

MATEUSZ STRÓŻYŃSKI

Institut Filologii Klasycznej Uniwersytetu im. Adama Mickiewicza  
ul. Fredry 10, 61-701 Poznań  
Polska – Poland  
monosautos@gmail.com

## THE APORETIC METHOD IN PLOTINUS' *ENNEADS*

ABSTRACT. Stróżyński Mateusz, The Aporetic Method in Plotinus' *Enneads*.

The paper introduces the concept of the aporetic method in Plotinus' philosophy. It is a form of spiritual exercise whose purpose is to lead the reader to the state of contemplation through the particular use of contradictions and paradoxes.

Keywords: Plotinus, spiritual exercise, aporia.

### INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to show that one of several spiritual exercises in Plotinus' philosophy is what I propose to call the “aporetic method” and to analyze how it appears in the Plotinian text. In the literature dealing with spiritual exercises in the *Enneads* two tendencies can be distinguished. The first and older one, is characterized by an attempt to give an overall description of the general spiritual method that was either adapted, or created by Plotinus in order to achieve the supreme goal of his philosophy: the union with the One (or “ecstasy”). Among the scholars who described the Plotinian method in such a way were René Arnou,<sup>1</sup> Jean Trouillard,<sup>2</sup> Edouard Krakowski,<sup>3</sup> Jean Moreau,<sup>4</sup> Rose-Marie Mossé-Bastide<sup>5</sup> and, more recently, Daniel Dombrowski.<sup>6</sup> They speak

---

<sup>1</sup> R. Arnou, *Le désir de Dieu dans la philosophie de Plotin*, Rome 1967 [1st edition: 1921], esp. pp. 195–225.

<sup>2</sup> J. Trouillard, *La purification plotinienne*, Paris 1955, pp. 133–165.

<sup>3</sup> E. Krakowski, *Plotin et le paganisme religieux*, Paris 1933, pp. 155–175.

<sup>4</sup> J. Moreau, *Plotin ou la gloire de la philosophie antique*, Paris 1970, pp. 173–178.

<sup>5</sup> R.-M. Mossé-Bastide, *La pensée philosophique de Plotin*, Paris 1972, pp. 109–112.

<sup>6</sup> Dombrowski writes about physical aspects of Plotinus' exercises (fasting, physical exercise) as

about this method in a general way, pointing out the role of *eros*, explaining the metaphors of purification, stripping of clothes or athletic training, in order to show that there was a practical dimension of Plotinus philosophy, that of *askesis*. What emerges from their reflections could be called a “theory of *askesis*” or – to borrow Krakowski’s expression – a “theory of ecstasis”.<sup>7</sup> Such a general account of the spiritual method of the *Enneads* could be traced down to the important passage in which Plotinus himself explicitly admits that he possesses such a method:

but we speak and write impelling towards it and wakening from reasonings to the vision of it, as if showing the way to someone who wants to have a view of something. For teaching goes as far as the road and the travelling, but the vision is the task of someone who has already resolved to see. (VI.9[9].4.12–6).<sup>8</sup>

Also, in the treatise against the Gnostics Plotinus reproaches them exactly of not teaching any spiritual method of acquiring virtue:

they... have altogether left out the treatment of these subjects; they do not tell us what kind of thing virtue is, nor how many parts it has, nor about all the many noble studies of the subject to be found in the treatises of the ancients, nor from what virtue results and how it is to be attained, nor how the soul is tended, nor how it is purified. For it does no good at all to say ‘Look to God’, unless one also teaches how one is to look. (II.9[33].15.28–34).<sup>9</sup>

Since Plotinus uses „virtue” to describe not only moral dispositions („civic virtues”), but also contemplative ones („purifying virtues”),<sup>10</sup> this passage pertains to all sorts of spiritual exercises.

But the passages just quoted as well as the works of the eminent Plotinian scholars that were mentioned, still leave an important question: what is the path (ὁδός) or what exactly one needs to do in order to “take care” or “cure” the soul (θεραπεύειν) or to “purify” it (καθαίρειν)? Plato taught dialectics and even

---

well as about metaphorical descriptions of mental exercises in terms of athletic practice (D.A. Dombrowski, *Asceticism as Athletic Training in “Plotinus”*, ANRW II, 36, 1, 1987, pp. 701–712.

<sup>7</sup> „la theorie de l’extase” (E. Krakowski, op. cit., p. 155).

<sup>8</sup> “λέγομεν καὶ γράφομεν πέμποντες εἰς αὐτὸ καὶ ἀνεγείροντες ἐκ τῶν λόγων ἐπὶ τὴν θεὰν ὥστερ ὁδὸν δεικνύντες τῷ τι θεάσασθαι βουλομένῳ. μέχρι γὰρ τῆς ὁδοῦ καὶ τῆς πορείας ἢ διδάξις, ἢ δὲ θεὰ αὐτοῦ ἔργον ἤδη τοῦ ἰδεῖν βεβουλημένου” (Greek text according to: *Plotini Opera*, ed. P. Henry, H.-R. Schwyzler, Oxonii 1964–1982. All Plotinus’ translations are from: Plotinus, *Enneads*, ed. J. Henderson, G.P. Goold, trans. A.H. Armstrong, Cambridge–London 2000–2003).

