

PLOTINUS ON TIME AS MEASURE AND NUMBER OF MOTION

1. Time for Greek Philosophers. In spite of the heterogeneous solutions of Greek thinkers to the problem of the comparative stability of the sublunary world their views on the ontological status of time have been quite homogeneous. A systematic comparison between the conceptions of time, respectively held within the Platonic¹ and the Aristotelian² traditions, can let

1. Cf. PLATO, *Timaeus*, 37 d-e; 29 b-d; 39 b ff.; 51 a - 52 b; *Phaedo*, 102 c - 105 b; *Philebus*, 30 c-d; *Laws*, 897 c-d; SPEUSIPPUS, fr. 515, in I. VON ARNIM, *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta*, vol. I, Leipzig, Teubner, 1905, p. 165; XENOCRATES, fr. 40, ed. R. Heinre, Leipzig, Teubner, 1892, p. 173. Cf. also DIOGENES LAERTIUS, *Life of Philosophers*, III, 73, who reports that «according to Plato time is the *φορὰ* of celestial bodies». On the concept of time in Middle-Platonism, cf. PHILON OF ALEXANDRIA, *Quis rerum divinarum heres sit*, 54, p. 165; ID., *De mutatione nominum*, (47), p. 267; ID., *Quod Deus sit immutabilis*, (6), p. 32, Berlin, Reiter, 1896-1915, who addresses time as the *μέτρον* of the *αἰών*. See also PLUTARCH, *Platonicae Quaestiones*, VIII, 1007bff., Leipzig, Teubner, 1895, pp. 138-139, where we read that time is only «accidentally measure of movements but essentially cause, potency and source of the symmetry and of the order of the physical universe by virtue of the World-Soul that governs it» (my translation); ALBIN, *Epitomé*, 14, 6, Univ. Diss., Paris 1945, who claims that «the planets are destined to create number and time, which make so knowable what exists. God has created time so that it could be interval of movement (*διάστημα τῆς κινήσεως*) and image (*εἰκὼν*) of eternity» (my translation). On time in New-Platonism, cf. S. SAMBURSKY - S. PINES, *The Concept of Time in Late New Platonism. Texts with translation, introduction and notes*, Jerusalem, Commercial Press, 1971, pp. 27-47 (on Iamblichus) and pp. 49-63 (on Proclus). On these issues cf. also R. SORABJI, *Time, Creation and the Continuum*, London, Duckworth, 1983, especially pp. 33-45 and pp. 52-63.

2. Cf. ARISTOTLE, *Physics*, III, 200 b 33 f.; IV, 21810-15; IV, 219 a 25-220 b; VIII, 252 a 10. Cf. also R. SORABJI, *Time, Motion and the Continuum*, pp. 28-29, who reports a passage from Alexander of Aphrodisia's *De tempore*, where this philosopher claims, in accordance with Aristotle's view, that time as measure and number of movement exists uniquely in our thought and, as such, it is the result of our *estimacio*. Among the definitions of time which rest on the Aristotelian view I recall the one of ZENO, fr. 510, and the one of CHRYSIPPUS, fr. 509, 518, 541, in *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta*, pp. 164-172. By Stoics, time has been thought of as «πάσης ἀπλῶς κινήσεως διάστημα», i.e. as the interval that qualifies every kind of motion. Cf. also SEXTUS EMPIRICUS, *Against the Physicists*, II, 170, 218, 226-227; DIOGENES LAERTIUS, *Lives*, VII, 141. On the Stoic conception of time as *ἄσώματον* and thought as an objective feature of the physical world, cf. M. POHLENZ, *Die Stoa. Geschichte einer geistigen Bewegung*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1948, pp. 57-58, and especially p. 65; on the Aristotelian inspiration of

us grasp their common *leitmotiv*, which primarily emphasizes the epistemological role played by time in its quality as number and measure of sublunary changes. Time was thought of by Greek thinkers as that kind of *universal order*, in virtue of which the complex multiplicity of physical events can be ordered into a coherent structure, whose internal articulations are determined by the formal coordinates of 'before' and 'after'³.

The idea, that – through a systematic abstraction from the temporal relations of anteriority, simultaneity and posteriority between physical phenomena – the causal laws of the sensible world can be inferred, is due to the 'realistic' conception of time held by ancient philosophers. In their view, the 'existence' of time derives from the objective status of physical movements of which time constitutes the accident. Time, which is mathematically expressed by the relation of space and velocity, relies on the activity of the soul, inasmuch as only human *nous* is able to discover and use this relation in order to define any kind of phenomenon – be it of motion or of alteration – for the ultimate sake of a comparative analysis. This position is coherent with the ancient epistemological assumption, according to which it is not through the *a priori* form of time that movement is originally perceived and consequently defined. Greek philosophers did not attribute to time primacy in relation to space, on which Kant's philosophy would later insist⁴. According to the Greek theory of knowledge, the main notion on which the philosophical interpretation of the sublunary world must rest is the phenomenon of local motion, whose qualification to constitute an objective feature of reality is assured by its essential connection to the 'primary qualities' of space⁵. The *res extensa* exists in its purely quantitative characteristics *per se* independently of the contextual presence of an observer able to make an accurate record of it.

