

Notes on Time in Plotinus

1. Background

a. Plotinus' descriptions of both time and eternity must be situated in the context of his overarching theory of the Three Primary Hypostases. These are:

i. The One (*to hen*)

1. The unifying and differentiating principle of all things.
2. That which allows us to posit and think singularity.
3. Also that which allows us even to differentiate between one and many, singularity and multiplicity.
4. Straining the capacities of human thought, the One is ultimately incomprehensible for us.
5. Thus it is best described apophatically (negatively), or at the very least hyper-phonetically. (e.g., it is 'beyond being'; being cannot be predicated of the One...)

ii. Intellect (*nous*)

1. Nous is the unified structure of true thought.
2. It contains both the thinking (*noesis*) and the thinkable (*noēma*).
3. It should primarily be thought of as a unity, since it contains the interconnections of all possible objects of thought.
4. However, it must be said to include multiplicity in a qualified sense, since it allows the unified structure of thought to be 'looked at' in its different aspects. That is: there are multiple of objects of our intellect, even if all intellectual objects are ultimately unified in one noetic structure.
5. To put it briefly: Nous is the One of the Many, rather than the One *simpliciter*.

6. Nous is not above being, but is perhaps itself being.

iii. Soul (*psyche*)

1. Soul is the power of discursive thought, which humans happen to have.
2. However, the universe as a whole can be said to have a soul.
3. The life of the universe as a psychological component.
4. Psyche has access to reason, which it uses to try engage with objects both (a) sensory and (b) intellectual.
5. Soul brings the sensory world into being by its rational movement (as opposed to the static being of Nous), which means that its engagement with sensory objects is somewhat autoerotic.
6. The soul's desire should instead be directed at the realm of nous.
7. Discursive reason should strive for the certain stability of intellectual objects.
8. This is easier said than done, of course, and so the soul tends to 'run around' with its reason as it engages with the world of multiplicity.
9. Soul, then, abides in multiplicity while striving for unity (in the Nous).
10. Twirling around in multiplicity as it is, the soul fits best with the earlier Platonic sense of becoming (*genesis kai phthora*).

- b. Both Armstrong and Sorabji laud Plotinus' account as a seminal turning point in the history of the philosophy of time. (For Armstrong, indeed, only Aristotle and Plotinus matter here.) Plotinus' clarification that the divine *aiōn* must be timeless—properly atemporal, not simply everlasting—would be received and preserved in the subsequent Neoplatonic and Christian traditions, especially. This seems to be the case not just for Proclus and Simplicius, but also for Boethius and Augustine. The acceptance of eternity as properly atemporal does not always mean that each author agrees with Plotinus about the definition of time, however. This can be seen even in Augustine, whose later description of time is too often collapsed back into Plotinus' account.
- c. So who was Plotinus, anyway?
 - i. We actually know a decent amount, thanks to his disciple Porphyry, who both collated all of the *Enneads* (organized thematically rather than chronologically) and wrote a *Life of Plotinus*.
 - ii. Best highlight of Plotinus' life: when he saved Porphyry from suicide!
 - iii. His dates: ca. 204-270 CE.
 - iv. Hailing from Egypt, Plotinus studied philosophy under Ammonius Saccas in Alexandria, as the Christian Origen also seems to have done.
 - v. There are some rumours about Persian or Indian philosophy playing a role in shaping Alexandrian intellectual culture. Perhaps motivated by such talk, Plotinus tried to travel to Persia along with Emperor Gordian III, but that expedition was cancelled upon the emperor's assassination.
 - vi. In 245 CE, Plotinus came to Rome and taught Ammonius-style Platonic philosopher there.
 - vii. He is remembered as a Neo-Platonist, although he would have described himself as simply a Platonist, engaged in the centuries-long endeavour to uncover the fullest possible understanding of Plato's genius.
 - viii. (Plato had died back in 348 BCE, about five-six hundred years previous.)
 - ix. Plotinus' philosophy also incorporates many of the insights of Aristotle. In fact, he seems to have regarded Aristotle primarily as a helpful interpreter of Plato.
 - x. Plotinus' systematic explication of Platonic philosophy would become the basic understanding of what "Platonism" was for centuries to come. This was the Platonism taken up by the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions, then renewed in the Renaissance (Marsilio Ficino) and after (the Cambridge Platonists in the seventeenth century).
 - xi. Augustine himself was transformed by his reading of the *libri Platoniconum*, although it is unclear what he actually read. Marius Victorinus did translate much of Plotinus and Porphyry, and Augustine was certainly familiar with the texts of both Victorinus and Porphyry. Does that mean he puzzled over every last page of the *Enneads*? It's impossible to know.

