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Original research paper**THE LIFE OF CONTEMPLATION AND THE LIFE OF ACTION: PLOTINUS AND ΦΡΟΝΗΣΙΣ****Abstract:**

*The analysis of the characteristics of the concept φρόνησις (phronesis) in Plotinus' philosophy inevitably opens a wider discussion about the status and autonomy of ethical theory in Plotinus' philosophy and about the relationship between contemplative and active life. On the one hand, the paradigmatic interpretations hold that there is an otherworldly, self-centred and elitist ethics in Plotinus' philosophy, and on the other, in the recent interpretations, the so-called "ethics of descent", as opposed to "ethics of ascent", the autonomy of πράξις is asserted. Without examining φρόνησις with a predefined position about the status of practical ethics in Plotinus, in this article the standpoint on this issue will be formed precisely through an analysis of φρόνησις, as a key axis around which the understanding of practical reasoning and action develops. In this analysis, the connection between φρόνησις and likeness to God, understood as the ultimate goal of life, will be investigated; as well as the relationship between θεωρία and πράξις, considered through the relationship between φρόνησις and σοφία, as well as through the conception of virtue as ἔξις. The goal is to show to what extent φρόνησις, and thus ethical practice, is dependent on contemplation, that is, whether φρόνησις has an autonomous status or performs an intermediary role between the intellect and the human soul.*

**Keywords:** Plotinus, ethics, φρόνησις, contemplation, πράξις

### **Introduction: ethics of escapism or philosophy of the human affairs?**

Disagreements are open about whether we can speak about ethical theory, or rather, about the practical aspects of ethical action in Plotinus' philosophy. In the last few decades, more attention has been devoted to the question of the reconstruction of Plotinus' ethical theory, against the dominant assumptions that within the framework of late ancient Platonism there is no autonomous interest in ethical theory or that there is some kind of "escapist" ethics, and that in general, this is a philosophical position that focuses more on the metaphysical principles of the transcendent world than of the physical world in which the world of man belongs. Namely, it is about whether one can speak of ethics, as Aristotle defines it, as a "philosophy of human affairs" (*NE* 1181b15). In doing so, it is taken into account that significant ethical issues are elaborated by Plotinus and that they are presented in the first book of the "Enneads". The division of the philosophical disciplines in the "Enneads" into ethics, physics (books II-III), and metaphysics (books IV-VI), as arranged by Porphyry, where ethics has its own area of inquiry and has its own place in the system of philosophy, becomes essential in the school of Iamblichus, and also in the schools of Athens and Alexandria. However, despite this clear differentiation of the ethical sphere, questions about the status and autonomy of ethics in the overall Plotinus system are reopening, where the focus is put on practical ethics and the implications of action in the external world.

Plotinus formulates theses that give the impression that Neoplatonism changes the interest in ethics that is dominant in Classical Greek and Hellenistic-Roman philosophy, more precisely in the philosophy of Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus, and the Stoics, where a harmonious relationship between contemplative and active life is established. Plotinus is commonly seen as an otherworldly mystical ascetic who is completely devoted to separating himself from bodily existence in order to achieve unity with the transcendent God, which implies total indifference to all that is external and human. Because of this, it is believed that he showed no interest in ethical issues, devoted entirely to himself and his ascent to the transcendent, and therefore did not concern with the issues that affect our life with others. To these theses, Bene adds the one according to which precisely the otherworldly, self-centred and elitist ethics of the late antique sage had nothing to offer the common man. (Bene, 2013, 141) However, a broader perspective towards Plotinus' philosophy in the aspect of affirmation of certain ethical principles, which are not in conflict with his metaphysics, is developing among some modern authors. For example, Smith develops the theory of double action according to which action is considered an external activity of contemplation, which, in turn, represents an internal activity. (Smith, 2005, 71) According to O'Meara, the dominant interpretations are derived from various caricature concepts of the Platonists of late antiquity. He believes that the difficulties for the conceptualization of ethical theories from late antiquity lie in the little knowledge and understanding of the texts of the authors of late

Platonism, but also in their theoretical basis, which is mainly grounded on metaphysical foundation. (O'Meara, 2017, 240)

