apparent and the real. For the pre-Socratics, the oppositions that appear in reality are part of reality. The cosmos is ONE. It is only in Plato that such a division becomes concrete. Some passages in the dialogues bear witness to the birth of this separation, which, incidentally, is barely named using the terms apparent and real. It's better to think of Mortal and Immortal, or, according to the Line passage in Book VI of *The Republic*, Visible and Intelligible. One of the most explicit passages in this respect is in *The Symposium* (202e-203a), when priestess Diotima makes it clear that Eros is not a God, but a *daimon*, a being who mediates contact between beings who do not mix: mortals and immortals (θεός δὲ ἀνθρώπῳ οὐ μείγνυται). Between one realm and another, he is the *σύνδεσμος* of the universe, the bond that unites worlds that have been separated and makes the whole (τὸ πᾶν) reconnect with itself. The separation of the worlds appears in almost all of Plato's dialogues, and it is from there that we see the birth of an entirely abstract reality. Aristotle had already criticized it in *Metaphysics*, but we find the radical critique in Nietzsche, who calls it metaphysics and considers it to be the foundation of all Western philosophy.

designate the imagination through which we can visualize remote situations and objects in space and time. In this case, there seems to be a combination of being aware of a current situation and envisioning a desired future for that situation, including how to achieve that desire. An interesting example of this combination can be found in *Scutum*, a poem by an unknown author whose language exhibits the influence of both Homer and Hesiod. According to Fritz, however, it ceases to exist in verse 222, when it is said of Perseus ὥς τε νόημι' ἐποτᾶτο. The νόημα in this expression is, of course, essentially the imagination through which distant things become present and whose swiftness in overcoming time and space is already a familiar concept in the Homeric poems, so the translation of the phrase would be “as he flew around the imagination”. But when Perseus flies around ὥς νόημα, his body follows his imagination just as quickly, which of course implies that he “desires” to be in the place he is thinking of. “Thought” and “desire” become indistinguishable in this complex notion of νόος, from verse 222 onwards. The initial meaning of νόος as the imagination of “making distant things present” is animated by the desire to move to the situation previously only imagined. Perseus now becomes present in the originally distant thing⁸;

6. It is important to underline the fact that νόος and νοεῖν in Homer never mean “reason” or “reasoning”, although it is possible to find traces of a development in Homer’s poems that will later result in an extension of the meaning of these

⁸ Even today, we find the idea that a thought can fly. In Portuguese, we have the expression “dar asas ao pensamento” (giving wings to thought), which is more or less the same meaning of what happens in verse 222, when the νόος, animated by desire, carries Perseus. In English, the idea that words and thoughts can fly is a recurring theme in James Joyce’s Works, most notably in the music-themed Chapter 11 of his *Ulysses* and throughout the collection *Finnegans Wake*, where the musical and spoken merge into a flowing, dreamlike experience. Sung words are winged words. Cf. David Pierce, “On Local Disturbances: Reflections on Joyce’s Use of Language in Sirens”.

terms in this direction. When a man, who has at first been deceived by an apparently friendly attitude, begins to suspect that bad intentions may be hidden behind the friendly appearance, he does so based on certain observations. Putting these observations together, he deduces, as we would say, that the appearance must be deceptive. A certain amount of reasoning, therefore, seems to go into the process. However, there is no passage in Homer in which this process of reasoning is even hinted at when the terms *vóoc* or *voeĩv* are used. On the contrary, the understanding of the truth always appears as a sudden intuition: the truth is suddenly “seen”.

But that's not all. A third obstacle to understanding the terms in question is the lack of an etymology that could certainly provide clues to reduce the obscurity surrounding the original meaning of these words.⁹ Some *scholars* have raised interesting etymological hypotheses trying to establish at the semantic level a primary meaning that would bring *vóoc* closer to patterns of action. A rare article, especially because it is recent,¹⁰ brings us up to date on the research that was carried out to clarify the origin of these terms in the mid-20th century, and draws our attention to two etymological hypotheses that it considers predominant for a return to research: the hypothesis **snu*, Indo-European radical, which applies to “sniffing”, “smelling” something or a situation (von Fritz, Heidegger,¹¹ Gadamer¹² *et al.*) —and here it should be noted that such an ethmo would link the meaning of *vóoc* to very concrete situations — and the

⁹ On this subject, see the entry for *vóoc* in Pierre Chantraîne: *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque. Histoire des mots*. 1999.

¹⁰ Fabio Stella . "L'origine des termes *vóoc*-*voeĩv*. L'intelligence comme "schéma d'action", 2016: La notion d'Intelligence (*nous-noein*) dans la Grèce antique. De Homère au Platonisme. Also by the same author, the general presentation of the aforementioned issue of *Methodos*.