Stoic physics, cf. *ibid.*, p. 68. About the Epicurean definition of time, cf. EPICURUS, *Letter to Herodotus*, in DIOGENES LAERTIUS, *Lives*, X, 72-73; SEXTUS EMPIRICUS, *Fundamental lines of Pyrronian Skepsis*, III, 137; ID., *Against the Physicists*, II, 181, 219, 227. As for the Stoics, so for the Epicureans time is to be conceived as an *ἄσώματον*: time consists in a *πρόληψις* that lets us anticipate the actual perception of phenomena of local motion and of alteration. Such phenomena are conceived as 'accidents' of real beings which consist either of atoms or of atomic compounds. Therefore, time is for Epicurus just a *σύμπτωμα συμπτωμάτων*, «an accident of accidents».

3. Cf. especially ARISTOTLE, *Physics*, IV, 221 a 5-221 b 25.

4. Cf. I. KANT, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, Hamburg, Felix Meiner, 1998, B 48, p. 108. Cf. also *ibid.*, B 52-54, pp. 110-114; B 102, pp. 124-125; B 148, pp. 189-190; B 182, p. 244; A 373, pp. 487-488.

5. Cf. ARISTOTLE, *Physics*, IV, 208 a 30-32; 211 a 10-20; 220 b 25-30; 223 b 10; VIII, 261 a 30-35. On the relevance of local motion in respect to the other kinds of changes, cf. ID., *Physics*, VI-II, 265 b 15 ff. On the centrality of local motion in Stoic philosophy, cf. M. POHLENZ, *Stoa*, p. 75. On the ontological and epistemological priority of space and movement in respect to time, cf. PLATO, *Timaeus*, 36 e ff.; 39 b-d; ARISTOTLE, *Physics*, 219 a 10ff.; ID., *De caelo*, 268 a, 298 b. Cf. U. COOPE, *Time for Aristotle. Physics IV, 11-14*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005, pp. 47 ff.

The outlined common background of the ancient definitions of time can provide us with an orientation in the attempt to show that, in spite of the impression that a first reading of Plotinus' third *Ennead* may give, the founder of New-Platonism did not support a different view than his predecessors. Like them Plotinus thought of time as measure of movement and, therefore, as the fundamental epistemological medium by which the dialectical and ethical ascent to the One is made possible. Assuming that his epistemology is founded upon the process of reminiscence, as it is described in Plato's *Phaedo*, Plotinus claims that the way back to the source of the ontological procession can be undertaken only if we dispose of an image able to recall its superior model⁶. The model-image kind of relation is obtained primarily between the noetic *cosmos*⁷ thought of as the logical cluster of Ideas and its reproduction into the temporal articulations of physical phenomena, which constitute the materialization of the noetic contemplation of the intelligible contents of the World-Soul. Thus, under the metaphysical assumption that the formal relations between the physical phenomena of 'before' and 'after' originate from the discursive articulation of the contents of *Nous*, as performed by the World-Soul, time must be primarily defined as a physical image of eternity and only consequently as a measure of motion. In other words, only the model-image kind of relation that ties eternity to time allows Plotinus to indicate time as the fundamental epistemological medium, by which we are enabled to infer from the temporal and causal order of the physical world the logical relations between the Ideas, i.e. the structure itself of the second hypostasis. The metaphysical assumption that time, thought of as the Life of the third hypostasis, proceeds from eternity, conceived as the Life of the second hypostasis, is what makes of time the necessary prerequisite for undertaking the movement of conversion from the sensible *cosmos* to the intelligible one. Consequently, the objections raised by Plotinus in his third *Ennead* against the Aristotelian-Stoic definition of time as interval, measure and number of movement do not aim at a refutation *tout court* of such a description, but rather at pointing out the need for a sounder ontological foundation for it. Plotinus suggests that the definitions of time, as given by Aristotle and the Stoics, do not rise above the mere ontic level and because of their lack of a coherent ontological background they must be definitively characterized as insufficient⁸. For the founder of Neoplatonism,

6. Cf. PLOTINUS, *Enneads*, II.9.33; V.8.4. Cf. PLATO, *Phaedo*, 75 e ff., and A. CHARLES-SAGET, *L'architecture du divin*, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 1982, pp. 30-31.

7. A. CHARLES-SAGET, *op.cit.*, p. 25, clarifies that the expression ὁ νοητὸς κόσμος is not a creation of Plato, but rather the result of the contamination between Stoic philosophy and Middle-Platonism.

8. On these concepts, cf. PLUTARCH, *Platonicae Quaestiones*, VIII, 1007 b-c, and PLOTINUS,

as it was already for Plato, the fundamental function of time as epistemological medium between physical reality and intelligible *cosmos* can be justified and safeguarded only under the condition that its ontological status as an image of eternity is systematically assumed. Plotinus argues more specifically that the epistemological function of time, and therefore its definition as measure of motion, can be rigorously formulated only if one knows what eternity is and which analogical relation it has to its physical image. Only the right comprehension of the structure of eternity can let us define time properly and so understand why it is supposed to play the central epistemological function that Greek thinkers have unanimously attributed to it.

2. Eternity as Simultaneity of the Logical 'Before' and 'After' of Ideas.

Plotinus' treatise on the nature of time begins with the claim that the naïve understanding of eternity (αἰώνα) as the main quality belonging to the everlasting being (τὴν αἰδίον ... φύσιν), and of time as the main feature of the world of becoming, can satisfy ordinary understanding, but not philosophical thinking. Anticipating Augustine⁹, Plotinus claims that whenever we try, on the score of the common representations of eternity and time, to get an appropriate conceptual account of them, we run into several *aporiai* which make their alleged obviousness vanish. In order to find a point of access to a deeper understanding of eternity and time, an inquiry into the philosophical tradition is required inasmuch as such an inquiry constitutes the most effective antidote to the deceptive blatancy of common representations, even when – as Plotinus admits – the views of the ancient philosophers are divergent and liable to different interpretations. The tradition represents both the necessary condition for gaining access to truth and yet an apparently homogeneous complex of theories which must be tested and ordered by the critical approach of interpreters¹⁰.