<sup>9</sup> “ἐκλελοιπέναι δὲ παντάπασιν τὸν περὶ τούτων λόγον, καὶ μήτε τί ἐστιν εἰπεῖν μήτε πόσα μήτε ὅσα τεθεώρηται πολλὰ καὶ καλὰ τοῖς τῶν παλαιῶν λόγοις, μήτε ἐξ ὧν περιέσται καὶ κτήσεται, μήτε ὡς θεραπεύεται ψυχὴ μήτε ὡς καθαίρεται. Οὐ γὰρ δὴ τὸ εἰπεῖν «βλέπε πρὸς θεόν» προὔργου τι ἐργάζεται, εἰ μὴ πῶς βλέψη διδάξῃ”

<sup>10</sup> About the division of virtues see *Enn.* I.2[19].2–5.

showed it in some of his later dialogues (like *Parmenides*, for example), the Stoics and the Epicureans developed plenty of exercises that were intended to change the habits of thinking and consequently cure the passions. But Plotinus' goal is more than that: in his philosophy the single most important achievement of human being and, at the same time, the cure for his sick condition is intuitive contemplation, that is, a contemplation that does not consist in reasoning about its object, but rather in directly, intellectually "seeing" it. The concept of atemporal, non-verbal, non-discursive and non-propositional, intuitive, intellectual seeing is quite alien to most people everyday consciousness and thinking, so we can imagine more easily what Stoic *praemeditatio malorum* was or even – Platonic dialectic, than what Plotinian κάθαρσις was.

But some scholars tried to find in the *Enneads* specific exercises, embedded in the text, which could lead to that purpose. The second tendency in the Plotinian scholarship consists of attempts to focus more on the text and to reconstruct the way in which this text could influence the reader's consciousness in order to help him achieve the state of contemplation. Plotinus mentions several types of practices, but it is hardly a catalogue that we could follow in order to decipher the practical dimension of the *Enneads*: (1) ἀναλογίαι, (2) ἀφαιρέσεις, (3) γνώσεις, (4) ἀναβασμοί, (5) καθάρσεις, (6) ἀρεταί, (7) κοσμήσεις, (8) ἐπιβάσεις, (9) ἰδρύσεις, (10) ἐστιάσεις (VI.7[38].36.7–10). Dominic O'Meara describes the Plotinian method in general as "accustoming oneself to thinking of immaterial being in another way, not as if it were body, but in the light of its proper, non-quantitative, non-local characteristics"<sup>11</sup> and when he mentions purification, which could seem to be a more specific practice, he still remains quite vague: "purification of oneself as intellect, the removal of all obstacles or differences that might separate us from the One [...] a waiting in silence"<sup>12</sup> Christian Guérard also speaks in very general terms of "pratique de l'âme" and "pratique spirituelle".<sup>13</sup> Pierre Hadot also is more vague about Plotinus' exercises<sup>14</sup> than about Stoic or Epicurean practices he describes sometimes with great detail.<sup>15</sup> He emphasizes the importance of the exercises in the *Enneads*,<sup>16</sup> but he does not analyze texts in a satisfactorily manner.<sup>17</sup>

In this context a different path is taken by Bernard Collette, Michael Sells and Sara Rappe. They are successful in reconstructing specific exercises and showing "how they worked". Collette analyzed the whole treatise VI.2[43] in

<sup>11</sup> D. O'Meara, *Plotinus. An Introduction to the "Enneads"*, Oxford 1993, p. 24.

<sup>12</sup> Ibidem, pp. 104–105.

<sup>13</sup> C. Guérard, *La théologie négative dans l'apophatisme grec*, RSPH 68, 1984, pp. 187–192.

<sup>14</sup> P. Hadot, *Plotyn albo prostota spojrzania*, transl. P. Domański, Kęty 2004; idem, *Czym jest filozofia starożytna?* transl. P. Domański, Warszawa 2000, pp. 205–218.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. P. Hadot, *Czym jest...*, pp. 243–269.

<sup>16</sup> P. Hadot, *Filozofia jako ćwiczenie duchowe*, transl. P. Domański, Warszawa 2003, p. 52.

<sup>17</sup> E.g. when he discusses the Plotinian apophatics (ibidem, pp. 239–252).

terms of dialectic, pointing out both its theory and application, but his interest is confined to dialectic in the strict sense,<sup>18</sup> whereas he mentions the existence of other, more intuitive exercises which he calls „voies mystiques”.<sup>19</sup> We should also mention Joachim Lacrosse<sup>20</sup> who analyzes Plotinian texts in terms of “circular” movement of discursive thought<sup>21</sup> as well as of visualizations (the function of images and metaphors).<sup>22</sup>

Michael Sells concentrates on the apophatic methods in Plotinus. In his work we can find a division of this method into „apology”, „apophatic marker” and „apophatic pact”.<sup>23</sup> He is quite specific in his analyses of Plotinian apophasis; for example, he speaks about a technique called „split reference” which uses the, sometimes present in Plotinus’ doctrine, ambiguity of the relationship between Intellect and the One. Split reference consists in employing the same pronoun as referring at the same time to Intellect and the One, which transcends our normal categories and our desire to distinguish between the two hypostases.<sup>24</sup> Another method is „double proposition semantics” which is based on antithetical statements about the One, in which Plotinus tries to combine the opposites which are not yet divided within the Absolute.<sup>25</sup> Still another technique is called „regress from reference”. It involves a complete renunciation of naming or defining the Absolute.<sup>26</sup>

Sara Rappe’s contribution consists mainly in showing the non-discursive and non-verbal aspect of Plotinian exercises.<sup>27</sup> She shows how Plotinus engages the reader in what she calls „thought experiments”.<sup>28</sup> Rappe points out in what way the text is encouraging inner concentration and attentive awareness of the mind and she gives a very interesting analysis of the famous visualization of the cosmos in V.8[31].8, in which internal geometrical relations of the visualized image are “translated” into the relations between the subject and the objects of awareness.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>18</sup> B. Collette, *Dialectique et hénologie chez Plotin*, Paris 2002, pp. 82–84 and 93–95.