¹¹ Martin Heidegger, in *Qu'appelle-t-on penser?*

¹² Hans-Georg Gadamer. *Au commencement de la philosophie. Pour une lecture des Présocratiques*, 2001; *Idem, Interroger les Grecs: Études sur les Présocratiques, Platon et Aristote*, 2006.

hypothesis **nes*, another radical that is used to indicate “the return of light” or the “avoidance of death” (Frame¹³ *et al.*).

In his 1943 article, “*NOYΣ and NOEIN in the Homeric Poems*”, Kurt von Fritz sets out in detail the arguments that support these hypotheses and declares his preference for and acceptance of the **snu* hypothesis. After raising a series of objections to the **nes* hypothesis, νέυειν, “to assent” (Lat. nuere; Ger. nicken), Fritz moves on to analyze the root **snu*, “to sniff”, “to smell” (Middle High German snöuwen; Ger. schnupfern, schnüffeln), which presupposes that the original form of νόος is σνόφος, presenting the objections raised to it by some linguists and refuting them one by one.

The **nes* hypothesis, according to Fritz, has the great advantage of presenting us with a Greek verb derived directly from the same root as the noun. This would resolve the conundrum we faced at the beginning of this research, namely that a noun designating a function and not a quality or a concrete object appears to have no equivalent in a verb belonging to the same stage of linguistic development. We could then assume that there is such a verb, namely νέυειν, but that the noun νόος developed new meanings in which νέυειν had no part, and that this led to the creation of a new verb νοεῖν which corresponded to the new meanings of the noun. The connection between the noun and the original verb, on the other hand, can be found when we compare those many passages in which Zeus expresses his desire with an assent (e.g., *Iliad* I. 514, 527; VIII. 175, 245) with the passages in which νόος designates Zeus' desires that cannot be avoided (e.g. *Iliad* VIII. 143; XVI. 103, 688; XVII. 176; *Odyssey* XXIV. 164. 101). Fritz's objection to this etymology is summarized below:

But as soon as one tries to derive the other meanings of νόος and νοεῖν from this assumed original meaning of the root,” says Fritz, “he encounters insurmountable difficulties, for not only is there no easy psychological transition from νόος in the sense of “will” to νόος in

¹³ Douglas Frame, (1978), *The Myth of Return in Early Greek Epic*.

the sense of “understanding”: much more decisive is the fact that neither *vóoc* nor *voēiv* ever designate a momentary decision of the kind which may be, and often is, expressed by a nod of the head, as Zeus does, but both terms always imply some long-range plan or vision. Yet, if “to nod” in the sense of giving one’s assent or deciding was the origin of the word *vóoc*, we should expect at least this derivative meaning to have survived in the use of *vóoc* or *voēiv* somewhere in Homer. That this is not the case seems to exclude also the possibility that two roots of different form and meaning have been merged in the word *vóoc* by the mere coincidence of phonetic development. (1943, p. 92).

Among the objections raised against the **snu* hypothesis, the most interesting seems to be that of Snell (*Gnomon*, p. 77, *apud*. Fritz, 1943) and Krause (*Deutsche Literaturzeitung*, XLVIII (1) 1927); both reject **snu* arguing that, in Homer, *voēiv* appears more often linked to the sense of sight than to any other sense.¹⁴

But it wasn't always like this”, says Fritz. “The most fundamental and most original meaning of *voēiv* in Homer seemed to have been “to realize or understand a situation”. Now, the most primitive case in which a situation becomes important is that in which there is danger or where there is an enemy nearby. The most primitive function of the *vóoc*, therefore, would have been to sense danger and to distinguish between friend and enemy. It's not unlikely that, in a very early stage of human development, the sense of smell played a preponderant part in this function. One has only to point to the fact that even in our present-day language, we still speak of “smelling a danger”.¹⁵ With the development of a higher civilization, the sense of smell would naturally have been more and more replaced by the sense of vision. (1943, 77)

¹⁴ Bruno Snell. *Gnomon* p. 77, *apud*. Kurt von Fritz, *op.cit.* 1943.

¹⁵ In English, "smelling a danger." The comment applies to many languages. In Portuguese, for example, “cheirar mal (= stink, in the sense of it doesn’t smell good)” is an expression that can be used connotatively in various senses.

Fritz ends his text by saying that most likely the etymology proposed by Schwyzer, i.e., *snu, is the correct one.