Enneads, III, 7, 40-45. Radically different is the position of AUGUSTINE, who admits, on one side, that time is measure of movement (*Confessions*, XI, 24), and, on the other side, claims that it is the *extentio animi* to confer to time its original unit of measure (*ibid.*, XI, 28). Time is the instantaneousness of present, while past and future exist respectively as "remembered present" and as "expected present". In Christian philosophy it is no longer the Universe, which the World-Soul governs by its time-number, to constitute the image of the noetic *cosmos*, but rather the instantaneousness of the present, as it is experienced by individual souls, which are now the true images on earth of God's eternity.

9. AUGUSTINE, *Confessions*, XI.14.17 ff. On this point, see also the sharp criticism addressed to this definition of time by L. WITTGENSTEIN, *Philosophische Bemerkungen*, in *Schriften*, vol. II, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1964, pp. 80-87, and *Das Blaue Buch*, *ibidem*, vol. V, 1970, pp. 49-52.

10. PLOTINUS, *Enneads*, III.8ff. Cf. Th. SZLEZÁK, *Platon und Aristoteles in der Nuslehre Plotins*, Basel/Stuttgart, Schwabe & Co Verlag, 1979, pp. 9-39.

Plotinus proceeds in his inquiry taking into account first those theories which postulate a qualitative difference between eternity and time. Such theories of time as elaborated within the frame of the platonic tradition indicate eternity as the archetype (παράδειγμα) of time and claim that, in order to define the nature of the image (εἰκόνοϛ), the nature of the archetype has to be brought to light first¹¹. Thus, for the sake of gaining an appropriate understanding of time, the interpreter must consider the structure of the ontological procession and clarify the kind of relation which ties the third hypostasis to the second one. The possibility of inquiring into the nature of time before acquiring a definition of eternity is primarily taken into account as the task of those men who are far advanced in the route of the reminiscence process¹². Because of their formation and inclination philosophical natures, along with musicians and lovers who can recognize in perceptible beauty the image of the intelligible harmony, are able to detect in the temporal sequences of physical phenomena the reflex of the logical order of metaphysical realities¹³. However, since the recollection process of the structure of eternity can be carried out only on the ground of the ontological correspondence between eternity and time, the direction that philosophical investigation must take coincides with the sense of the being's procession. Consequently, Plotinus chooses eternity as the first object of his inquiry and points out three basic meanings in which the word 'eternity' (αἰών) has been used in the philosophical tradition. By eternity ancient thinkers denoted the highest entity, the absolute being, and ontological perfection. Under the same description, though, intelligible reality (νοητῆϛ φύσεωϛ) was also denoted. Since both eternity and intelligible reality seem to be definable as the highest entity, pure being and ontological perfection, and since for Plotinus, unlike his successors Iamblichus and Proclus, an hierarchy of ontological purity and perfection at the metaphysical level cannot be stated¹⁴, eternity and intelligible reality must be thought of as different descriptions of the

11. PLOTINUS, *Enneads*, III, 1, 15-20.

12. PLOTINUS, *Enneads*, III, 1, 25 ff.

13. PLOTINUS, *Enneads*, III, 1, 30; cf. also A. CHARLES-SAGET, *op. cit.*, p. 168, who emphasizes that, according to Plotinus, the experience of the intelligible needs to rely on the traces of it which are present in the sensible realm and which are destined to sustain and guide the theoretical efforts of reason and language in the recollection process. The most relevant trace of intelligible reality is certainly constituted by the numeric constitution of physical world, which is cause of both visible beauty and perceptible harmony. As far as time is concerned, we could say with CHARLES-SAGET, *op. cit.*, p. 82, that in Plotinus «the description of the horizontal cohesion produces the question of its dependency on a superior principle; [...] the unity of the origin becomes the last guarantee for the cohesion that it has generated. Harmony is the pre-figuration of unity and unity is its origin» (my translation).

14. PLOTINUS, *Enneads*, III, 1, 35 f.

same reality. Therefore, when we follow the naïve representations of the nature of eternity, and we say that the intelligible *cosmos* rests in eternity, or when we attribute eternity to transcendent being as an additional quality of it, we introduce a state of separation between them which does not hold in reality¹⁵.

As Plotinus points out, the main objection that can be raised against the identification of eternity and intelligible reality consists in opposing the alleged nature of eternity as a kind of homogeneous simultaneity to the noetic *cosmos* thought of as the logical unity of different parts. In other words, what Plotinus seems to consider problematic for his line of interpretation is the traditional understanding of eternity as a kind of synthetic permanence, while the ideal world has been described as a logically articulated complex of different meanings where synthesis and analysis play an equally relevant role¹⁶. Moreover, if eternity has to be thought of as the archetype of time and time has to be conceived in relation to motion, it seems that eternity must be conceived as persistence and, therefore, as pure *stasis*. In opposition to this view and for his line of investigation, Plotinus considers it crucial to show that eternity is the archetypal form of spiritual motion and that, as such, it can be thought of as the intelligible Life of *cosmos*¹⁷.

