

Bryn Mawr Classical Review

[BMCR 2022.10.25](#)

Fabio Stella, *Noos e noein da Omero a Platone*. Institut des sciences et techniques de l'Antiquité, 1518. Besançon: Presses universitaires de Franche-Comté, 2021. Pp. 808. ISBN 9782848678542 €45,00.

Review by Ivan Petrov, Institut für Slavistik, Justus-Liebig-Universität.

ivan.petrov@slavistik.uni-giessen.de; ivan.petrov.ae@gmail.com

This book aims to trace the history of two terms which are important not only for the field of Classics *per se* but also for understanding the philosophical world of Late Antiquity and of early Christianity. Fabio Stella concentrates, one could say, on the period of Greek literacy from the earliest testimonies to the oral tradition and reaching to what could be assumed to be the peak of Classical thought. Covering the period from Homer to Plato, he investigates the textually attested occurrences of *noos* (later *nous*) and *noein*, investigating how the semantic fields of the terms have evolved and what cognitive developments were related to this change. All texts are presented in translation and in the original Greek, which makes the book a source-anthology of ancient testimonies.

The methodology consists in part of established tools in the field of philology. There are extended textual analyses of selected passages embedded in a cultural perspective and sometimes quite voluminous debates with the rich scholarly tradition on those passages. What is particularly valuable and, in my view, innovative is that the book does not stop at what is already known in the field. Stella reaches one step further by contextualising the literary and linguistic commentary in the frame of some formulations from the cognitive sciences. The main foundation for this is based on Derrick de Kerckhove's views^[1] on the role of the Greek written alphabet – a vocalised linear left-to-right script – in formatting the cognitive mental processes as a predisposition, among many others, that contributed to the development of later Western rational thought. The other cornerstone of the monograph makes use of the so-called 'blending' or 'conceptual networking',^[2] which is applied at the end of each chapter to the material from each micro-period.

The book comprises seven chapters, preceded by a foreword by Francesco Fronterotta (*Sapienza*, Rome) which presents the whole work synoptically. A second, general summary (by the author) follows immediately after the last chapter, together with the bibliography and indices of places, names, translations, Greek words, and finally the table of contents. Each chapter is dedicated to the occurrences of *noos* and *noein* in texts from a defined period of Greek literacy.

The first chapter comprises some preliminary observations on the two words. Starting with the etymological debates, Stella discusses the two hypotheses about the origin of

noos, namely from the roots **snu-* (thus, connected with *neuein* ‘to nod, bow, incline’) and **nes-* (cf. *neomai* ‘to go back, return’). [3] Although neither of them is generally accepted nowadays in studies on the history of the Greek language, Stella proposes a ‘possible convergence’ between the two, more in a way of a semantic overlap. As a result of further elaboration on the different contributions of the cognitive sciences, Stella proposes working definitions regarding the initial coverage of the pair. He accepts a primary notion of *noos* and *noein* related to the value of ‘action-oriented representation’ [4] and ‘scheme of action’ (*schema d’azione*). The chapter presents in detail the cognitive model of *blending* or *network of conceptual integration*, which is further employed in the reconstruction of the semantic development of *noos-noein*. This introductory chapter ends with some additional notes on possible errors that need to be avoided. The theoretical frames from the cognitive sciences and studies on metalinguistics and neural physiology not only provide a promising base for the investigation but also assure that the reader will encounter the texts through a new lens.

The second chapter is dedicated to the place of *noos* as *schema d’azione* in the tribal period of Greek culture focusing on the texts of Homer and Hesiod. Stella establishes that the pair *noos-noein* was associated with a notion of ‘vision’ that was different from the ocular and oriented towards a non-factual event; that event was not an elaboration of an ‘epistemic’ image but rather a ‘model, pattern’ (*schema*) for resolving a difficulty. Stella concludes that the ocular vision is located at the level of perception, whereas the gaze of *noos* is situated on a superior level, near the realm of imagination (p. 159). Regarding the ‘Homeric subject’, *noos* is conceived as a distinct organ-function (*organo-funzione*) somehow autonomous regarding the ‘self’.

Asia Minor and the Eastern Aegean Greek literary realm are the objects of research in Chapter Three. Here *noos* is investigated as falling between reality and appearance. The texts are those of Archilochus, Simonides, Mimnermus, Alcman, Alcaeus, Sappho, Heraclitus, and Xenophanes. Stella observes that the collapse of the epic values does not result immediately in the formation of a more rational perception of the gods or the ‘principles’ but rather retains the characteristics of the mythical period. A novelty that Stella emphasises is the ‘dose of an effort’ (*dose di ‘sforzo’*) in exercising the psychical functions that he finds in the texts. It is claimed that those are the first signs of a perception that beyond the mere presentation of the things in the physical world there is another realm, superior and hidden.

Chapter Four analyses *noos* in the textual monuments of mainland Greece in respect of the invisible realm and the soul. Here Stella leads the reader in a detailed enquiry into fragments by Solon of Athens and Theognis of Megara. The chapter ends with a conclusion where the present observations are analysed together with those from the previous chapter. Stella’s thesis is that it was the writing down, the *alphabetisation*, that first objectified the speech/thinking of the primary oral culture and has ‘cut the object’ into two layers. The first layer is related to the visible reality and closely related to chirographic practice, ‘always situational and practically finalised’. The second layer is hidden and refers to the first one which remains henceforward related to the fixedness of the written symbol. This perception is then projected onto the terms used for psychic activities, thus resulting in the emancipation of *noos* from its original meaning of ‘model/scheme of action’ and its attachment to the stable reality beyond the mutable appearance of the visible. Stella also proposes a graphical representation of the *blending* he applies in explaining this semantic development.