According to Fritz, the etymologies make no difference to his thesis. As far as we are concerned, however, a more detailed examination of these hypotheses, especially the hypothesis *snu, to sniff, to smell, would give greater prominence to Fritz's thesis on which we are based, namely, that in its origin νοῦς and derivatives in general do not apply to abstract situations, although many interpreters claim that they do, but to situations that are always concrete, those in which the senses (*aistheseis*) mediate the apprehension of reality, i.e., play a mediating role between our interiority and the external world it perceives or apprehends, a role that is “highly enigmatic”, as Lloyd P. Gerson states in the aforementioned article. In fact, against Boehme, his main adversary, Fritz considers the theses of Snell and Krause to be sufficient:

Snell, Krause and many others — he says — have rightly stressed the fact that in the Greek language the notion of νοεῖν has an especially close relation with the sense of vision. Boehme, on the other hand, contends that from the very beginning νοεῖν was carefully distinguished from any kind of sensible perception —in other words, that it always designates a purely mental act. He fails to explain how, in a period and in a literature which otherwise shows no sign of a high degree of abstract thinking, so abstract a distinction could not only be made, but unflinchingly applied in all cases by the Homeric poets. We are now able to give this explanation. Snell has given a brilliant analysis of the difference between ἰδεῖν and γινώσκειν. The term ἰδεῖν covers all cases in which something comes to our knowledge by the sense of vision, including the case in which this object remains undefined: for instance, a green patch or a brown patch, the shape of which we cannot quite distinguish. The term γινώσκειν, on the other hand, specifically designates the recognition of this object as something definite: for instance, a shrub, or a mound, or a human being. This recognition implies, of course, the classification of the object under a general concept. Snell has pointed out that if there is an etymological connection between γινώσκειν and γίγνεσθαι, it may

be explained by the fact that only when an indefinite something is classified does it come into being, so to speak, as a definite object. The term *voεiv*, then, signifies a further step in the recognition of the object: the realization, for instance, that this brown patch is not only a human being, but an enemy lying in ambush. This latter realization, if we use our modern terminology, is, of course, a purely mental act and does not belong to sensible perception properly. The Homeric Greeks did not think in such abstract terms. (1943, p. 88)

It was the study of this terminology in pre-Platonic texts that led me to the study of its use for cognitive functions in Plato's dialogues and to the consequent thesis that Plato, by hypothesizing the existence of ideas, abstract entities that he considered to be more real than concrete ones, introduced a new dimension of reality, a previously non-existent, invisible and radically abstract dimension.

To better substantiate the thesis mentioned above, I present here some of the main passages in Plato's philosophy that led me to this conclusion. Before, however, it's worth reaffirming what seemed clear to me in the examples cited at the beginning of this article, namely that there is nothing among the pre-Platonists that we can consider to be of the order of the purely abstract:¹⁶ sensations (*aistheseis*) play a fundamental role in acts of cognition and it is not supposed, except perhaps summarily in the Poem of Parmenides, the existence of a special type of apprehension that captures intelligible invisible entities, as Plato will do in the Middle dialogues, when, according to Aristotle's account in the *Metaphysics*, unlike Socrates, he begins to suppose that the essence (*οὐσία*) of things is not in the things themselves, but outside them, thus creating a separation

¹⁶ In this regard, above all, Kurt von Fritz (*op. cit.* 1943) and Bruno Snell, *The Discovery of the Mind. The Greek Origins of European Thought.* 1953.

(χωρισμός) which will be, according to Aristotle, the fundamental source of all the difficulties concerning the “theory of Ideas”.¹⁷

An exemplary moment of the realization of this separation between non-sensible beings, which he calls “Ideas” (τὰ εἶδη) and sensible beings (τὰ αἰσθητά), in Plato's entire work, is certainly to be found in the *Symposium*, when desire, Eros, during Socrates' dialogue with the priestess Diotima, is said to be a *daimon*, i.e., an intermediary being (μεταξύ) between the divine and the mortal. Eros is not a god, insists Socrates/Diotima, but a *daimon*, a being who mediates contact between beings who do not mix (οὐ μίγνυται): mortal and immortal (θεὸς δὲ ἀνθρώπων). Neither mortal nor immortal, Eros is one of the many *daimones* that have the power to unite what is irretrievably separated. Between one “realm” and another, he is the σύνδεσμος of the universe, the bond that unites worlds that have been separated and makes the whole (τὸ πᾶν) reconnect with itself (202e-203a).

This separation is also very clear in the *Timaeus*, in 27d, right at the opening of the account of the creation of the world, where the radical opposition between being (οὐσία) and becoming (γένεσις) characteristic of the Middle dialogues reappears, and which, according to most scholars who consider the *Timaeus* to be a Late dialogue, should no longer be present there since *Philebus* (26d), remarkable as it is by the use of the expression γένεσις εἰς οὐσίαν. The opposition comes in the form of a question that Timaeus

¹⁷ *Metaphysics* A, 6, 987b 8-9; M, 1078b 30-31 and especially N, 1086b 3-5, where Aristotle says that Socrates, although he gave impetus to the theory that bases the possibility of universals on the instability of sensible things (τὰ αἰσθητά), did not separate the latter from the universals and that, in this respect, he was right. The χωρισμός is also at the origin of the modern sense of metaphysics. According to Nietzsche's definition, in *Beyond Good and Evil*, metaphysics is a position of opposition, whose medullary belief is in the antinomy of values: “*The fundamental belief of metaphysicians is the belief in antitheses (antinomies) of values. It never occurred even to the wariest of them to doubt here on the very threshold (where doubt, however, was most necessary), though they had made a solemn vow, de omnibus dubitandum. For it may be doubted, firstly, whether antitheses exist at all [...]*”.