The founder of New-Platonism uses four arguments in order to explain why eternity cannot be identified with *stasis tout court*. First, he claims that if eternity's definition is to coincide with the concept of *stasis*, eternity would just be *stasis* and no longer eternity; in this way, it would also cease to be eternal, since eternal is what participates in eternity and the being of eternity would just be *stasis*. Plotinus' second argument stresses the point that, if eternity is *stasis* – since movement ceases at the very moment it approaches *stasis* – movement considered in its sublunary progressive character could also paradoxically take part in the definition of eternity. Third, Plotinus argues that the definition of *stasis* is essentially connected with the further concepts of limitation and boundary. If this is so, how can one say that *stasis* is unlimited, as the infinitude of eternity is thought to be? In his last argument, the philosopher claims that if the definition of eternity as *stasis* is not to be understood in its generality but rather in the special sense of ontological persistence, so that eternity would be the *stasis* of being *qua* being, then the classes of being such as kinds and species would be *ipso facto* excluded from the participation in eternity. However, the rejection of the concept of *stasis*

15. PLOTINUS, *Enneads*, III, 2, 10 -15.

16. PLATO, *Sophist*, 240 a-256 b; *Timaeus*, 29 b - 40 c.

17. PLOTINUS, *Enneads*, III, 2, 25 ff.

as a possible definition of eternity does not diminish the ontological distinction between eternity and time. Plotinus suggests that, in order to differentiate them, we do not need to rely on the radical opposition between *stasis* and motion, but it is rather sufficient to assume on the score of Plato's *Timaeus* that eternity differs from time inasmuch as it is conceived of as what "remains in the One" (τὸ μένειν ἐν ἐνί)¹⁸.

By showing that eternity is not *stasis* but, rather, that which persists in unity, Plotinus has found a way to overcome the most problematic obstacle to his definition of eternity as the being of intelligible reality. What he must explain now is the sense in which the αἰών, thought of as permanence in the One, can be qualified as the being and life of the eternal realities (αἰδιότης). Plotinus contemplates two possible solutions for such an issue: either eternity is to be understood as the synthetic horizon, thanks to which the manifoldness of noetic contents can become the object of a comprehensive intellectual vision, or it must be interpreted as a unique entity endowed with many potencies. In the light of the description of eternity Plotinus gives in the relevant passages of his third *Ennead*¹⁹, he seems to have inclined towards the second hypothesis. For Plotinus' definition of eternity as persistence in the One is meant to express its stable conversion to the ontological origin qualified as ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας²⁰. Following Hadot's interpretation of the scheme of the ontological procession "Being-Life-Intellect", eternity can be qualified as pure being, highest entity and ontological perfection, inasmuch as it proceeds from the One. However, since eternity is not identical with the One, but it affirms itself as distinct, in respect with its origin by departing from it, eternity becomes Life. In Life's tendency to flow into the exteriority²¹ of the One, the opposite movement of conversion towards the onto-

18. PLOTINUS, *Enneads*, III, 2, 30-37. Cf. PLATO, *Timaeus*, 38a.

19. PLOTINUS, *Enneads*, III, 3, 10-35.

20. Cf. PLOTINUS, *Enneads*, VI, 9, 3; cf. also *ibid.*, VI, 6, 9, where Plotinus claims that all beings find their origin, their root and their principle in number. On Plotinus' conception of the One as ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας and as Good, cf. Ph. MERLAN, *From Platonism to Neoplatonism*, The Hague, M. Nijhoff, 1953, pp. 147 ff. On the One as original number from which being originates, cf. A. CHARLES-SAGET, *op. cit.*, p. 124. For this author procession and conversion coincide with the progression and regression in the order of numbers. This interpretation is supported by the definition of number as given by THEON OF SMYRNA (ed. Hiller, p. 18, 3-5), according to whom number is «a progression of multiplicity (προποδισμός) which finds its origin in the unit, and a regression (ἀναποδισμός) which finds its end in the unit». On the centrality of numbers in the constitution of being, cf. also PLATO, *Philebus*, 27 b 1-2; *Sophist*, 237 d 6-7, 238 a10, b 7.

21. Cf. PLOTINUS, *Enneads*, I, 8, 7; I, 8, 14; V, 1, 1; VI, 9, 5.

logical source becomes increasingly explicit and vigorous²². For Life expresses the unlimited potency to receive from the ontological source, by its movement of conversion, the delimitation and determination of its infiniteness²³ into a plurality of forms. Such a plurality of forms is the noetic *cosmos*, thought of as a unity of intelligible contents whose mutual connections constitute an infinite net of logical relations. Stating both the finite number of the Ideas and still the infiniteness of their possible correlations, Plotinus seems to conceive the structure of eternity as the dialectic of Identity and Difference. Identity expresses the uniqueness of intelligible Life which, on the ground of its ontological completeness, is always identical to itself and never alienated, essentially unchangeable and with no dimension²⁴. At the same time, eternity is Difference because it is a plurality of intelligible contents²⁵, whose totality is not displayed in the progressiveness of the noetic-ethical articulation, but is rather a kind of logical simultaneity. In eternity, the formal coordinates of 'before' and 'after' as a structure of the logical relations of Ideas appear in the mode of a time-transcending presence which does not need any intermediary phases or passages²⁶. Eternity, as a dialectic of Identity and Difference, is therefore intrinsically dynamic in the sense of a logical, spiritual motion²⁷. Eternity's being is *συμφωνία* inasmuch as it is a plurality of units and a unity of plurality, i.e. number *par excellence*²⁸.

3. Time as Interval, Number and Measure of Motion. In the light of Plotinus' definition of eternity as the totality of noetic contents, as the si-

22. Cf. P. HADOT, *Les Sources de Plotin, Entretiens Hardt*, V, Vancouver-Genoa, 1966, pp. 135 ff.

23. Cf. PLOTINUS, *Enneads*, VI, 9, 8, where the philosopher opposes the *ἄπειρον* of power, which belongs exclusively to the One, to the *ἄπειρον* of extension such as the sequence of numbers, magnitude, and time. On this point, cf. also *Enneads*, VI, 6, 16.