The status of practical ethics in Plotinus' philosophy is an extremely important issue in the context of the elaboration of concepts such as φρόνησις (phronesis)<sup>1</sup>, which is the subject of this text. The concept φρόνησις is explicitly elaborated in Aristotle's "Nicomachean Ethics", and as can be seen from the textual testimonies, Plotinus gives it a certain role in his philosophy. According to Aristotle, φρόνησις is an intellectual virtue that denotes the excellence of the decision-making, reasoning, part of the rational soul and refers to the ethical virtues as their rational regulator, and the context in which it develops is precisely the sphere of practical action. (NE VI. 5; cf. Поповска, 2018) Plotinus as a Neoplatonist takes most of his ethical standpoints from Plato, but his views are also influenced by some of Aristotle's views, such as the distinction between intellectual (to which φρόνησις belongs) and ethical virtues. Because the presence of φρόνησις in some ethical theory is a key axis around which the understanding of practical reasoning and action develops, the status of φρόνησις can reveal much about the status and nature of ethics in Plotinus. Thus, instead of starting an examination of φρόνησις with a predefined position about the status of practical ethics in Plotinus, in this text this position will be created precisely by analysing φρόνησις.

### Likeness of God and φρόνησις

An important aspect for understanding Plotinus' concept of φρόνησις is the elucidation of the relationship between life's ultimate goal and virtue. The second chapter of the first book of Plotinus' "Enneads", which is devoted to virtue, Plotinus begins with a reference to Plato's "Theaetetus", where Socrates states: "evil... must inevitably haunt human life, and prowl about this earth. That is why a man should make all haste to escape from earth to heaven; and escape means becoming as like God as possible; and a man becomes like God when he becomes just and pious, with φρόνησις" (*Tht.* 176a-b). In the following, Plotinus further elaborates on what the likeness of God means, by adding "altogether in virtue" (*Enn.* I 2. 1). From this passage, it can be seen that Plotinus believes that the goal of human life should be attaining likeness of God. At the same time, virtues, such as justice, piety and φρόνησις, do not represent goals, nor does their achievement constitute well-being, but rather represent means to achieve likeness - the goal of life. Thus, according to Plotinus, they have a preparatory and instrumental role.

Plotinus elaborates a detailed theory of the virtues in which, similar to his ontological theory, he establishes a theory of hierarchization of the virtues.

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<sup>1</sup>Due to translation pluralism in the English language ("practical wisdom", "prudence", "practical intelligence"), the term φρόνησις in this article will be used in its ancient Greek original. In the quotations that follow, it will be noted in its nominative form.

He distinguishes two types of virtues: civil (political) and “higher” or purifying virtues. Plotinus puts both types of virtues into operation in the process of attaining likeness of God.

As civic he considers the cardinal virtues already defined by Plato: φρόνησις, courage, temperance (balanced control, self-control) and justice. “Φρόνησις which has to do with discursive reason, courage which has to do with the emotions, balanced control which consist in a sort of agreement and harmony of passion and reason, justice which makes each of these parts agree in ‘minding their own business where ruling and being ruled are concerned’” (*Enn.* I 2. 1, 17-22). According to Plotinus, the function of the civic virtues is to restrain the passions, but also to remove false opinions. They represent measure, understanding the soul as matter. By establishing a measure of that which is measureless and indefinite, namely the corporeal and the passionate, we obtain a part of the divine measure, which is itself measureless. In addition to their name, they do not directly address the *res publica*, namely community life or any social relations, but only the “inner republic”. Although he acquires the list of virtues from Plato, Plotinus’ sage is far from Plato’s philosopher-king who is concerned with the welfare of the community.

However, likeness is not achieved on the basis of these virtues, but on the basis of the so-called “higher” or purifying virtues. This group includes the same four virtues mentioned earlier, but now redefined in the context in which they should direct man to the process of separation of the soul from bodily life so that it can be freed from bodily experiences. While by means of the civic virtues one achieves μετριοπάθεια (*metriopatheia*, moderation of the passions), with the purificatory ones one achieves ἀπάθεια (*apatheia*, freedom from passions). These four virtues, placed in the context of soul purification, are mentioned by Plato in “Phaedo” (69b-c). Plotinus says:

the soul is evil when it is thoroughly mixed with the body and shares its experiences and has all the same opinions, it will be good and possess virtue when it no longer has the same opinions but acts alone – this is intelligence and φρόνησις – and does not share the body’s experiences – this is self-control – and is not afraid of departing from the body – this is courage – and is ruled by reason and intellect, without opposition – and this is justice (*Enn.* I 2. 3, 13-19).

Furthermore, in *Enn.* I 6. 6. Plotinus defines φρόνησις as a purifying virtue as follows: “φρόνησις is an intellectual activity which turns away from the things below and leads the soul to those above”. With these virtues the soul is purified from its attachment to the body and turns to itself and to God. Thus, the civic virtues moderate passion, and the “higher” virtues eliminate them. But the mere attainment of virtues does not mean identification with God; virtue is a disposition of the soul, and God has no virtues.