addresses to Socrates in 27d: “It is therefore my opinion that we must first distinguish the following: what is the eternal being that is never born, and what is the one that is always born and never is?” (τί τὸ ὄν αἰεὶ, γένεσιν δὲ οὐκ ἔχον, καὶ τί τὸ γιγνόμενον μὲν αἰεὶ, ὄν δὲ οὐδέποτε;). And he continues: 28a1: “One, being always the same, is apprehended noetically (νοέω, νόημι) with the help of reason (τὸ μὲν δὴ νοήσει μετὰ λόγου περιληπτόν, αἰεὶ κατὰ ταῦτα ὄν); the other, on the other hand, is apprehended by opinion followed by sensible perception devoid of reason (τὸ δ’ αὖ δόξει μετ’ αἰσθήσεως ἀλόγου δοξαστόν), and is the object of opinion, being born and dying, without ever really being (γιγνόμενον καὶ ἀπολλύμενον, ὄντως δὲ οὐδέποτε ὄν)”.¹⁸

These, and many other passages in the *Dialogues*, exemplify the radical nature of the separation introduced by Plato in his quest to demonstrate the existence of ideas and to prove that “the being” of things (the τί ἔστιν) is called and explained by them, ideas, and not by the things themselves, as Socrates wanted.¹⁹ However, it is only in the famous passage of the Divided Line (*Republic* 509d-511e), where Plato establishes a hierarchy between the objects of knowledge and the mental states (παθήματα) capable of apprehending these objects, that a technical meaning will be applied to the terms ΝΟΥΣ, ΝΟΗΣΙΣ, ΝΟΕΙΝ and derivatives²⁰ and a new type of apprehension

¹⁸ This same distinction appears in almost identical terms in *Republic* VI (507b, 509d; and in the *Politics*, 269d.

¹⁹ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* A, 987 a29-b14 and M, 1078b 9-32, 1086 a37-b5.

²⁰ The passage of the Divided Line is one of Plato's most controversial and commented upon. One critic has even claimed that in the space of seventy-five years there has only been disagreement about the opinions of scholars. The main problem, the *crux* of the passage, is whether Plato, in hierarchizing orders of reality, was also making an ontological distinction between his objects. The passage suggests that the ways of apprehending reality are determined by the degree of intelligibility of the objects that correspond to them. As far as the region of the visible is concerned, Plato goes so far as to list these objects and to say how they are distinguished: some are truly, others are not. This first part of the Line is therefore not problematic. The problem arises when Plato divides the region of the intelligible. The passage suggests that the same principle of dividing the visible should be applied to the intelligible, but nowhere does Plato mention that

of reality, the νόησις, will be created. This new type of apprehension, as we shall see, is described as not making use of anything sensible and is therefore something that occurs invisibly in each person's soul. Twice in the passage, Plato refers to the noetic procedure as an entirely abstract procedure, and both times his interlocutor, Glaucon, says that he doesn't fully understand what is being said.²¹ The first is in 510b, when Socrates, —after describing the two sections of the upper segment of the Line, distinguishing them not by the degree of reality of their objects, as he had done in the sections of the lower segment, but by their modes of apprehension— refers to the noetic procedure, characteristic of the philosopher, as being that which, unlike the mathematician, does not make use of images, “proceeding to the investigation (τὴν μέθοδον ποιουμένη) using the ideas themselves, through themselves (αὐτοῖς εἶδεσι δι' αὐτῶν).” Glaucon does not understand what Socrates is trying to say: “These things of which you speak I have not sufficiently understood” (b10: Ταῦτ' ἃ λέγεις, οὐχ ἱκανῶς ἔμαθον). Socrates then repeats to clarify and, again explaining the procedure of mathematicians, says that in their investigations, like philosophers, they start from hypotheses, but treat them not as hypotheses, but as principles (ἀρχαί), moving in a single

mathematics has an object of its own. On the contrary, in this and several other passages, Plato suggests that mathematical objects are not distinct from the objects of dialectic. This question of the existence of mathematical objects has led critics to divide into two extremes: (1) those who maintain that the objects of the διάνοια are intermediate between visible things and ideas, and who therefore ontologically differentiate the objects of the two sections of the intelligible. These are followers of Aristotle, who states in *Metaphysics* (987b 14-18) that Plato supported a theory of intermediaries; and (2) those who deny that the objects of the διάνοια and therefore undifferentiated from the objects of the sections of the intelligible. Among the supporters of (1) Aristotle, Syrianus, Proclus, James Adam (in his translation of the Republic), Suzanne Mansion, E. Zeller, and H. Bonitz. Among those who defend (2) H. Cherniss (who radically denies that Plato supported any theory of intermediaries in *The Riddle of the early Academy*), Henry Jackson, David Ross, F.M. Cornford, R. Robinson, Émile de Strycker, Cook-Wilson, and Ernest Hoffmann. Intermediate positions between (1) and (2) can be found in A. Wedberg, I.M. Crombie, L. Robin, and J.A. Brentlinger.