2. *Ennead III.vii: Time & Eternity*

- a. Chapter 1
 - i. Anticipating Augustine, early on Plotinus remarks how strange it is that we speak of 'time' all the time, as if we knew what we meant. And yet when we try to concentrate on what words like time and eternity really mean, we run into roadblocks. Plotinus' goal is to relieve those roadblocks.

- ii. He also begins with some word association:
 - 1. Eternity—Nature—Everlasting
 - a. *Aiōn*—*Physis*—*Aïdios*
 - 2. Time—Universe—Becoming
 - a. *Chronos*—*Pan*—*Gignomenon*
- iii. As Sorabji points out, this early invocation of “everlasting” will only cause problems. Is eternity merely everlasting or rather atemporal? The latter is where Plotinus is heading.
- iv. In a manner reminiscent of the *Timaeus*, Plotinus recommends the method of first grasping the paradigm (eternity) in order to then make sense of the icon (time).
- b. Chapter 2
 - i. So: what then is eternity? Is it the universe? No; the universe is made up of parts that arise and fall away over time.
 - ii. Is it rest (*stasis*)? Is it unity? It is similar to both rest and unity, although neither word quite captures it, since temporal things can have a kind of ‘rest’ and ‘unity,’ as well.
 - iii. To grasp eternity, we have to free our mind of the temporal meaning of such terms. We have to come up with non-temporal interpretations for words that might otherwise make us think of time. (cf. Sorabji)
 - iv. First of all: “always” (*aei*) doesn’t always mean the same thing.
 - v. When we say that eternity is “always,” we don’t mean that it has an everlasting duration, since that would be the “always” of time.
 - vi. Eternity, in fact, has no duration or extension or interval. It is *adiastatos*; it lacks any *diastēma* (distance, extension).
- c. Chapter 3
 - i. But now Plotinus catches himself: has he not been describing eternity (*aiōn*) as everlasting (*aïdion*) or everlastingness (*aïdiotēs*)? Are those the same thing?
 - ii. Of course not! We’ve just heard that eternity has no duration, not even an everlasting duration.
 - iii. Eternity is instead more like the unity of all intelligible objects.
 - iv. Eternity, therefore, must be understood in terms of nous (and *noēsis-noēma*).
 - v. What we have to think of is an ‘intellectual life’ that could think every possible thinkable thing all at once—“always” and “without extension,” *aei adiastatos*.
 - vi. So: don’t think of a soul jumping about from one object of thought to the next. Think instead of the entire realm of intelligible objects, taken together as a unified and unchanging whole.
 - vii. This whole would be like a “point” (*sēmeion*; sign, mark) that had not yet exploded outward into lines (*hrusin*).
 - viii. This kind of intelligible unity would not be subject to the arising and passing away of time, nor would it allow of past or future.
 - ix. In the Nous, everything exists in the present (*en toi paronti aei*).
 - x. The being of the nous is eternity (*aiōn*).
 - xi. *Aion* allows of no tense, no change, no extension of any kind.
 - xii. Eternity is that which simply is. Eternity simply is Nous.