<sup>19</sup> Ibidem, p. 114.

<sup>20</sup> J. Lacrosse, *L’Amour chez Plotin. Érôs hénologique, érôs noétique, érôs psychique*, Bruxelles 1994, pp. 80–91.

<sup>21</sup> Ibidem, pp. 97–104.

<sup>22</sup> Ibidem, p. 102. Cf. also the important work by R. Ferwerda: *La signification des images et des métaphores dans la pensée de Plotin*, Groningen 1965.

<sup>23</sup> M.A. Sells, *Apophasis in Plotinus. A Critical Approach*, HThR 78, 1, 2, 1985, p. 50.

<sup>24</sup> Ibidem, pp. 58–61.

<sup>25</sup> Ibidem, pp. 53–54; M. Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsayings*, Chicago 1994, p. 21.

<sup>26</sup> Ibidem, pp. 6–9 and 15.

<sup>27</sup> S. Rappe, *Reading Neoplatonism. Non-discursive Thinking in the Texts of Plotinus, Proclus, and Damascius*, Cambridge 2000, pp. 45–114. See also eadem, *Self-knowledge and Subjectivity in the Enneads*, [w:] L.P. Gerson (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus*, Cambridge 1996, pp. 250–274.

<sup>28</sup> S. Rappe, *Reading...*, pp. 78–81.

<sup>29</sup> About that cf. also R. Wallis, *ΝΟΥΣ as Experience*, [in:] R.B. Harris (ed.), *The Significance of Neoplatonism*, Albany – New York 1976, p. 124, and A. Krokiewicz, *Zarys filozofii greckiej*, Warszawa 1995, p. 438.

In my first book on Plotinus I tried to describe how the exercises work in a “phenomenological” fashion, that is, showing which faculties are engaged in the practice (imagination, discursive thought and attention) and how those faculties are used.<sup>30</sup> I also analyzed some parts of the *Enneads*, which were organized in such a way that they encouraged the reader to practice with the text and to engage in contemplative states.<sup>31</sup> However, I did not give a satisfactorily catalogue of such exercises, apart from the classification based on the faculties. Later I tried to give an initial analysis of two methods of exercise (the aporetic and the deictic) that can be found in Augustine’s philosophical works, but I did not focus on their Plotinian source, even though it seemed quite obvious that Augustine relied on his greatest philosophical authority in that matter.<sup>32</sup> My recent book contains a chapter on Plotinus, where I suggest another classification of exercises – into aphaeretic, anabatic and deictic methods.<sup>33</sup> I am also describing the agnoetic method in a forthcoming paper<sup>34</sup>.

In this paper I will take a closer look on the aporetic method and its function in Plotinus' texts.

#### THE APORETIC STATE OF MIND AS SPIRITUAL LABOR

At the beginning of the third book of his *Metaphysics*, Aristotle explains what *aporia* is. He says:

For those who wish to get clear of difficulties it is advantageous to state the difficulties well; for the subsequent free play of thought implies the solution of the previous difficulties, and it is not possible to untie a knot which one does not know. But the difficulty of our thinking points to a knot in the object; for in so far as our thought is in difficulties, it is in like case with those who are tied up; for in either case it is impossible to go forward. Therefore one should have surveyed all the difficulties beforehand, both for the reasons we have stated and because people who inquire without first stating the difficulties are like those who do not know where they have to go; besides, a man does not otherwise know even whether he has found what he is looking for or not; for the end is not clear to such a man, while to him who has first discussed the difficulties it is clear. (*Met.* 995a-b).<sup>35</sup>

<sup>30</sup> M. Stróżyński, *Mystical experience and philosophical discourse in Plotinus*, Poznań 2008, pp. 38–69.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 142–179.

<sup>32</sup> *Idem*, *Time, Self, and Aporia: Spiritual Exercise in Saint Augustine*, *AugStud* 40, 1, 2009, pp. 103–120 and *Rhetoric in the Service of Contemplation in St. Augustine*, *SPhP* 19, 2009, pp. 289–296.

<sup>33</sup> *Idem*, *Filozofia jako terapia w pismach Marka Aureliusza, Plotyna i Augustyna*, Poznań 2014, pp. 128–147.

<sup>34</sup> *Idem*, *Visus iste non a carne trahebatur. Rola zmysłów w kontemplacji w księdze VII i IX Wyznań Augustyna*, “*Vox Patrum*” 2013, 33[60] (in press).

<sup>35</sup> “ἔστι δὲ τοῖς εὐπορῆσαι βουλομένοις προὔργου τὸ διαπορῆσαι καλῶς· ἢ

Aristotle considers *aporia* to be an obstacle in thinking – an aporetic state of mind is a state of being tied up, it is a state in which one cannot think properly. *Aporia*, therefore, does not have any value *per se*; the only philosophical value is in our knowledge of *aporia*, because this knowledge enables us to overcome the problem. Aristotle proposes to begin from *aporia* in order to avoid being trapped in it and to eventually solve it.<sup>36</sup>