The cognitive ‘revolution’ of Magna Graecia (as per Stella) and the role of *noos* in the metalanguage are the focus of Chapter Five. This is the longest and most detailed part of the book, where Stella leads the reader through extensive commentaries (and even broader footnotes, sometimes covering several full pages), analysing authors that either were born in or travelled in Magna Graecia: the late archaic poets (Simonides, Bacchylides, Pindar), Parmenides, Empedocles, and Aeschylus. In this chapter, Stella enumerates four distinctive and complementary stages of grammaticalisation, i.e. the use of language to speak of itself, in this particular case the written Greek that makes the language for the first time in Greek intellectual history an object of its own reflection. The first stage, connected with the Pythagoreans, emerges from the mathematical approach to language. As a result, concepts ‘of a second level’ were created, i.e. concepts that were referring to other concepts. The second stage, parallel ‘grammaticalisation’, comes from the interpretation of the Homeric texts and is mostly observable in Parmenides of Elea. In a way like a ‘linguistic exegete’, Parmenides, so Stella, speaks of the epic derivation of the idea of *eon* as a ‘grammatical name/noun’ common for all names/nouns. This was the cognitive meta-level to what could be named the ‘mental world’. *Noein* is thus conceived as an activity addressed to such ‘linguistic meta-objects prefiguring in a way their existence in an ontological-natural sense’. The third stage of grammaticalisation stems from the re-elaboration of traditional poetics, accomplished by Empedocles of Agrigento. Stella argues that this led to the use of terms that could be already defined as metaphysical, despite their still prevailing mystical and naturalistic perspective. The fourth stage is found in Aeschylus’ dramatic works, where the Greek theatre was the means through which language was ‘desensorialised’ [5] and thus the abstract ‘noetic’ values, deprived of their initial verbo-motorial perspective (as *schema d’azione*), assume a ‘possible character’. Thus, the conative or emotive meanings were placed in the deictic level of expression (p. 493). Another innovation related to the work of Aeschylus is the connotation of *dianoia* as a ‘noetic activity, provided with a strong suggestive directionality’ that had not been presented previously.

The development of *noos* towards a ‘gnoseological scheme’ in Athens is the central topic of Chapter Six. After analysing texts from Sophocles, Euripides, Anaxagoras, Democritus, Diogenes of Apollonia, Gorgias, Antiphon, Prodicus, Herodotus, Thucydides, and Philolaos, Stella concludes that *noos* represented the ‘privileged part of the conscious subject, destined to grasp the *content* in an active manner, rather than the passive appreciation of external sensible data.’ The act of *noesis* is thus characterised by Stella as “an efficient operation of *mapping*, revealing the non-immediately visible layer of the object, which is now identified theoretically with an abstract object” (p. 609). In Anaxagoras, the role of *nous* is quasi-deified as the universal order which knows and encompasses everything, the condition imposing order on everything.

Chapter Seven is limited to analyses of *noos-noein* in the central books of Plato’s *Republic*, where are situated the passages dedicated to the idea of good (*agathon*) and the following discussion on *nous* as an organ of intellection of the ideal entities. Here Stella adduces two other important terms, *dianoia* and *noesis*, discussing their part in the development of *noos-noein*. After careful analysis of the textual material, Stella proposes, as in most of the chapters, a graphical representation of the semantic development of *noos* towards a ‘scheme of intellection’. The conclusions of this chapter could be regarded as general for the book. The development of *noos-noein* has reached its farthest differentiation and abstraction, overlapping the ‘gnoseological scheme’, i.e.

the entities (even ‘mathematical objects’) unavailable for the senses, and now extending its scope to the eternal concepts, part of the world of ideas.

In conclusion, the book of Fabio Stella is a valuable outcome of deep and hard philological labour, combining both classical and modern tools of interpretation. Its use of paradigms from the cognitive sciences opens new avenues of research that incorporate traditional diachronic lexical investigation and contemporary synchronic research on semantics and consciousness. This work also raises interesting topics for discussion, such as: How far could the cognitive models be employed on material from ancient sources, given the fact that those texts are the only available source of proof at our disposal? How far could our conclusions on the early (pre-Classical) Greek material be legitimate, taking into consideration that it is hard to speak of a unified Greek language before the *Koine* period? Nevertheless, Stella’s conclusions could lay a rich foundation for further discussions reaching not only Late Antique and Patristic philosophy and their use of language, but also providing a fruitful starting point for any endeavour in the field of history of ideas and intellectual development over time.

Notes

[1] Cf. among others De Kerckhove, Derrick. *The Alphabet and the Brain. The Lateralization of Writing*, Berlin: Springer Verlag, 1988.

[2] Cf. Fauconnier, Gilles. *Blends* – In *Mapping in Thought and Language*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, 149 – 186. Fauconnier, Gilles, Mark Tunern, *Conceptual Integration Networks* – *Cognitive Science*, 22 (1998), 2, 133-187 [https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1207/s15516709cog2202_1].

[3] For a recent overview of the hypotheses, cf. Beekes, Robert, Lucien van Beek, *Etymological dictionary of Greek*. Vol. 1 & 2. Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2010, 1023.

[4] Following Andy Clark, *Being There: Putting Brain, Body, and World Together Again*. Cambridge (MA): The MIT Press, 1997.

[5] Stella speaks of *desensorializzazione*.