The relationship between the two types of virtues is problematic especially because there is a relationship of subordination between them. On the one hand, there is the causal ontological-axiological relation which is directed from top to bottom, and on the other hand, there is the possibility of abandoning the civic virtues once the purifying virtues are acquired, which would mean that they represent only a transitional step towards moral elevation. It would entail a state of inactivity in the sphere of the relationship with other people. Plotinus considers this relationship and holds that he who possesses the higher necessarily possesses the lower in potency, but he who possesses the lower does not necessarily possess the higher virtues. (*Enn.* I 2. 7, 11-13). The good man, according to Plotinus, in spite of possessing the higher virtues, according to the circumstances, will act in agreement with the civic virtues.

### **Φρόνησις through the relationship of θεωρία (theoria) and πράξις (praxis)**

When action is concerned, Plotinus is clear: once man has acquired the higher virtues, he will act according to them. As far as possible, Plotinus recommends, "civic" life should be avoided because the paradigm of the wise is God, not the good man who is guided by civic virtues. However, "separation" does not mean "breaking up" with bodily life because Plotinus considers that there is some continuity between the good man and God; according to him, it is a relationship like that of the copy and the paradigm, "two pictures of the same subject to each other" (*Enn.* I 2. 7, 20-30). The question of the succession of the acquisition of the virtues is resolved by Plotinus in *Enn.* I 3, where he takes a more dialectical position and establishes a more dynamic process. Namely, the subordination of virtues does not mean that once the lower type of virtue is acquired, it will be neglected in the process of further ascent to higher virtues. They improve and perfect each other. Political values are imperfect and incomplete without the "higher ones", and man cannot be wise and a dialectician without political virtues. They must, says Plotinus, develop either before or simultaneously with wisdom. (*Enn.* I 3. 6, 15-19).

However, this explanation of the relation of the two types of virtue does not clearly clarify the areas of θεωρία and πράξις, especially since throughout the text the sphere of πράξις is often subordinated to the sphere of θεωρία. According to Plotinus, all things, not only man, tend by nature to reach θεωρία, and that πράξις and ποίησις (poiesis) arise secondarily from this tendency. (*Enn.* III 8. 1) The practical life is concerned with the necessities of the body, while the life devoted to contemplation is the life that is turned towards knowledge and God – the best life that the soul can achieve. This second authentic way of life is a paradigm of the first, namely that the practical life should tend to become similar to the theoretical one.

The status of these two spheres can be analysed by the relationship that Plotinus establishes between σοφία and φρόνησις. In the third chapter of the first "Enneads" he says:

The intellectual virtues have principles from dialectic almost as their proper possession; although they are with matter most of their principles came from that higher realm. The other virtues apply reasoning (λογισμούς) to particular experiences and actions, but φρόνησις is a kind of superior reasoning (ἐπιλογισμός) concerned more with the universal; it considers question of mutual implication, and whether to refrain from action, now or later, or whether an entirely different course would be better. Dialectic and σοφία provide everything for practical wisdom to use, in a universal and immaterial form (*Enn.* I 3. 6, 5–14).

In this passage, Plotinus separates φρόνησις from σοφία; and in terms of generality, φρόνησις is subordinated to σοφία. Σοφία refers to the reasoning activity which is of a higher degree than that which the virtues apply within their own actions. According to Plotinus, φρόνησις refers to deliberation at the level of the virtues themselves and their relationship, as well as at the level of whether or not to act in a particular case. Namely, despite the fact that it refers to a particular situation, it cannot be said that its activity is connected to a specific decision and action because it is clearly emphasized that it is “concerned more with the universal”. In terms of universality, φρόνησις depends on σοφία as more universal, and therefore more significant. According to Bene, for Plotinus φρόνησις and σοφία are not virtues of two types of reason that differ in both their object and mode of operation, but are subsequent stages in a descending series that convey contents of intellect to human beings. (Bene, 2013, 156) In certain passages, he does not even differentiate φρόνησις and σοφία, thus φρόνησις represents the activity of “contemplation of that which the intellect contains” (*Enn.* I 2. 6. 12–13).