Andrea Nightingale in her recent paper on the relationships between *aporia*, self-knowledge and contemplation, points out that Aristotle is referring here to Plato's allegory of the cave.<sup>37</sup> Nightingale points out that whereas in Socratic dialogues *aporia* has an ethical function and it is identified with the state of not knowing,<sup>38</sup> in Plato it has mostly epistemological nature, similar to the one that Aristotle was to determine later so clearly in the *Metaphysics* (e.g. in *Resp.* 523a – 525a, where *aporia* is a beginning of the soul's dialectical ascent to the Forms). But Nightingale addresses also an interesting fact that in the allegory of the cave *aporia* appears in a different context. There an aporetic state of mind is experienced by the philosopher who has already seen the truth and was released of the chains; the source of the *aporia* is that what he sees with his bodily eyes seems to him far less real than what he sees with his intellect (515d). Nightingale considers this to be both epistemological and ethical type of *aporia*.<sup>39</sup>

Aristotelian way of using *aporia* makes it a point of departure for philosophical analysis. As Alan Code points out, “for Aristotle the puzzlement is the result of improper education, and is betrayed in the demand, unreasonable by his lights, that a proof be given of everything. [...] Aristotle is confident that puzzles are not an impediment to the discernment of truth.”<sup>40</sup> Plotinus follows that tradition, when he used traditional *aporias* to begin philosophical discussions, both in his school and later, in his treatises which reflected oral dialogues during his lectures. Nearly a century ago Bréhier described the structure of a Plotinian treatise, in terms of the following parts: (1) *l'aporie*, (2) *la démonstration*, (3)

---

γὰρ ὕστερον εὐπορία λύσις τῶν πρότερον ἀπορουμένων ἐστὶ, λύειν δ' οὐκ ἔστιν ἀγνοοῦντας τὸν δεσμόν, ἀλλ' ἢ τῆς διανοίας ἀπορία δηλοῖ τοῦτο περὶ τοῦ πράγματος· ἢ γὰρ ἀπορεῖ, ταύτη παραπήσιον πέπονθε τοῖς δεδεμένοις· ἀδύνατον γὰρ ἀμφοτέρως προελθεῖν εἰς τὸ πρόσθεν. διὸ δεῖ τὰς δυσχερείας τεθεωρηκέναι πάσας πρότερον, τούτων τε χάριν καὶ διὰ τὸ τοὺς ζητοῦντας ἄνευ τοῦ διαπορηῆσαι πρώτων ὁμοίους εἶναι τοῖς ποῖ δεῖ βαδίζειν ἀγνοοῦσι, καὶ πρὸς τούτοις οὐδὲ πότε<ρον> τὸ ζητούμενον εὗρηκεν ἢ μὴ γινώσκειν· τὸ γὰρ τέλος τούτῳ μὲν οὐ δῆλον τῷ δὲ προηπορηκότι δῆλον” (Greek text: Aristoteles, *Metaphysica*, ed. W. Jaeger, Oxonii 1985; translation by W.D. Ross, in: *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. J. Barnes, Princeton 1984).

<sup>36</sup> See A. Code, *Aristotle and the History of Skepticism*, [in:] *Ancient Models of Mind. Studies in Human and Divine Rationality*, ed. A. Nightingale, D. Sedley, Cambridge 2010, p. 98.

<sup>37</sup> A. Nightingale, *Plato on aporia and self-knowledge*, [in:] *Ancient Models of Mind...*, p. 19.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 9–16.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 20.

<sup>40</sup> A. Code, *op. cit.*, p. 109.

*la persuasion, (4) l'hymne, l'élevation, la méditation intérieure.*<sup>41</sup> However, as I will try to demonstrate, there is also a different use of *aporia* in Plotinus, which is more akin to the tradition of Socrates, in that it has a practical, ethical dimension, but its meaning and functions are different. The use of *aporia* that I will try to elucidate here is both epistemological and ethical, but we cannot find any precedent of exactly such use of it in Platonic dialogues. It is related more to spiritual exercises than to theoretical analyses of philosophical problems. This second use of *aporia* makes it not the point of departure but the point of arrival or rather – the gate through which one should pass in order to get to the final destination.

In V.3[49].16 Plotinus deals with Intellect-Being understood as possessing all beings, self-sufficient, self-present, possessing the perfect life and perfect knowledge of itself. But Plotinus is certain that Intellect-Being cannot be the supreme Source of existence and that there is something higher than that. He poses an *aporia*, one of the greatest problems of his philosophy: how something that is multiple (Intellect-Being) derives from the absolutely simple? How something that possesses the form of the good derives from the Good itself? (V.3[49].16.16–9). His answer, which he repeats several times, is that the Source must be something higher than Intellect-Being and that the latter is totally dependent on that Source. In the course of his reasoning Plotinus arrives at a question (which opens chapter 17 of the treatise): What then is better than the wisest life, without fault or mistake, and than Intellect which contains all things, and than universal life and universal Intellect? (V.3[49].17.1–3).<sup>42</sup>

Plotinus started with *aporia*, but now he also arrives at *aporia* – there must be something higher than the perfect being, life, and intellect, but how can something be more than that? How can something be more perfect than all that perfection? When we consider the structure of the text, at this point there is a break in the flow of thought. Plotinus asks repeatedly what is above Intellect-Being, but the answer is only silence. At the same time, he insists: ἀλλὰ δεῖ ἀναβῆναι (V.3[49].17.6). The necessity to go higher and the inability to move creates a significant tension here. This tension is partially released when Plotinus makes a paradoxical statement about the One, referring to Plato (*Resp.* 509b8–9): it... is not itself existence but beyond it and beyond self-sufficiency. (V.3[49].17.13–4).<sup>43</sup>

But is the problem solved, is the *aporia* neutralized? Rather not, since Plotinus arrives at the conclusion that the One does not exist, it is not a being. This statement – even though it can be explained and qualified (e.g.: Plotinus does not

<sup>41</sup> E. Bréhier, *La philosophie de Plotin*, Paris 1928, pp. 17–19.