24. PLOTINUS, *Enneads*, III, 5, 15-20.

25. *Ibidem*. Cf. also A. CHARLES-SAGET, *op. cit.*, pp. 133-134, who emphasizes that each being is one by participation. The One is not the unit but rather the foundation of the unit. For Plotinus, plurality of beings means plurality of units. The intelligible is both one and many, even though the separation of Ideas does not reach the distance which characterizes physical beings.

26. PLOTINUS, *Enneads*, III, 3, 10-25. Cf. A. H. ARMSTRONG, *Eternity, Life and Movement in Plotinus' Accounts of Nous*, in *Le Néoplatonisme, Actes du Colloque international, Royau-mont, 9-13 June 1969*, edited by P.-M. Schuhl and P. Hadot, Paris, CNRS, 1971, pp. 67-74, here p. 73: Plotinus has «introduced into his account of the eternal life of Intellect the idea of intellectual travel and exploration, and so of duration and succession».

27. On this neoplatonic conception of eternal realities as characterized by spiritual motion, cf. S. E. GERSCH, *Kinesis Akinetos. A Study of Spiritual Motion in the Philosophy of Proclus*, Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1973, pp. 20 ff.

28. PLOTINUS, *Enneads*, III, 4, 10 ff.

multaneity of their logical relations and as the most paradigmatic number, it is easy to realize to which extent its understanding as a mere *stasis* would have missed its far more complex constitution. Moreover, for Plotinus the fact itself that – in spite of the man's immanence in time – we are in condition to comprehend the structure of eternity, demonstrates that the human soul entertains a kind of stable contact with intelligible realities²⁹. Thus, even if the orientation provided by the philosophical tradition were not available, still the truth about time could be gained by drawing an analogy with the mentioned structure of eternity. However, since we do have the support of the philosophical tradition on the issue of time, for the sake of a greater accuracy, this subject must be also inquired in the light of the doctrines of Plotinus' predecessors. Plotinus reviews and analyzes the previous theories of time putting them into three main types: a) doctrines which define time as movement; b) doctrines which define time as a moved entity; c) doctrines which define time as the accident of movement. The first type of definition must be further divided into theories, a₁) which intend time as a non-special kind of movement, and into theories a₂) which understand time as the movement of the outermost sphere. The third type of definition presents the further articulation into doctrines, c₁) which define time as the "interval" of movement and the ones c₂) which consider time as the "number and measure of movement"³⁰.

As far as theories of type a) are concerned, Plotinus claims that, whether we take time to be a non-special kind of movement, or we take time to be the most regular movement, in any case movement must occur *in* time and, since the 'where' of movement differs from its 'what', time cannot be motion. If the supporters of such a theory deny that movement occurs in time, then they have to explain why and in which cases this limitation of the universality of time is supposed to apply. To these theories it can be further objected that, while time is infinite, movement – thought of as that process which is determined and limited by two boundaries – cannot be infinite. The circular motion of celestial bodies does not constitute an exception, since the boundaries of such a motion are identified by the lapse of time needed by a celestial body, in order to complete the orbit around its center of gravitation.

29. PLOTINUS, *Enneads*, III, 7, 5-10. Cf. *ibid.*, V, 8, 4. Unlike Plato, according to Plotinus' philosophy, the affinity between man and intelligible reality is revealed by the capability of the human soul to reach a stable contemplation of the logical relations of Ideas. In Plotinus' metaphysics, the low level of being that is attributed to the sensible world does not exclude the acknowledgement of both beauty and the necessary epistemological function played by sublunary world as an image of noetic realities. On this point, cf. also *Enneads*, II, 9, 33.

30. PLOTINUS, *Enneads*, III, 7, 15-30.

Thus, if time is neither motion in general nor the motion of the outermost sphere, it can hardly be the outermost sphere itself, as theories of type b) claim, because they consider such a moving body as that motion's origin, which is universally taken as a unit of time.

As far as c₁) theories are concerned, Plotinus argues that time cannot be defined in the Stoic way as the interval of movement, since there is not a unique kind of interval, but there are as many intervals as the movements performed in the physical world. Thus, the definition of time as an interval of motion must require that, from the multitude of different intervals, a special kind of interval is selected and therefore qualified as "proper time" (ὀρθότερον... χρόνον)³¹. However, which interval among the infinite kinds of intervals, belonging both to regular and irregular movements, must be chosen as such "proper time" and for which reasons? If the Stoics answer that the ideal interval must be chosen on the ground of the regularity of the corresponding motion, as for example the outermost sphere's motion, Plotinus replies that an interval thus conceived coincides with the extension of that motion, which is measured by space-coordinates and which, therefore, is not time. In other words, the interval that should be qualified as proper time is just space. If we take such a space-interval as the proper measurement of motion, then we would just deal with a mere quantity (τὸ πολὺ) of movement and this quantity would be an ordinary number (ἀριθμός). Time as a number coincides with the extension outlined by the boundaries of motion, so that we deal here either with a definition of time as space, or again with the already rejected definition of time as movement. Moreover, if we consider the interval as the extension of the corresponding movement, the interval must be also conceived as a continuous movement and, as such, it must occur *in* time; however, we cannot define time as an interval of movement and still admit that the interval of motion, thought of as continuous motion, occurs in time without falling into a *petitio principii*; nor can we identify the interval with movement *tout court*, because the interval must also include the boundaries of motion which are in a state of *stasis*. Therefore, time as an interval seems to differ from both movement and *stasis*. What is then such an interval?³² Is it to be understood on the score of the Aristotelian definition of time as a number and measure of motion?