Therefore, the role of φρόνησις can be problematized in light of the context in which it is reduced to the implementation of a certain automatic command or to some kind of spontaneous reflex as a result of contemplative activity. In that direction, the autonomy of φρόνησις is questioned. Andrade believes that he can show the “attuned” relationship between internal intellectual contemplation and external virtuous actions. (Andrade, 2020) As inspiration for the attempt to derive such action-contemplative attunement, he takes Porphyry’s description of Plotinus’ double focus when speaking to an interlocutor. This focus, according to the testimony, refers simultaneously to the conversation and to his own train of thoughts, saying that “he was simultaneously present for himself and for others”.<sup>2</sup> According to Andrade, there are three models according

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<sup>2</sup>“Even when he was talking to someone, engaged in continuous conversation, he kept to his train of thought. He could take his necessary part in the conversation to the full, and at the same time keep his mind fixed without a break on what he was considering. When the person he had been talking to was gone he did not go over what he had writ-



to which this relationship can be interpreted. The first and the second model, the first called the “double activity model” and the second “practical-syllogism model”, explain the connection of inner and outer life in terms of reducing the autonomy of *πρᾶξις*. The third model developed by Andrade called “model of moral attunement”, has a goal to show the autonomy of the two spheres of action. According to the first model, “the double activity model”, the internal activity (our will) automatically causes the external activity (virtuous action), without any special effort on the part of the agent, provided that there is some adverse circumstance. Cause (will) and effect (action) are seen as a single activity, but from two different perspectives, like, for example, fire and heat. However, this consequence in certain passages is considered by Plotinus as “weakening” of the contemplation, seeing the effect as some kind of a by-product (*παρακολουθεμα/parakolouthema*) of the contemplation. (*Enn.* III 8.4) The second model, “the practical-syllogism model”, developed mainly by Bene (Bene, 2013), represents Plotinus’ attempt to establish a basic form of practical syllogism based on Aristotle’s. In this syllogism, *φρόνησις* is supplied with knowledge through contemplation in the form of premises (*προτάσεις/protaseis*), which are considered the major premise, based on which, directions for action are given. This premise is supplemented by the knowledge of the individual circumstances in which one acts (*Enn.* VI 8. 3), which is considered a minor premise. This model emphasizes the key role of contemplation in ethical action which is the goal of practical action, while reducing the role of the minor premise and bringing the action to an automated production of the contemplative activity. According to the third model - that of moral attunement, our free rational desires tend to actualize, in the embodied life, the intelligible principles of action that arise from contemplation. According to Andrade, in this model the freedom of intelligible activity is fulfilled through practical life.

Another important characteristic of *φρόνησις* that is significant for its relation to practical life is Plotinus’ conception of virtue as a disposition (*ἕξις/hexis*) of the soul, which closely resembles that of Aristotle. In Aristotle, the virtues represent dispositions of the soul that are aimed at deliberative choice, however in Plotinus, the intellectual dimension of virtue is emphasized not in relation to practice, but in relation to contemplation. According to Stamatellos, in Aristotle the habitual aspect of *ἕξις* is emphasized, while in Plotinus *ἕξις* is not established at the level of *πρᾶξις*, but at the level of *θεωρία*. (Stamatellos, 2015) According to Plotinus, virtue is “a kind of other intellect, a state which in a way intellectualizes the soul” (*Enn.* VI 8. 5), thereby turning the direction of virtue towards the inner life, as opposed to the outer. He confirms this even

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ten... He went straight on with what came next, keeping the connection, just as if there had been no interval of conversation between. In this way he was present at once to himself and to others, and he never relaxed his self-turned attention except in sleep” (Porph, *Plot.* 8.19).

more by saying that “being in our power<sup>3</sup> does not belong to the realm of action but in the intellect at rest from actions” (*Enn.* VI 8. 5, 35-36). Thus, φρόνησις also represents ἔξις that consciously directs the soul, through contemplation, towards the intelligible world; as he says, it represents “contemplation of that which intellect contains” (*Enn.* I 2. 6, 25-26). Accordingly, φρόνησις, like the other virtues, acquires an internalizing function. In this way, Plotinus removes φρόνησις from the sphere of the outwardly directed πρᾶξις, at the expense of the inward.

The completely intelligible aspect of φρόνησις can also be seen in its function that it receives at the cosmic level. Unlike Plato (especially in “*Timaeus*”; cf. Поповска, 2020), Plotinus does not draw the micro-macrocosmic φρόνησις parallel, thereby making impossible its participation in the sphere of human affairs.