d. Chapter 4

- i. Plotinus doubles down on this identification: It is not simply that Nous ‘has’ Eternity, but rather that Nous is Eternity.
- ii. The intelligible realm is quite timeless.
- iii. Eternal Nous is a whole, a totality, in need of nothing else.
- iv. Only temporal things are ‘in need of’ more being.
- v. That’s what becoming is: ‘adding on’ more being to something that has incomplete being.
- vi. If you stop adding on to the process of becoming, it stops.
- vii. If you take away a temporal thing’s future, it is destroyed.
- viii. But if you were to add a future to true being, you would likewise destroy it by debasing it, lowering it down, as if it were lacking and in need of a supplement.
- ix. Cosmologically speaking, the universe must have its future. That’s why the heavenly cosmos swirls round and round in cycles, aspiring to the unchanging stability of noetic being. (Here Plotinus comes quite close to the plainer meaning of Plato’s text.)
- x. But the Nous has no need of cycles.
- xi. It doesn’t need to imitate changeless identity; it simply is changeless identity.
- xii. Plotinus breaks this down etymologically: Eternity (*aion*), as always-being (*aei on*), is the state (*diathesis*) and nature (*physis*) of complete being (*panteles ousia tou ontos*).

e. Chapter 5

- i. Eternity is the Nous = Eternity is a god.
- ii. Which god? The Second Hypostasis: the Nous.
- iii. (The One would presumably remain beyond even Eternity.)
- iv. Thus theologized, Eternity is also a paradigmatic form of Life.
- v. The Eternal Nous is the unbounded life of the divine.
- vi. Again: this is not ‘eternal life’ as infinite duration in heaven.
- vii. It is properly atemporal, sans extension, yet still somehow ‘life.’

f. Chapter 6

- i. Eternity-Nous is the life of the really real ‘around’ the One.
- ii. It is the life of being in the proper sense.
- iii. It is the life of truth, which allows anything to be true at all.
- iv. (Only by aligning itself with the truth and sameness of the eternal Nous can the temporal rationality of the Psyche approach what is true.)
- v. In a sense, Plotinus is patiently unfolding his complex reinterpretation of the Platonic distinction between being and becoming.
- vi. Eternity, as being proper, can have no stretch (*oude parateneis*).
- vii. It is undifferentiated (*adiaphorōs*), without this or that (*allo kai allo*).
- viii. Everything in the realm of temporal becoming does not really have true being, then, since to ‘be’ properly means to ‘always be’—now in this rarified sense of an ‘always’ beyond time itself.
- ix. For temporal things to claim being is like a false philosopher claiming to be a philosopher.
- x. Becoming is therefore counterfeit being.

- g. Chapter 7
 - i. So much for eternity. What then is time?
 - ii. After briefly hinting at what time might be for him, Plotinus proceeds to toss out some popular but erroneous theories of time.
 - iii. The Early Academy, for example, seems to have taken Plato very literally, simply equating time with the movement of the celestial bodies.
 - iv. Other popular ideas:
 - 1. Time is movement
 - 2. Time is what is moved
 - 3. Time is something belonging to movement (like measurement)
 - v. Both the Epicureans and the Stoics seem to be tacitly critiqued as faux-philosophers who equate time too quickly with its movement or measurement.
 - vi. The Stoics, for example, seem to have been happy to define time as the *diastēma* or “distance” of all movement, which is far too fast and loose for Plotinus.
- h. Chapter 8
 - i. To be sure, time has ‘something’ to do with movement, but that doesn’t mean it simply is movement.
 - ii. Movement is rather ‘in’ time.
 - iii. Movement can be stopped. Time cannot.
 - iv. Inverting their relationship, Plotinus insists that time must not be reduced to movement or an accident of movement in any way.
 - v. Cf. again the Epicureans and the Stoics, both of whom play around with the idea that time is merely a *sumbebēkos* to some more fundamental reality.
 - vi. But would it be acceptable to call time a *diastēma*, provided that we made this a non-spatial (*ouk topkion*) distance?
 - vii. Probably not.
- i. Chapter 9
 - i. What if we called time a ‘number’ having to do with movement?
 - ii. Cf. Aristotle’s *arithmos*.
 - iii. First of all: measure (*metron*) is a better word here than number.
 - iv. Because movement is continuous (*sunechēs*: a continuum).
 - v. And number, for Plotinus, is discrete.
 - vi. One must use a non-discrete (non-atomistic) measure for the continuum that is motion.
 - vii. Of course, finding out what time measures is not the same as saying what time is. Plotinus reminds us of this constantly.
 - viii. If it is to serve (incidentally?) as a measure, time itself must have its own separate nature (*physis*).
 - ix. This is akin to number, which can be used to count things but which also has its own separate nature. (e.g., 10 itself v. 10 sheep)
 - x. Unlike number, however, time measures a continuum (*sunechēs*).
 - xi. Therefore, it itself must also be a continuum.
 - xii. Time is thus more like a line (*grammē*) than a point (*sēmeion*).
 - xiii. Cf. the entire history of the atom-continuum debate!
 - xiv. Much of our confusion about time, it turns out, has to do with the fact that we talk both about ‘time itself’ and ‘the times’ or ‘time-spans.’