<sup>42</sup> “τί οὖν ἐστὶ κρείττον ζῶης ἐμφρονεστάτου καὶ ἀπαισίου καὶ ἀναμαρτήτου καὶ νοῦ πάντα ἔχοντος. καὶ ζῶης πάσης καὶ νοῦ παντός;”

<sup>43</sup> “ἐκεῖνο αὐτὸ οὐκ ὄν οὐσία, ἀλλ’ ἐπέκεινα ταύτης καὶ ἐπέκεινα αὐταρκείας”

mean that the One is nothingness, he just wants to emphasize its transcendence etc.) – is a radical problem to anyone sincerely interested in philosophy and religion, because this statement is beyond our comprehension. It is actually the *aporia* intensified, not solved. Here Plotinus comments on the function of this intensified *aporia*:

Is that enough? Can we end the discussion by saying this? No, my soul is still in even stronger labour. Perhaps she is now at the point when she must bring forth, having reached the fulness of her birth-pangs in her eager longing for the One. But we must sing another charm to her, if we can find one anywhere to allay her pangs. Perhaps there might be one in what we have said already, if we sang it over and over again. And what other charm can we find which has a sort of newness about it? The soul runs over all truths, and all the same shuns the truths we know if someone tries to express them in words and discursive thought; for discursive thought, in order to express anything in words, has to consider one thing after another: this is the method of description; but how can one describe the absolutely simple? But it is enough if the intellect comes into contact with it; but when it has done so, while the contact lasts, it is absolutely impossible, nor has it time, to speak; but it is afterwards that it is able to reason about it. (V.3[49].17.15–28).<sup>44</sup>

In the light of this passage it could be said that the aporetic method uses *aporia* to create a painful inner tension. It is done by means of reasoning, by using concepts and arguments. *Aporia* here is not a point of departure, a problem to be solved in meditation, but it is an end of meditation and the meditation is designed to intensify the *aporia*, to make it painful. But the pain is not merely a pain of failure, hesitation or ignorance, it is creative birth-pangs, it is mental labor that can bear the baby (cf. Pl. *Theae.* 151a-b, 210b). Plotinus, therefore, like Socrates in *Theaetetus*, can cause the *aporia* of birth-pangs in his disciples as well as help them to overcome it by bearing the baby. But – we should ask – what is this baby? Plotinus is quite clear about that. Whereas the ἐπωδὴ (cf. Pl. *Phae.* 77e-78a) are the words that are written or read in the course of meditation (and Plotinus' imagined interlocutor considers a possibility of repeating what was previously said to ease the pain of tension), the metaphorical baby that is delivered through this process is what Plotinus calls “touching” the One (ἐφάψασθαι). This touching, however, this intuitive, intellectual contact with the One, has nothing to do with words and reasonings – a specifically organized

<sup>44</sup>“Ἄρκει οὖν ταῦτα λέγοντας ἀπαλλαχθῆναι; Ἡ ἔτι ἡ ψυχὴ ὠδίνει καὶ μᾶλλον. ἴσως οὖν χορὴ αὐτὴν ἤδη γεννῆσαι αἰξασαν πρὸς αὐτὸ πληρωθεῖσαν ὠδίνων. οὐ μὴν ἀλλὰ πάλιν ἐπαστέον, εἴ ποθὲν τινα πρὸς τὴν ὠδῖνα ἐπωδὴν εὐροίμεν. τάχα δὲ καὶ ἐκ τῶν ἤδη λεχθέντων, εἰ πολλάκις τις ἐπάδοι, γένοιτο. τίς οὖν ὡσπερ καινὴ ἐπωδὴ ἄλλη; ἐπιθέουσα γὰρ πᾶσι τοῖς ἀληθεῖσι καὶ ὧν μετέχομεν ἀληθῶν ὅμως ἐκφεύγει, εἴ τις βούλοιο εἰπεῖν καὶ διανοηθῆναι, ἐπεὶ περ δεῖ τὴν διάνοιαν, ἵνα τι εἴπη, ἄλλο καὶ ἄλλο λαβεῖν· οὕτω γὰρ καὶ διέξοδος· ἐν δὲ πάντα ἀπλῶ διέξοδος τίς ἐστιν; ἀλλ' ἄρκει κἄν νοερώς ἐφάψασθαι ἐφαψάμενον δέ, ὅτε ἐφάπτεται, πάντα μηδὲν μήτε δύνασθαι μήτε σχολῆν ἄγειν λέγειν, ὅστερον δὲ περὶ αὐτοῦ συλλογίζεσθαι.”

thinking led to this contact, but this contact in itself excludes thinking (understood as *logos*, as arguments and concepts, the whole διέξοδος).

So there is a deep incompatibility of discursive thinking with the reality that has to be known. Plotinus emphasizes that the soul, using concepts and arguments, moves through this reality, but cannot grasp it, since thinking process involves time and change, while this reality is atemporal and unchanging. But it does not mean that there is no need of thinking, reasoning. On the contrary, this is the method here. But the method is aporetic, that is, thinking should not avoid paradox, contradiction and incomprehensibility, but, on the contrary, it should intensify them.

Plotinus does not answer one important question: why the painful tension of aporia is or at least can be released at the final point into contemplation of the One? We can speculate that the mechanism of the aporetic exercise is based on the fact that once the faculty of reasoning has reached its limits and experienced its painful inadequacy in terms of knowing the One (and even Intellect-Being, for that matter), it “surrenders” and, then, gives way to the higher faculty, that of intellectual intuition. In the traditional use of aporia the philosopher tries to use reasoning in order to arrive in the end at some knowledge about the object that can be expressed in words. In the Plotinian use of aporia, on the other hand, the philosopher tries to use reasoning in order to arrive at the painful tension of failure, of contradiction, of incapability. But this is not merely a failure: this is or should be a painful birth of intuitive contemplation.