²¹ I interpret Glaucon's difficulty as a difficulty concerning something unknown, not only to him, but to everyone of his time, as is likely.

movement from hypothesis to conclusion (511a). In 511b-c, Socrates describes the noetic procedure in more detail, and we finally understand that the νόησις consists of two movements, and not just one, like the διάνοια, an ascending one, which goes towards the non-hypothetical, and a descending one, which goes from the non-hypothetical to the conclusion. I quote the passage:

Understand, then, that by the other section of the intelligible, I mean that which reason itself deals with through the power of dialectic (οὗ αὐτὸς ὁ λόγος ἄπτεται τῇ τοῦ διαλέγεσθαι δυνάμει), treating hypotheses not like principles, but as real hypotheses, ie., as means of approximation and impulses, so that we can go as far as the non-hypothetical, to the principle of everything, and grasping it once again, holding on to the things that depend on it, thus descending to the end and not using anything sensible, but only the ideas themselves, moving on through ideas to ideas, and ending with ideas (ἀλλ' εἶδεν αὐτοῖς δι' αὐτῶν εἰς αὐτά, καὶ τελευτᾷ εἰς εἶδη).²²

What we immediately notice in this excerpt of the Divided Line is that Socrates seems to contradict himself when he says that the method used in the upper section of the line, the same to which the term νόησις is applied, is dialectical. Now, how could a method that doesn't make use of images be dialectical, if dialectics necessarily involves language — its very name deriving from the verb διαλέγεσθαι (= to converse) — and therefore the use of images?²³ If,

²² My translation: “Compreenda então que quando falo da outra seção do inteligível estou me referindo àquela de que se ocupa a própria razão através do poder da dialética (οὗ αὐτὸς ὁ λόγος ἄπτεται τῇ τοῦ διαλέγεσθαι δυνάμει), fazendo das hipóteses não princípios, mas realmente hipóteses, como meios de aproximação e impulsos, para que indo até o não-hipotético, ao princípio de tudo, e apreendendo-o, novamente mais uma vez, agarrando-se às coisas que dele dependem, desça assim para o fim e não se servindo, além disso, de nada sensível, mas sim das ideias elas mesmas em direção a elas mesmas, termine em ideias (ἀλλ' εἶδεν αὐτοῖς δι' αὐτῶν εἰς αὐτά, καὶ τελευτᾷ εἰς εἶδη)”.

²³ The form that Plato probably considered supreme for the realization of dialectic was dialogue. Plato was so absolutely certain of this, as Robinson said, that he derived the name dialectic from this fact: dialectical method means method of conversation. All other methods use words and something else; the dialectical

unlike the δίανοια, the νόησις does not make use of images, how can we understand the upward movement, the movement that goes from the hypothetical to the non-hypothetical, and which seems to be similar to the ἔλεγχος, the Socratic method that investigates the veracity of the hypotheses raised? It seems to me that, to avoid contradiction, we need to understand the two movements of noetic apprehension as being distinct: the first, which ascends from the hypothetical to the non-hypothetical, investigates through the power of διαλέγεσθαι, using language in the same way that mathematicians use figures, but the second follows only through abstractions, which are in fact solitary and incommunicable. For the sake of coherence, it is necessary to highlight the downward movement as the one that gives superiority to philosophical apprehension.

For the thesis I am defending here, it doesn't matter whether or not we divide the noetic procedure into two distinct movements, because the introduction of the “pure abstract” remains in the simple suggestion that it is possible to go “from idea to idea and end in idea” without making use of any visible thing. What matters is that to see the invisible, Plato introduces a type of apprehension that is also “invisible”, since it does not pass through any of our senses. The emphasis of the passage is undoubtedly on this new type of affection of the soul. And we should notice, right at the beginning of the passage (at 509 d8), that the proposed contrast is between the *genus* of the visible (τό τε τοῦ ὀρωμένου γένους) and the *genus* of the intelligible (τὸ τοῦ νοουμένου), being, therefore, by this contrast, the realm of the intelligible understood to be the realm of the “invisible”.

method uses only words, and this is an explicit sign that the dialectic uses only the faculty of reason. Words are the basis of our affirmations and negations, says the *Theaetetus* (165a). "The dialectician uses words as the lyre player uses the lyre," says the *Cratylus* (390). "Dialectics is the education that makes them able to ask and answer more scientifically" (*Republic* 534d); we can give a λόγος to reality through questions and answers (*Fédon*, 78d) and define ideas as all those things on which we seal "what is in itself" (τὸ "αὐτὸ ὃ ἔστι", *Fédon* 75d). If no one wishes to answer, dialectic doesn't take place (*Euthyphron* 275c), unless the same man can represent both parties at the same time (*Gorgias* 506c-507c).