Against the c₂) theories, Plotinus argues that, if time is a number of motion, it must be a number of regular and irregular movement of any kind whatsoever. But this can happen only if time is understood as an arithmetic

31. PLOTINUS, *Enneads*, III, 7, 35 f.

32. PLOTINUS, *Enneads*, III, 8, 10 ff.

number. If the essence of time is an arithmetic number, it is difficult to see in what respect time differs from other numbers. If time is not an arithmetic number, but rather a kind of continuous measure, then it must be a measure of a specific extension, even though time itself is an extension. Why then should time, thought of as a continuous extension, be the measure of movement and not the extension of movement be the measure of time?³³ It can be replied that it would be better to understand time as that which is measured in the movement. What then does time measure? For what is measured is movement, while measure derives from the projection of space-boundaries on the extension of movement. Which of them should be time? Is time the portion of movement as measured by space, is it the measuring space itself, or is time the measure of space? Let us take as an example the regular movement of the outermost sphere: if we say that the measure of time consists in the movement as measured by the extension of the orbit, we admit, on one hand, that time does not measure movement, since the measure of movement is given by the space-boundaries of the corresponding magnitude; on the other hand, time cannot be considered identical to space. The

33. In these passages Plotinus tries to refute the Aristotelian definition of time as a number of movement in respect with 'before' and 'after' by presenting the interdependency of magnitude, movement and time as a vicious circle, in which each of these entities is called to be the measure of the other ones without disposing of an external measure that can be 'fundamental' for all of them. This criticism is crucial for Plotinus' aim to show that such an original measure is provided by the World-Soul's *dianoia* of the contents of *Nous*. In reality, the Aristotelian definition of time is not liable to Plotinus' objections. Aristotle formulates his definition of time under the assumption that time is, as magnitude and movement, a *continuum* and, as such, an *ἄπειρον* (ARISTOTLE, *Physics*, III, 200 b 15-20; 202 b 30 ff.; *De caelo*, 268 a ff.), i.e. a potential infinite which strives for a different kind of actualization in comparison to the one pursued by sublunary substances (*Physics*, III, 206 a 20; *De caelo*, 270 a ff.). The infinite of magnitude can become actual only when its *continuum* is determined by a *πρότερον* and a *ὑστέρον*, i.e. when it gets actualized into the form of a definite and perceptible magnitude by receiving its boundaries (τὰ νῦν) from the contact with the surrounding bodies (*Physics*, III, 204 b 5; IV, 209 b ff. 211 b10; 212 a 30 ff.). At its turn, the infinite of movement receives its boundaries from the projection on the infinite of boundaries of the magnitude on which it occurs (*Physics*, III, 206 a 15-206 b 15). In the same way, the potency of time is actualized when the boundaries of the movement, of which it is accident, are projected on its *ἄπειρον*, i.e. when time becomes the mathematical relation of space and motion. However, for the sake of finding a measure of time, i.e. in order to actualize its *continuum*, without making use of the boundaries of a motion which is counted on score of temporal coordinates, we must dispose of a movement which can be delimited without making use of time-boundaries. That is the case of local motion. Under these presuppositions, the *a-b* segment outlined on the *ἄπειρον* of time by the projection on it of the boundaries of a regular local motion, which is counted on the score of space coordinates, can function as that universal measure by which every kind of phenomenon can be understood and defined as anterior, posterior, or simultaneous to the temporal segment *a-b*. In this context, it is important to stress against Plotinus' criticism that space does not need any further measure besides its own coordinates.

only alternative seems to be the qualification of time as that measure which can be directly applied to space and only indirectly to movement. Therefore, time would be the number³⁴ of the extension over which movement occurs, being, however, neither such a movement nor the extension itself. In what then would time differ from the other numbers, which are also supposed to measure the extension? Whatever answer we are to give, the definition of time as a number of movement makes it just a specific temporal interval, which is not time in its primary meaning. On the contrary, if we do not define time as that number which measures movement in respect with 'before' and 'after' in space, but we understand 'before' as that time which ends in the present and 'after' as that time which originates from the present, then time is no longer a number, but once again just a movement³⁵, and this hypothesis has already been rejected.

If Plotinus' criticisms cannot be regarded as fully convincing, in their attempt to stigmatize the Aristotelian and Stoic definition of time as an interval, number and measure of motion by pointing out their supposed circularity, they are fully successful in explaining what – according to Plotinus – their true inadequacy must be attributed to. Plotinus seems to believe that the biggest fault of such theories of time does not consist in logical mistakes, but rather in the trivialization they make of the concept of number, which they use in its merely ontic sense as an arithmetic number, a concrete measure and a simple quantity. Plotinus is willing to concede that time is a number, but he cannot concede to consider number as the result of a mere calculation. As Plotinus explains in *Ennead* VI, the number has a metaphysical relevance inasmuch as it represents the internal structure by which each being attains its own perfection. In the neoplatonic perspective, every mode of the being's procession receives its order and principle from a mode of number, which must be, therefore, primarily conceived as the rule and law of the ontological procession. The kinds of number and measure, to which the definitions of the Aristotelian kind reduce time, constitute the last possible instantiation of number, thought of as a rational structure of both intelligible and sensible reality. For this reason, Plotinus denies any ontological significance to the mere scheme of quantity, to which beings become liable only in terms of their original numeric constitution. For the scheme of mere quantity presupposes that a being, distinct from the author of calculation, receives from him a unit of measurement and thus a number is produced, which represents the result of such an extrinsic operation. In this way, it seems that the mathematical structure of beings derives from an external act of interpretation as performed by human thought³⁶.