#### VARIOUS USES OF APORIA

Scholars writing about aporia in Plotinus place it, correctly, in a broader field of apophasis. Baladi speaks about aporia as a form of negation,<sup>45</sup> while Guérard – as a form of negative theology. He also divides it into analogy and gradation.<sup>46</sup> Sells sees aporia as a part of apophatic discourse,<sup>47</sup> but I would not equate what I call the aporetic method with any of the methods analyzed by Sells. It is certainly close to them, but there are also important differences (Sells does not develop the idea of the tension and its contemplative outcome, which is central to my interpretation). The closest to my understanding of the aporetic method is a remark by Christian Guérard who said about aporia (which he calls “la négation”): „elle est avant tout impuissance, et que l’impuissance est dynamique. La négation théologique devient enchantement de l’âme et prepare à l’union mystique”.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>45</sup> N. Baladi, *La pensée de Plotin*, Paris 1970, p. 28.

<sup>46</sup> C. Guérard, op. cit., p. 189.

<sup>47</sup> M. Sells, *Apophasis...*, pp. 49–51.

<sup>48</sup> C. Guérard, op. cit., p. 192.

Another place in which *aporia* is used in such a way is VI.8[39].11.1–14. But this passage is also interesting, because we find there a twofold use of *aporia*. First, it is conceived of as a spiritual exercise, and then, it is used as a point of departure for a discussion which ends in some philosophical conclusions that are acceptable to reason.

In chapter 10 Plotinus discussed whether the One exists by accident or by necessity and he concludes that the One is as it is, because it is best and because it is a master of itself. The contradictions in that chapter are not only those between necessity and chance, but also those between being without origin and causing itself to be. The One seems to be a cause of its own existence, but at the same time it has not come into being either by virtue of something else, or by virtue of itself (τὸ οὖν πρὸ ὑποστάσεως πῶς ἂν ἢ ὑπ' ἄλλου ἢ ὑφ' αὐτοῦ ὑπέσται, VI.8[39].10.37–8). Those considerations reach a climax in the question opening chapter 11: Ἀλλὰ τὸ μὴ ὑποστὰν τοῦτο τί; The answer to this intensified *aporia* is a painful, silent resignation: We must go away in silence and enquire no longer, aware in our minds that there is no way out. (VI.8[39].11.1–3).<sup>49</sup> But Plotinus does the contrary – he starts to explain the reason of the *aporia*. We understand things only by reference to their principles and causes, so when we deal with something that is not caused or dependent on anything else, we cannot understand it.

By means of those explanations the negative state of painful resignation turns into a positive state of birth-pangs: *aporia* leads to contemplation. Plotinus says that we should not reason about the One (which in the *aporetic* state was experienced to be pointless), but, instead, we must make no enquiry about it, grasping it, if possible, in our minds by learning that it is not right to add anything to it. (VI.8[39].11.11–13).<sup>50</sup> I understand λαβεῖν here as an equivalent of ἐφάψασθαι in the previously analyzed passage: it refers to intuitive contemplation of the One. In addition, μαθόντας refers to the experience of the *aporetic* state of mind, which teaches us about the limits of thinking with regard to higher dimensions of reality.

But Plotinus continues with the statement: But in general we probably think of this difficulty, those of us who think about this nature at all...<sup>51</sup> and he starts to point out that many problems with understanding the One are caused by the use of imagination and material categories in thinking about the One, such as place or space (VI.8[39].11.13 i n.). This time he does not use *aporia* in order to create painful tension of spiritual birth-pangs, but in order to explain that

<sup>49</sup> “ἢ σιωπήσαντας δεῖ ἀπελθεῖν, καὶ ἐν ἀπόρῳ τῇ γνώμῃ θεμένους μηδὲν ἔτι ζητεῖν”

<sup>50</sup> “τὸ μηδὲν δεῖν περὶ αὐτοῦ ζητεῖν, αὐτὸ μόνον εἰ δυνατόν αὐτοῖς λαβόντας, ἐν νῶ μηδὲν αὐτῷ θεμιτὸν εἶναι προσάπτειν μαθόντας”

<sup>51</sup> “ὅλως δὲ εἰοίκαμεν ταύτην τὴν ἀπορίαν ἐνθυμηθῆναι, περὶ ταύτης τῆς φύσεως οἵπερ ἐνεθυμήθημεν...”

when we think about the One we should conceive of it as alone, beyond space, limits, extension, quality, form etc. Even though this passage can be understood on two levels, first, as a philosophical discussion of the nature of the One, and, second, as still another spiritual exercise (the aphaeretic), consisting in an elimination of various, hierarchically organized attributes of the object (or the self),<sup>52</sup> it is clear that aporia here functions differently, more traditionally, as a point of departure.

Plotinus also refers to aporia in VI.9[9].3–4. It is quite similar to the later passage from V.3[49].17, which we discussed at the beginning, since the problem is again how there can be something higher than Intellect-Being and what is the nature of it. Plotinus again states that the One is neither Intellect, nor Being, but something other and higher than them. It is also without any form. Then the philosopher enumerates, in the one of the most famous apophatic passages, what the One is not: not a thing, nor quantity, nor quality, nor intellect, nor soul, nor in motion, nor at rest, nor in place, nor in time (VI.9[9].3.41–2). But the aporia arises precisely because the One is also not the opposite of the things mentioned: it is, for example, not nothingness, not ignorant (because not-intellect) or inanimate (because not-soul) etc. Here Plotinus describes the aporetic state as moving around the One, in a (painful?) desire to know it, but, as profanes, forced to stay out of the temple and unable to enter it. In this passage aporia is equated precisely with this inability to attain the contemplation of the One and with the necessity to use words which are, after all, all about us, not about the One (VI.9[9].3.50–54).