...the same [unchanging] φρόνησις... as belonging to the universe, is a kind of static universal φρόνησις, manifold and varied, and yet at the same time simple, belonging to a single mighty living being, not subject to change because of the multiplicity of things, but a simple rational principle and all things at once; for it was not everything, it would not be that [universal] φρόνησις, but the φρόνησις of partial things. (*Enn.* IV 4. 11)

As can be seen from here, but also in the text that follows (cf. *Enn.* IV 4. 10-14), Plotinus does not attribute to the cosmic φρόνησις multiplicity, awareness, nor participation in human life.

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Plotinus’ concept of φρόνησις shares many elements with Aristotle’s. Plotinus makes distinction between ethical virtues, which according to him, arise from the passions, and intellectual virtues, which are acquired through contemplative experience. Φρόνησις is superordinate to the ethical virtues, coordinates them, and is concerned with the course of action. There is also an attempt to construct practical syllogism on the basis of which φρόνησις would act. However, the insufficient textual support in “*Enneads*” for the context in which one acts, reopens the question of whether the function of φρόνησις is to deliberate or to follow and carry out orders from higher spheres. Given Plotinus’ textual explanation, the nature, status, and function of φρόνησις still

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<sup>3</sup> In the distinction between the external and the internal in human, Plotinus is influenced by Epictetus and his thesis on the dichotomy of control (*Arr. Ench.* 1.5). According to Plotinus, the first sphere is the sphere of what is necessary and composite and what is not in our power, while the second is the sphere of what is free and unimpeded and what is in our power (the intellect). (*Enn.* VI 8.2; 8.6)



remain unclear. On the one hand, it is emphasized that *φρόνησις* is aimed primarily towards the intellect and not towards the outside world. This aspect is particularly emphasized through the profile of the sage who does not find the goal of his contemplative life in the external world, but in the internal one. Some passages in the “Enneads” strongly suggest that he who has attained the greatest good should avoid, as far as possible, interference with the world. (*Enn.* IV 8. 7, 32-33) On the other hand, it is pointed out that *φρόνησις* belongs to a sphere that does not belong to theoretical reason. In that sense, one cannot see with certainty and precision how all those intellectual principles attributed to *φρόνησις* effect virtuous actions. Especially unclear is the relationship with particular contexts, as well as the process of action-oriented reasoning. There is no doubt that ethical practice, and thus *φρόνησις*, is dependening on contemplation. In that sense, *φρόνησις* does not have an autonomous status, but rather has a mediating role between the intellect and the human soul.

Is Plotinus’ ethical conception profoundly Platonist, or is it a one-sided semi-Platonism labelled as “Platonism without Socrates” (cf. Bröcker, 1966)? Benet strongly affirms the first thesis and finds that Plotinus is unwilling to separate practice from theory, keeping metaphysics to be directly relevant to ethics. Thus, according to him, Plotinus proposes a Platonist theory of action, while adapting elements of Aristotle’s theory. (Bene, 2013, 159) These theses find strong support in Porphyry’s testimony to Plotinus’ attuned double focus, as well as Plotinus’ criticism of the Gnostics for their indifference to matters of community.<sup>4</sup> According to Plotinus, the sage and the virtuous soul should not leave this world in a disinteresting way like the Gnostics do, but, through the virtues, understand the divine origin of the soul through its self-improvement. However, despite the strong theoretical affirmation of this so-called “ethics of descent”<sup>5</sup> (as opposed to “ethics of ascent”) (cf. Song, 2009) and “ethics of disinterested interest” (cf. Remes, 2006) in the last few decades, the impression remains that *φρόνησις*, practical life and action have an intermediary or secondary role. The fact that later Neoplatonists keep the relevance of metaphysics for ethics, but go beyond Plotinus in emphasizing the deliberative role of *φρόνησις*, indicates the necessity to soften Plotinus’ position. They pay more attention to the importance of the bodily life for the soul, and therefore more focus in their reflections is placed on the bodily aspects of human life. Thus, the questions of *φρόνησις*, the practical syllogism, the connection between freedom and providence, are explicitly opened, and for this reason it is more valid to conduct the Neoplatonist discussion of *φρόνησις* with the later Neoplatonist authors than with Plotinus.

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<sup>4</sup> Plotinus criticizes Gnostic egoism, accusing its adherents of caring only for their own interests without regard for the community. He says: “so pleasure is left for them, and what concerns themselves alone, and what other men have no share in, and what is nothing but a matter of their needs” (*Enn.* II 9. 15).

<sup>5</sup> The metaphor of the descent refers to Plato’s allegory of the cave suggesting that Plotinus’ sage should descent into the “cave” of the political life. (cf. Song, 2009)

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