34. A. CHARLES-SAGET, *op. cit.*, p. 122.

35. PLOTINUS, *Enneads*, III, 9, 20 ff.

36. Cf. PLOTINUS, *Enneads*, VI 6, 16.

For Plotinus time is certainly a number, but a number which must be, first of all, conceived in its proper metaphysical sense and, only secondarily, in the light of its epistemological meaning and function, which rest, though, on its metaphysical status as the rule and law of the ontological procession.

4. Time as Noetic-ethical Articulation of the Eternity's Logical Simultaneity. After inquiring his predecessors' views on time, Plotinus claims that the correctness of their definitions can be definitively proven only if such definitions are considered in the light of the scheme of the ontological procession and of the relation that ties the third hypostasis to the second one³⁷. The 'mythological' way of exposition that Plotinus chooses here, in order to shed light on the issue of time in the context of his metaphysics, does not make it difficult to grasp the underlying conceptual background. For Plotinus' definition of time can be fairly understood if the analogical correspondence between eternity and time is systematically used as a hermeneutical key: as the concept of eternity has found its clarification in the light of the triad of the second hypostasis, such as Being-Life-Intellect, so time can be best conceived in the light of the triad of the third hypostasis, such as Soul-Life-Universe.

Thus, as well as *Nous* departs from the One, in order to affirm itself as an autonomous Being, so the Soul detaches itself from the perfect unity of Eternity because of its desire for an ontological self-determination and affirmation. This exit from *Nous* expresses the ontological moment of the Life of Soul. As the Life of *Nous* is an infinite potency and tendency to the plurality of intelligible Forms, so the Life of Soul is an infinite potency and tendency to the Difference of the material forms. As in eternity's Life the movement of conversion to the ontological origin appears at the very moment of its flow into the exteriority of the One, so in the Life of Soul the movement of conversion to the superior hypostasis appears in her flow into the exteriority of *Nous*. The act of the conversion of Soul is expressed by the effect of delimitation and determination undergone by its infinite potency by means of the contemplation of the logical contents of the second hypostasis. The ontological result of the conversion of Soul to *Nous* is the sensible *cosmos* thought of as a totality of material forms, whose temporal-causal relations reflect the logical relations of the Ideas. However, while eternity persists in the identity because it is Life of the second hypostasis, which, by virtue of its closeness to the One, can determine its own infinite potency into the unity of a simultaneous presence of logical contents, time as Life of the third hypostasis testifies the predominance of Difference. The Soul lies too far

37. PLOTINUS, *Enneads*, III, 7, 11 ff.

from the ontological origin, so that, by contemplating the logical plurality of *Nous*, it can only produce a progressive image of the simultaneous 'before' and 'after' of Eternity, i.e. the temporal order of physical phenomena.

Time is created at the very moment in which motion originally enters being, i.e. when the Soul, because of its desire for self-determination, flows into the realm of Difference, and so introduces changeability and progressivity into the perfect unity of being³⁸. In this context, time as a definitive loss of unity and the original appearance of progressivity seems to constitute the ontological consequence of the original motion of the Soul. But the motion of the Soul still remains an intellectual process, which expresses its act of conversion to *Nous* and which takes on the form of a noetic-ethical contemplation of the contents of the second hypostasis. If time is conceived by Plotinus as the accident of the original motion of the Soul, and if such a motion is the intellectual activity of the third hypostasis by which the logical contents of *Nous* are articulated according to the temporal coordinates of 'before' and 'after', then time will be Life of the third hypostasis in the sense that it will express the rational order of the thinking activity of the Soul. Since the physical world lies in the Soul and time is the Life of the third hypostasis, physical reality must be thought of as immanent in time and as such it will be subjected to its number³⁹.

Time, conceived as an accident of the intellectual motion of Soul⁴⁰, constitutes the indispensable epistemological medium for the recollection process and, consequently, for undertaking the route of conversion to the One. Even though time is the Life of Soul, according to Plotinus, it is impossible to proceed to measure time using as boundaries the 'before' and 'after' of the thinking processes of individual Souls. Since time does not have a tangible measure, Plotinus evokes Plato's *Timaeus* when he says that God has created nights and days, in order to provide man with a means to discover numbers and to learn calculation. Since time is the number of the sensible realm, it can be especially manifested and distinguished by the observation of regular motions. Plotinus claims that time can be thought of as the measure which finds in the regular movements of the celestial bodies its universal unit. Man must realize and use time in order to be able to carry out a comparative analysis of the sublunary motions, which will allow him to discover the rational rules and laws to which beings obey. The ability to abstract the causal implications of physical phenomena from temporal se-

38. Cf. on these concepts, W. BEIERWALTES, *Ueber Ewigkeit und Zeit (Enneade III, 7)*, Frankfurt am Main, V. Klostermann, 1981, pp. 9-25.

39. PLOTINUS, *Enneads*, III, 11.

40. PLOTINUS, *Enneads*, III, 13 ff.

quences⁴¹ is the first step of the man's ascent from the sensible images of the logical relations of Ideas to the contemplation of the totality of eternity for the ultimate purpose of reaching the One.