As Suzanne Mansion has rightly observed,²⁴ what Plato is certainly trying to say by contrasting the mathematical procedure with the philosophical procedure is that the mathematical sciences are limited, and that it is possible to penetrate more deeply into the intelligence of their hypotheses, which does not mean that mathematics should change its procedure and invest in another type of approach to its objects. It is precisely in contrast to the mathematical procedure that Plato justifies the space of dialectic and, consequently, the affection that corresponds to it. Mathematicians are not clear about their starting points; that is, they consistently demonstrate what they want to demonstrate without, however, knowing the nature of what they are basing their demonstrations on. The dialectical procedure, on the other hand, wants to know what each thing is, and that's why it treats its hypotheses as real hypotheses, as assumptions that must be exhaustively tested before they can be considered, if ever, self-evident. And this is why, if any method can lead to science, it can only be the dialectical one.

This does not seem to be the case in 533b-d, where we are told that, although mathematics is in some way connected to reality, from reality itself the mathematicians only have dreams, and from these dreams they can never wake up, as long as their hypotheses remain undisturbed (ἀκινήτους) and cannot be explained, “for if their starting points [ie, hypotheses transformed into ἀρχαί] are unknown and if [consequently] their conclusions and intermediate steps are made through equally unknown things, what possibility is there that the resulting agreement (ὁμολογία) [between mathematicians] will in any way become science?” (533c).²⁵

Another point that is the subject of intense discussion in this passage revolves around the meaning of non-hypothetical (ἀνυπόθετον). Some interpreters wonder whether the experience of

²⁴ "L'objet des mathématiques et l'objet de la dialectique selon Platon", 1969, p.367.

²⁵ ὅ γὰρ ἀρχὴ μὲν ὃ μὴ οἶδε, τελευτὴ δὲ καὶ τὰ μεταξὺ ἐξ οὗ μὴ οἶδεν συμπλέκται, τίς μηχανὴ τὴν τοιαύτην ὁμολογίαν ποτὲ ἐπιστήμην γενέσθαι.

the upward movement describes a journey not simply towards the clarification of a hypothesis, but towards the contemplation of the Good itself, identifying this moment with an abrupt “vision” which, I suppose, is not rational, since it is not expressed in any kind of language and therefore cannot be communicated (506 d-e; 533 a). Now, with the introduction of the Good, what seemed to be a logical journey to ascertain the truth value of a hypothesis becomes a journey towards the apprehension of the highest object of knowledge, the one that, once apprehended, would clarify all of reality.

This conversion of a stage of noetic reasoning into contemplation is certainly corroborated by other related passages in the *Republic*. In addition to the passage on the Sun (507a-509c) of which the Line is avowedly a continuation and the well-known Allegory of the Cave (VII 514a-517a), which rewrites the passage on the Line itself (517a-b) and where the Good is the ultimate end of dialectic, further on, in another passage (VI 531d-534e), Plato, recalling the Divided Line, will say that dialectic, conceived there as reasoning based on hypotheses that must be converted into non-hypotheses, has as its object the vision of the Good, the last stage of the ascent from the Cave.

Many interpreters see the final moment of the ascending dialectic as an enigma. Influenced by their reading of the Neoplatonists (who emerged in the 3rd century AD in reaction to Hellenistic philosophy and religion), many interpret the moment of apprehension of the non-hypothetical (transfigured into the Good) as mystical and not as a stage in dialectical reasoning. But, once again, this point would not affect my hypothesis either, since, regardless of Plato's original intention, the abstract dimension introduced has solidified over time.

That the dialectic ends in the contemplation of the Good (= Beauty) is also stated in the *Symposium* and *Letter VII*. In the *Symposium*, during the description of the *scala amoris* by the priestess Diotima, —at the moment when the initiate, without the help of his master, having reached the end of the initiation, abruptly (ἐξάφνης) perceives a beauty of a marvelous nature (θαυμαστόν)—,

the proposed dialectical exercise is very similar to that of the *Republic* and one of the most detailed definitions of idea appears:

He who has been instructed thus far in the things of love, and who has learned to see the beautiful in due order and succession, when he comes toward the end will suddenly perceive a nature of wondrous beauty (and this, Socrates, is the final cause of all our former toils), a nature which in the first place is everlasting, not growing and decaying, or waxing and waning; secondly, not fair in one point of view and foul in another, or at one time or in one [context] or at one place fair, at another time or in another [context] or at another place foul, as if fair to some and foul to others, or in the likeness of a face or hands or any other part of the bodily frame, or in any form of speech or knowledge, or existing in any other being, as for example, in an animal, or in heaven, or in earth, or in any other place; but beauty absolute, separate, simple, and everlasting, which without diminution and without increase, or any change, is imparted to the ever-growing and perishing beauties of all other things. He who from these ascending under the influence of true love, begins to perceive that beauty, is not far from the end. (Smp 210e-211b. Transl. B. Jowett).