- xv. But saying ‘this time here’ is very different from speaking of time itself.
- xvi. To get at time itself, then, we have to refrain from pointing to any kind of delimited or measured time-span.
- xvii. Even Aristotle falls astray here, since even he wants to reduce time to its ability to be used as a (for him numerical) measure of motion.
- xviii. Critiquing Aristotle, Plotinus reconfigures the meaning of before and after (*proteron kai husteron*) so that they are more clearly temporal:
 - 1. Aristotle, properly understood, posited an earlier and a later time-limit, between which a delimited span could be measured.
 - 2. Plotinus, however, thinks temporal ‘before and after’ should only have to do with before and after a posited now-point. Aristotle’s before-and-after is misleading, ultimately turning out to be a fairly minor point about how we measure spans of time.
- xix. Jettisoning Aristotle, then, Plotinus doubles down on the idea that time is a boundless continuum (*apeiron*), which means it has no real number.
- j. Chapter 10
 - i. There could be more to say about the history of the philosophy of time, as Plotinus admits.
 - ii. But he is not doing history; he is doing philosophy.
 - iii. And so it is time for him to press on to his own philosophy of time.
 - iv. (Luckily for us, we get to do history and fill in some of the blanks left behind by Plotinus here. Hopefully, that means we’ll better grasp the import of his intervention.)
- k. Chapter 11
 - i. So if eternity is whole and stable and unchanging, why would there be time in the first place?
 - ii. Could Nous itself grow restless with itself?
 - iii. Not quite—recall the third primary hypostasis: Soul or Psyche.
 - iv. Soul is that restlessly active nature which wanted ‘more.’
 - v. More specifically: it wanted ‘more than the present!’ (*to pleon parontos*)
 - vi. Seeking to itself become the master, rather than be mastered by Nous, Psyche broke free of Nous.
 - vii. That is to say: It moved. And time moved with it.
 - viii. Time, in other words, was constituted by this primordial movement of the psyche out of the stable realm of nous.
 - ix. It is this movement of Psyche which constructed time as an icon of eternity.
 - x. What’s more: we are part of this universal Psyche.
 - xi. So, in a sense, we made time: *aiōnos eikona ton chronon eirgasmeta*.
 - xii. Just as the movement of Psyche made time, it also made the entire sensory universe. It made a multiplicity of things taking place one after the other. It handed all sensory things over slaves to time, to genesis and decay.
 - xiii. But it all began with Psyche ‘temporalizing’ itself! (*beautēn echronōsen*)
 - xiv. In doing so, Psyche accomplishes something ‘great,’ but also weakens itself immensely.
 - 1. This is like the seed, which bursts out of itself to become a huge tree, but in so doing spreads itself thin, opening itself up to decay even as it begins to grow. Psyche, likewise, would have remained stronger and more secure if it had remained in the eternal Nous.