Time is for Plotinus, as well as for his predecessors, a number of motion in respect to 'before' and 'after', but he intends the number of time first in its metaphysical sense, as the rational order of 'before' and 'after' followed by the noetic-ethical activity of the Soul, and only secondarily in its ontic and epistemological sense as a mere quantity of physical motions, whose 'before' and 'after' derive from the projection of the boundaries of space and motion in its *continuum*. Time can be the number of physical changes only because it is primarily conceived as the Life of the Soul.

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41. PLOTINUS, *Enneads*, III, 12.

Ο ΠΛΩΤΙΝΟΣ ΠΕΡΙ ΤΟΥ ΧΡΟΝΟΥ ΩΣ ΜΕΤΡΟΥ ΚΑΙ ΑΡΙΘΜΟΥ ΚΙΝΗΣΕΩΣ

Π ε ρ ί λ η ψ η

Οί Έλληνες φιλόσοφοι είχαν συλλάβει την έννοια του χρόνου ως του επιστημολογικού εκείνου μέσου, στοῦ ὁποῖου τὴν ἀρετὴ στηριζόμενος μπορεῖ κάποιος νὰ ἐπεξεργαστεῖ μιὰ αἰτιακὴ περιγραφὴ τοῦ φυσικοῦ κόσμου, τὸν χρόνο καὶ τὸν ἀριθμὸ τῆς κίνησης σύμφωνα μὲ τὸ «πρὶν» καὶ τὸ «μετὰ» κατὰ τὸν Ἀριστοτέλη, ἢ τὴ διακοπὴ τῆς συνέχειας τῆς κίνησης σύμφωνα μὲ τοὺς Στωικούς. Ὁ Πλωτῖνος ἦρθε σὲ ἀντίθεση μὲ τοὺς «προκατόχους» τοῦ ὑποστηρίζοντα ὅτι οἱ ὁρισμοὶ τοὺς γιὰ τὸν χρόνο ἦταν ἀπλῶς ὄντικες περιγραφές καὶ ὅτι δὲν θεμελιώνουν ἐπιστημολογικὰ τὴν ὄντολογία τοῦ χρόνου. Ὁ χρόνος μπορεῖ νὰ ὁριστεῖ ὡς διάλειμμα, ἀριθμὸς καὶ μέτρο τῆς κίνησης, ὑπὸ τὴν προϋπόθεση ὅτι ἡ ἀληθινὴ του οὐσία θὰ καταστεῖ σαφὴς ὑπὸ τὸ φῶς τῆς μεταφυσικῆς τοῦ Ἐνός. Ὁ χρόνος εἶναι εἰκόνα τῆς αἰωνιότητος, ἔτσι ὥστε μόνον ἐὰν ἡ φύση τοῦ ἀρχετύπου ἐρευνηθεῖ καὶ διευκρινισθεῖ, τότε καὶ ἡ οὐσία τῆς εἰκόνας θὰ μπορεῖ νὰ ἀποκαλυφθεῖ. Ὁ Πλωτῖνος ὀρίζει τὴν αἰωνιότητα ὡς Βίῳ δευτέρας ὑποστάσεως, ποὺ ὑφίσταται στὸν βαθμὸ ἐνὸς συνόλου λογικῶν περιεχομένων, τῶν ὁποίων οἱ σχέσεις διαμορφώνονται κατὰ τὸν τρόπο μιᾶς ἀ-χρονικῆς παρουσίας. Ὁ χρόνος καθίσταται ἔτσι εἰκόνα τῆς αἰωνιότητος ὡς κάποιο βαθμὸ, ἐνῶ γίνεται ἀντιληπτὸς ὄχι τόσο ὡς ἀπλὴ ποιότητα ἀλλὰ ὡς μεταφορὰ στὴν διαλεκτικὴ πρόοδο τοῦ Λόγου τῆς Ψυχῆς τοῦ Κόσμου τῶν ἄρρητων περιεχομένων τοῦ Νοῦ. Ὁ χρόνος, ὡς ρυθμὸς στοχασμοῦ τῆς ψυχῆς, εἶναι ἡ κανονιστικὴ ἀρχὴ ποὺ ρυθμίζει τὴν αἰσθητικὴ πραγματικότητα, ἐνῶ οἱ χρονικοὶ δεσμοὶ ποὺ ἐνυπάρχουν στὰ σχήματα τῆς ὕλης ἀντιστοιχοῦν στοὺς λογικοὺς δεσμοὺς ποὺ ἐνώνουν τὶς Ἰδέες μεταξύ τους. Ἐὰν ἀποδειχθεῖ ὅτι ὁ χρόνος εἶναι ἀριθμὸς μὲ τὴν έννοια τῆς δομικῆς μορφῆς τοῦ φυσικοῦ κόσμου, εἶναι δυνατὸν στὴν περίπτωσιν αὐτὴ νὰ γίνῃ ἀποδεκτὸς ὁ ὁρισμὸς του ὡς μέτρου τῆς κίνησης καὶ ὡς σημείου ἀφετηρίας τῆς διαδικασίας ἀνάμνησης. Οἱ κανονικὲς κινήσεις στὸν χῶρο, ὅπως ἐκεῖνες τῶν οὐρανίων σωμάτων, ἀποκαλύπτουν τὴν ὑπαρξὴ τοῦ χρόνου καὶ τοῦ ἀριθμοῦ, ἀκόμη καὶ ἐὰν ὁ χρόνος συνιστᾷ μόνον κατὰ τύχην τὸ μέτρο τῆς φυσικῆς κίνησης, ἐνῶ κατὰ βάσιν εἶναι ἡ κίνηση τοῦ πνεύματος τῆς τρίτης διαστάσεως.

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