Plotinus says that we are sometimes near it and sometimes falling away in our perplexities about it (VI.9[9].3.53–54),<sup>53</sup> and in the next sentence he explains the source of the aporia which makes it impossible to think about the One:

The perplexity arises especially because our awareness of that One is not by way of reasoned knowledge or of intellectual perception, as with other intelligible things, but by way of a presence superior to knowledge. The soul experiences its falling away from being one and is not altogether one when it has reasoned knowledge of anything; for reasoned knowledge is a rational process, and a rational process is many. The soul therefore goes past the One and falls into number and multiplicity. One must therefore run up above knowledge and in no way depart from being one... (VI.9[9].4.1–8).<sup>54</sup>

<sup>52</sup> See M. Stróżyński, *Filozofia jako terapia...*, pp. 128–132.

<sup>53</sup> “ὅτε μὲν ἐγγύς, ὅτε δὲ ἀποπίπτοντας ταῖς περὶ αὐτὸ ἀπορίαις”.

<sup>54</sup> “Γίνεται δὲ ἡ ἀπορία μάλιστα, ὅτι μηδὲ κατ’ ἐπιστήμην ἢ σύνεσιν ἐκείνου μηδὲ κατὰ νόησιν, ὥσπερ τὰ ἄλλα νοητά, ἀλλὰ κατὰ παρουσίαν ἐπιστήμης κρείττονα. πάσχει δὲ ἡ ψυχὴ τοῦ ἐν εἶναι τὴν ἀπόστασιν καὶ οὐ πάντῃ ἐστὶν ἔν, ὅταν ἐπιστήμην τοῦ λαμβάνῃ· λόγος γὰρ ἡ ἐπιστήμη, πολλὰ δὲ ὁ λόγος. παρέρχεται οὖν τὸ ἐν εἰς ἀριθμὸν καὶ πλῆθος πεσοῦσα. ὑπὲρ ἐπιστήμην τοῖνυν δεῖ δραμεῖν καὶ μηδαμῇ ἐκβαίνειν τοῦ ἐν εἶναι...”

In this passage, again Plotinus explains that the aporetic state should not become the end in itself, but become labor from which contemplation is born. What was called in the previously discussed passages “touching” or “taking”, here is called the “presence” of the One, the presence which is more powerful than knowledge. Aporia is a temporal state of not-knowing, brought about by means of contradictions and paradoxes which cannot be resolved within the field of discursive thought. But there are two kinds of not-knowing – one is sheer ignorance or skepticism, and this is what the aporetic state could become without contemplation; the other is what later will be called by Nicolaus Cusanus the *docta ignorantia*, a not-knowing which is at the same time a superior kind of knowledge – this is contemplative contact with the One that is born out of aporia.

#### THE APORETIC METHOD AS A WAY TOWARDS INTELLECT

A slightly different example of the aporetic method can be found in VI.5[23].11–12. At the beginning of chapter 11, Plotinus asks: Ἀλλὰ πῶς τὸ ἀδιάστατον παρήκει παρὰ πᾶν σῶμα μέγεθος τοσοῦτον ἔχον; καὶ πῶς οὐ διασπᾶται ἐν ὃν καὶ ταυτό; ὁ πολλακίς ἠπόρεται, παύειν τοῦ λόγου τὸ ἄπορον τῆς διανοίας περιττῇ προτυμῖα βουλομένου (VI.5[23].11.1–4).<sup>55</sup> As we can see, aporia is a departure point here, but Plotinus warns lest we try to solve it too quickly, thus preparing the reader for the intensification of the aporia through a spiritual exercise.

Plotinus initially seems to have found a simple solution of the aporia, saying that this “nature” (the One or Intellect-Being – he seems to shift between those levels throughout the treatise) is not material, temporal and spatial, so the problem is irrelevant: πᾶσα ἐστὶ δύναμις οὐδαμοῦ τοσήδε (VI.5[23].11.14–15).<sup>56</sup> However, Plotinus does not seem to be content with his answer and he returns to the initial aporia. Why does he do it? It seems that it is not only for the sake of further elucidations, but for the sake of creating a painful tension, which could release into contemplation of a higher level than λόγος (“reasoned knowledge,” in Armstrong translation). At the beginning of chapter 12 Plotinus asks again the same aporetic question: Πάρεστιν οὖν πῶς; He compares the mysterious presence of spiritual nature to the presence of life in living beings. Because they live, they possess their life completely, and not merely a portion of it. At the same time, as Plotinus suggests, most people tend to imagine Life (Intellect-Being) in a material way, as a kind of subtle energy that fills and

<sup>55</sup> „But how can the unspaced stretch over all body, which has so great a size? And how being one and the same, is it not torn apart? This difficulty has often been raised, when the argument was excessively anxious to end the discursive reason’s difficulty”.

<sup>56</sup> „it is all power, nowhere of this particular size”.

permeates the world. But if it fills the world in a material fashion, there will be more of it in some places than in others (more in bigger places, less in smaller). Plotinus' aporia, which is intensified, not resolved, during this meditation, has a purpose of overcome what O'Meara called a "category mistake".<sup>57</sup> The philosopher encourages the reader to imagine that he divides the vital energy of Intellect-Being into still smaller portions, while, at the same time, every portion must remain equal to the whole, because otherwise in some parts of the world, in some beings, the power of Intellect-Being would be smaller than in others, which is not possible.