- xv. Is this the same as Augustine?
 - 1. Now this is very different from Augustine! For Augustine, God creates time and the universe simultaneously. ‘Soul’ does not fall out of eternity and into time. First of all, there is no world-soul. Second of all, human souls are created as temporal from the beginning. The closest we could get to this in Augustine would be angels and demons, but even then it’s not a perfect fit. By the grace of God, the angels remain in the quasi-eternity of the heaven of heavens. The temporality of the fallen angels is admittedly obscure, but I have yet to find a conclusive passage in Augustine that posits the transition from eternity to time as precisely the fall of Satan. (One might have to take a closer look at the *De Genesi ad Litteram*.)
- xvi. Back to Plotinus: Psyche’s self-temporalization creates the differentiated universe that we encounter in time.
- xvii. The spreading-out (diastasis) of the soul’s life ‘involves’ time.
 - 1. Is this diastasis the same as the *distentio animi* of Augustine? No, because the *distentio animi* does not ‘create’ time. God does that directly. Only by forcing Plotinus onto Augustine could we think otherwise.
- xviii. We thus come to Plotinus’ definition of time:

Time is the life (*ζωή*) of soul in a movement of passage from one way of life (bios) to another.
- xix. In other words: time is a continuum (*sunecheia*) produced by the additive activity of a psyche not satisfied with eternity’s static present.
- xx. This has predictably tragic results.
- xxi. So: why does this time count as an icon of the *aion*?
- xxii. Because the Psyche continually adds new activities to its life in order to attain the holistic perfection it once knew in the Nous. But it can only asymptotically approach such perfection. Thus: Psyche’s time can only be a ‘moving icon’ of the fullness of the *aion*.
- 1. Chapter 12
 - i. For Plotinus, ‘salvation’ would thus be the abolition of psychological time and return back into noetic eternity.
 - ii. This would mean the ceasing of all of the ‘making and producing’ that psyche does.
 - iii. Once the soul’s ‘lifestyle’ (bios) ceases, time would collapse back into eternity.
 - iv. Now that we have a proper understanding of both time and eternity, we can toss out all of those misguided theories which tried to reduce time to its measurement, distance, *diastēma*, etc.
 - v. ‘For time itself is not a measure.’ Plotinus is clear on this.
 - vi. Before the question of measuring time arises, time is already active.
- m. Chapter 13
 - i. Time, furthermore, is not ‘in’ anything else.
 - ii. Time is what it is: the dynamic life of active-creative Psyche.
 - iii. Sensory world is ‘in’ time, not the other way around.
 - iv. The same must go for motion, etc.
 - v. The whole story, then, is this:

1. Soul spontaneously temporalizes itself.
2. Thereby producing sensory universe of motion as by-product.
3. All motion thus finds its cause in psyche's motion.
4. Even soul-less motion owes its dynamism to the psyche.
- vi. Plotinus' whole theory is thus predicated on a universal world-soul.
- vii. If no world-soul, then Plotinian account of time cannot hold.
- viii. Plotinus' philosophy of time must be positioned within the framework of his Three (Divine) Primary Hypostases.
- ix. And what is the upshot for humans?
- x. Well, we all have souls.
- xi. That means we are all part of the Universal Psyche.
- xii. That means Time is in all of us.
- xiii. We are unified in time; or rather, time is unified in us, because we are all one.
- xiv. We must use the continuity of time to re-attain the higher unity—without interval or differentiation—that we abandoned when we fled the noetic homeland...

3. Questions

- a. Does Plotinus care about the paradox of the present time? (Not really!)
- b. Does Plotinus weigh in much on issues of atomism, divisibility, and so on?
- c. Does the dependence of time on the world-soul survive into Christianity?
- d. Can there be a Plotinian theory of time without taking on the whole, complex Plotinian metaphysics?
- e. Is *diastasis distentio*? (No—one is constructive, the other passive.)
- f. Has Plotinus bequeathed anything to the Christian philosophy of time? (Yes—he has clarified eternity as atemporal, rather than simply everlasting. He has made it clear that seemingly temporal terms can be used in non-temporal ways, thus becoming capable of describing timeless intellectual truths—and perhaps even the divine, to a degree...)
- g. Does the Trinity map on to the Three Hypostases? (No: God is One and Creator and Will and Love and Word and Truth, etc. Christian thinkers will be concerned with whether or not the Godhead as a whole can be considered 'timeless' or not, rather than specifying the realm of the intelligibles as eternity proper. Most important of all: are psyches are in no way 'divine' like God is divine.)