Although the terminology in question is not present in the passage, the movement described suggests a comparison. Unlike the *Republic*, however, in the *Symposium*, the erotic dialectic is only ascending. But, just as it is described in the *Republic*, the upward movement in the *Symposium* also takes place by “leaps” (or impulses) and each leap is accompanied by abrupt, synoptic apprehensions, resulting from the many λόγοι produced by the disciple about each step. As Léon Robin observed, erotic initiation implies the formation of an understanding, in which we always rediscover the Beautiful under the diversity of its manifestations, in

bodies, souls, occupations, and sciences, and this is how, abruptly (ἐξαίφνης), the Beauty itself is revealed to us.²⁶

The same process is described in two paths of *Letter VII*: in 342a-343c, where the independence of true knowledge from discourse is reaffirmed, since Plato, in distinguishing the elements of the process of knowledge, identifies the latter with νοῦς, and in 341a-d, where once again the vision of truth is accompanied by the adverb ἐξαίφνης pointing to a movement:

Only after long partnership in a common life devoted to the thing itself, does truth abruptly (ἐξαίφνης) flash upon the soul, like the light that springs from a spark that is ignited, and once it is born there it begins to nourish itself.

In addition to the traditional passages in the Middle dialogues, there is one in the Late Dialogues which is often used as a powerful basis for defending the existence of ideas: *Timaeus* 51d-52a, where Plato distinguishes νοῦς from δόξα ἀληθής, a distinction that is understood as a kind of summary of *Republic* 476d-478e, where Socrates distinguishes ἐπιστήμη from δόξα, though these two processes of differentiation, according to Cornford, definitely do not mean the same thing.

I quote the passage from the *Timaeus*, in F. M. Cornford's translation, in *Plato's Cosmology. The Timaeus of Plato*:

If intellect (νοῦς) and true opinion (δόξα ἀληθής) are two kinds of things (δύο γένη), then these —the Forms that we cannot perceive, but only think of— certainly exist by themselves. If, however, as it seems to some, true opinion differs in no way from the intellect, then everything we perceive through the bodily senses must be understood as the most exact reality. Now we must affirm that they are two different kinds of things, because they are distinct in origin and unequal in nature: one is produced in us through instruction, the

²⁶ *Le Banquet*, Notice, in *Platon, Oeuvres Complètes*. Trad, notes and commentaries. T. IV, 2ème. Partie. Paris, Les Belles Lettres, p. XCIV, XCV.

other through persuasion; the former can always give a true account of itself, while the latter can't; the former remains indifferent to persuasion, the latter can be overcome by it; and although it must be said that all men share the latter, only the gods and a small group of people share the former. This being the case, we must first agree that there is the immutable, ingested, and indestructible Form, which receives nothing from anywhere other than itself and which does not enter into anything other than itself. It is neither visible nor otherwise sensible; it is in fact what thought (νόησις) has as its object.²⁷

The existence of these “invisible entities”, which have no connection with anything sensible and yet are considered quiddities by Platonists, seems to have been unknown in Plato's time. The countless times Socrates refers to these entities, for instance, in the *Republic*, and Glaucon doesn't understand what is being said, as we mentioned earlier, testify to this fact. And let's also consider the constant effort, according to Aristotle, vain, of the Platonists of the First Academy in demonstrating the existence of the Ideas through formal arguments and the obvious difficulty that these arguments raise, even for a Platonist like Aristotle²⁸ who refutes all his