Of course, this task is impossible to perform. The part is always smaller than the whole, so any attempt of imagining Intellect as something spatial or material end in failure (if it is still Intellect, that is, if its parts are equal to the whole). At this point the aporetic tension should give way to the contemplation of the all-present Intellect-Being in the material world. But Plotinus assumes it could not be achieved by the reader, so he continues with his meditation, giving another opportunity to the reader. At this point he returns to yet another aporia which was introduced a bit earlier, in chapter 10: how can the two universes, the material and the spiritual one, coexist together? Plotinus shows that it is impossible and absurd to imagine the spiritual world of Forms as existing somewhere "outside" of the material world of sense. He says it will be more ridiculous (*γελοιοτέρω ἔσται*, VI.5[23].10.45) and that there is need to separate the two worlds. The aporia of undivided presence was introduced in relation to the aporia of the two worlds. Now they are joined together in the question how one can see Intellect-Being in the material world. Plotinus addresses the possibility that when we hear that Intellect is present equally everywhere in the material world, we might be tempted to look for it with our sensible consciousness in the material world. The direction is right, since the noetic world can be contemplated through the material world by means of what Plotinus calls the "Lynceus sight" (V.8[31].4.26),<sup>58</sup> that is, if the senses are fully transparent to the intellectual faculty)<sup>59</sup>, but we can easily fall prey of our mental habits.

Plotinus points out that if we focus our attention on any particular thing, imagining that we can see Intellect "in them", we will not be able to see the real presence of Being everywhere. That is, as he explains elsewhere, because consciousness is narrowed by concentration on any particular object (*ἡλάττωται*, VI.7[38].33.8).<sup>60</sup> So the combination of the two aporias gives rise to the third, more intensified one: focusing on Being makes it impossible to see it. The tension here is achieved due to the fact that we naturally associate seeing some-

<sup>57</sup>D. O'Meara, op. cit., p. 24.

<sup>58</sup>Cf. *Apollon*. I, 151–5.

<sup>59</sup>On this see M. Stróżyński, *W ciele czy poza ciałem? Relacja kontemplacji do zmysłów w filozofii Plotyna*, "Studia Philosophica Wratislaviensia", 9, 1, 2014, pp. 7–26.

<sup>60</sup>Cf. *Pl. Parm.* 145e – 146c.

thing with making efforts and focusing our attention on it. Plotinus wants the reader to fail in finding Intellect in order to open to the experience of not concentrating on anything particular. When the efforts stop, the field of attention can enter a higher cognitive level: it expands infinitely and encompass everything in a timeless, spaceless intuition. Then, as Plotinus explains, the state of contemplation is present – we notice that the movement of thought has come to an end and we realize that we are in the All; we seek nothing anymore, because we possess everything.<sup>61</sup>

## CONCLUSION

It seems that in Plotinus' philosophy aporia played not only the traditional role, that is, the role of the point of departure for philosophical discussion, as Bréhier pointed out. The other role is that of an element of spiritual exercise, of a method that I propose to call "aporetic". It can be placed within the general field of negative or apophatic theology, but it is a specific method of meditation and a method of writing a philosophical text, which is designed to lead the reader to the state of contemplation. The essence of this method is the aporetic state of mind, to which Plotinus leads the reader by using contradictions and paradoxes which seem to render all thinking pointless. The aporetic state is a state of a painful tension, of not-knowing, hesitation, resignation and incapability, but it also can and should become a state of spiritual labor. If the reader is lucky, the painful tension is released into the state of contemplation which replaces discursive thinking.

In most passages (e.g. V.3[49].17, VI.8[39].11, VI.9[9].3–4) the aporetic method is used to arrive at the contemplation of the One, but it also can be used to contemplate Intellect, as in VI.5[23].12. Because both Intellect and the One are beyond discursive thought and concepts, both are atemporal and spaceless, the intuitive seeing of those dimensions of reality requires the suspension of reasoning faculty. But Intellect, even though it is higher than reasoning, can be more easily expressed by reason, because its internal structure is the base for all reasoning (e.g. concepts stem from the Forms). The One, on the other hand, is absolutely simple and does not possess a "structure" that could be later expressed in concepts and propositions. Intellect is the object of the perfect knowledge, the One is the "object" that is not an object and that is why there is no knowledge of the One, only contemplative not-knowing (touching, presence etc.). That is why the aporetic method is much more suitable for the latter.

---

<sup>61</sup> Cf. P. Hadot, *Structure et thèmes du Traité 38 (VI.7) de Plotin*, ANRW II, 36, 1, 1987, p. 663.

THE APORETIC METHOD IN PLOTINUS' *ENNEADS*

## Summary

There seem to be two tendencies in the Plotinian scholarship concerning spiritual method of the *Enneads*. First is more general and the other more specific and focused on the analysis of the text. The paper follows the second type of study and attempts to present and analyze Plotinian use of aporia as a spiritual exercise. Traditionally aporia was used as a point of departure for philosophical discussion (e.g. by Aristotle) and sometimes Plotinus follows this tradition. But at other times he uses aporia as a point of arrival – he creates a painful tension due to the fact that discursive thought is unable to know the nature of the One (or, less frequently, also Intellect). The tension becomes a sort of spiritual labor in which the contemplation is born and the tension is released. Several passages from the *Enneads* are analyzed to show various uses of that method.