²⁷ εἰ μὲν νοῦς καὶ δόξα ἀληθῆς ἔστων δύο γένη, παντάπασι εἶναι καθ' αὐτὰ ταῦτα, ἀναίσθητα ὑφ' ἡμῶν εἶδη, νοούμενα μόνον· εἰ δ', ὡς τισιν φαίνεται, δόξα ἀληθῆς νοῦ διαφέρει τὸ μηδὲν, πάνθ' ὀπίσ' αὖ διὰ τοῦ σώματος αἰσθανόμεθα θετέον βεβαιότατα. δύο δὲ λεκτέον ἐκείνω, διότι χωρὶς γεγονάτων ἀνομοίως τε ἔχοντο. τὸ μὲν γὰρ αὐτῶν διὰ διδαχῆς, τὸ δ' ὑπὸ πειθοῦς ἡμῶν ἐγγίγνεται· καὶ τὸ μὲν αἰεὶ μετ' ἀληθοῦς λόγου, τὸ δὲ ἄλογον· καὶ τὸ μὲν ἀκίνητον πειθοῖ, τὸ δὲ μεταπειστόν· καὶ τοῦ μὲν πάντα ἄνδρα μετέχειν φατέον, νοῦ δὲ θεοῦς, ἀνθρώπων δὲ γένος βραχὺ τι. τούτων δὲ οὕτως ἐχόντων ὁμολογητέον ἔν μὲν εἶναι τὸ κατὰ ταῦτα εἶδος ἔχον, ἀγέννητον καὶ ἀνώλεθρον, οὔτε εἰς ἑαυτὸ εἰσδεχόμενον ἄλλο ἄλλοθεν οὔτε αὐτὸ εἰς ἄλλο ποιῖον, ἀόρατον δὲ καὶ ἄλλως ἀναίσθητον, τοῦτο ὃ δὴ νόησις εἴληχεν ἐπισκοπεῖν·

²⁸ In *Metaphysics A*, 9, 990b 8-29, Aristotle mentions five types of arguments that the Platonists used to defend the existence of the Ideas: (1) the arguments that come from the Sciences (ἐκ τῶν ἐπιστημῶν); (2) the argument from the One over the Multiple (τὸ ἓν ἐπὶ πολλῶν); (3) the argument of Thinking the perished (τὸ νοεῖν τι φθαρέντος); (4) the arguments leading to Relations (πρὸς τι); and (5) the arguments leading to the Third Man (τρίτον ἀνθρώπων). According to him, the first three do not prove anything and the last two —called here “the most rigorous” (οἱ ἀκριβέστεροι) — do not prove the existence of the Ideas, but only that of the

colleagues' attempts to demonstrate the reality of these abstract beings —remembering that both in *On the Ideas* (ΠΕΡΙ ΙΔΕΩΝ) and in the *Metaphysics* (although, in the latter book, not all the time) Aristotle's objections are made in the first person plural.

To close, I'll leave you with seven notes, to be further elaborated in a future approach: (1) the existence of invisible abstract things is already present, although never in its full radicality, in passages of philosophical and non-philosophical texts prior to Plato; (2) despite the variety of words used in the translation of νοῦς, νόησις and νοεῖν in Plato's works, the meaning attributed always refers to abstract entities that are only abstractly apprehensible; (3) no author before Plato supposed a special type of apprehension for grasping and understanding abstract things; (4) when considering the movements of noetic apprehension separately, we find a distinction, apparently absent in the vast majority of specialized commentaries, between the *act of thinking and the content of thought*²⁹; (5) this distinction points to another problem, namely the impossibility of expressing and consequently communicating what has been apprehended without the use of images or words, as suggested by the downward movement of the “dialectic” described in the passage of the Divided Line;³⁰ (6) the

Universals. For a more detailed analysis, FRANCO, I F and MATOSO, Renato, "Aristotle. *On the Ideas* (ΠΕΡΙ ΙΔΕΩΝ). Excerpts from Alexander of Aphrodisias, in *Aristotelis metaphysica commentaria*", 2018.

²⁹ A. C. Lloyd is one of the few interpreters who seems to have realized the existence of this distinction. In "Non-Discursive Thought: An Enigma of Greek Philosophy", he refers to non-discursive thought as that in which the thinker or the act of thinking and the object of his thought are not distinguished. In *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, New Series, Vol. 70 (1969 -1970), p. 261-274.

³⁰ Although it is not our aim to deal with the problem of the incommunicability of thought, we recognize the proximity between these two problems. Regarding the proximity of these two problems —the connection between the possibility of thinking without images or words and the incommunicability of thought— it would also be interesting to consider Gorgias of Leontini' 3 famous theses —(1) Nothing is (66-76); (2) Even if it were, it would be unknowable (77-82); (3) Even if it were knowable, it would be incommunicable (83-87)— in *The Treatise on Non-Being*, although the vocabulary used by Gorgias is different, he doesn't use νοεῖν, but φρονέω. For Gorgias' theses, Gorgias. *On the Nonexistent*, in Sextus Empiricus,

current languages preserve features of the Platonic sense of νόησις, and since the vast majority of interpreters translate νόησις by “thought” and its corresponding verb, νοεῖν, by “thinking”, this sense seems to have been extended to the set of words originating in Latin *pensare* that have acquired characteristics of the Platonic sense of νόησις in the neo-Latin languages; and (7) by introducing a previously non-existent dimension of the invisible, a dimension of the absolutely abstract, Plato would also have given sense to what we today call “thought”. In many ways, what we understand today as “thought” is tributary to the Platonic meaning of νόησις, just as the meaning of νόησις is tributary to older uses of this word and the terms linked to it in pre-Platonic texts.

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