

David A. Kolb Time and the timeless in Greek thought

Plato tells us that "time is the moving image of eternity" (*Timaeus* 37d). I would like to explore one aspect of the relation of time and the timeless in Greek thought. Is eternity itself only a static original for the moving image? Or can we speak of "timeless happenings" which are themselves imaged in time? Our conclusions will bear on the question of whether we can speak in any important sense of something timeless in man.

In Plato's world, time is the realm of becoming. The eternal Forms, patterns of order, are instantiated in the growth and decay of perishable things. Temporal beings strive to embody the Forms, then perish with the passing of time. The Forms themselves are unaffected; they have no history. It is conceivable that events could lead to the instantiation of a pattern never seen before (though given infinite time this is unlikely; cf. *Republic* 499cd), but this would only be a new appearance, not the generation of a new Form. There is no temporal process that determines the Forms to be the particular patterns that they are.

If we abstract from the influence of the Forms, time is only a flux to be bound and ordered. "[The Receptacle,] being full of powers which were neither similar nor equally balanced, was never in any part in a state of equipoise, but swaying unevenly hither and thither, was shaken by them. (*Timaeus* 52de)."¹ When the flux of time and space is bound into stable patterns, temporal beings emerge and try to come as close as possible, to a harmonious, unchanging state. "Change, except when it is change from what is bad, is always, we shall find, highly perilous, whether it be change of seasons, of prevailing winds, of bodily regimen, of mental habit, or, in a word, change of anything whatever without exception" (*Laws* 797de). Indeed, the best members of the physical world are the heavenly bodies whose changes follow unvarying cyclic patterns (cf. *Laws* 898, 966e-969). As for men, they should live according to the best part in them, their souls, which are closest to the timeless nature of the Forms. "The soul is most like that which is divine, immortal, intelligible, uniform, indissoluble, and ever self-consistent and invariable" (*Phaedo* 80b). Time is the moving image of the static perfection of the timeless.

What I have just related is a familiar picture of Plato, but not a complete one. Something "happens" in the timeless realm, and that happening too is imaged in time. As we know from the *Sophist*, the eternal patterns are not isolated from one another; they involve each other in complex dependencies, inclusions, and sharings. They exhibit a structure like that of a realm of interrelated mathematical objects. Mathematical objects, however, can be seen in two ways. They stand in finished, static totality, but they are also generated from simpler unities. The natural numbers are both a set of related objects and

a sequence generated by an operation. If we think of Plato's Forms as analogous to mathematical objects, we may be able to speak of a timeless happening: the generation of the patterns of order themselves.

The analogy of the Sun in the *Republic* (509b) suggests that the Good is in some sense the origin of the Forms, not by being their cause in an Aristotelian fashion, but by being the principle from which they are derived. In the *Philebus* (23cd) Plato speaks of a class of entities generated from the mixture of Unity and the Unlimited. If these entities are the Forms—the interpretation is questionable—we have another indication of timeless generation.

I am suggesting that we take the mathematicization of the Platonic Forms very seriously. While the details of the doctrine that "the Forms are numbers" seem almost impossible to reconstruct,² it seems clear that Plato did attempt some type of generation of the Forms from the One and the Indefinite Dyad, as Aristotle suggests. Before Plato, the Pythagoreans had generated all patterns of order from the Unit and the Unlimited. Aristotle criticizes them for turning this generation into a temporal process involving spatialized units (cf. *Metaphysics* 989b29–990a32 and 1083b8–23). He then discusses the Platonic theory, and we can at least glean from his obscure remarks that Plato's generation of the Forms was a timeless process which Aristotle felt could not be linked to concrete becoming in time (cf. *Metaphysics* 991b10–993a10).

Thus it seems correct to speak of a timeless happening: the determining of the timeless patterns of order to be the precise patterns they are. Of course, this is not a process done by anyone or anything; it is a mathematical generation from highest principles which determine a realm of valid patterns. Neither the principles nor the patterns can be simply identified with Aristotelian substances or Neoplatonic hypostases. Plato's is the most austere of the three notions we will examine.

This timeless determining of the Unlimited by the One allows us to see additional meaning in Plato's claim that time is the moving image of eternity. What happens in time is a binding and measuring of the flux of change by unitary patterns. Just as in the timeless realm, there is a happening of definiteness and order. This is told to us in the story of the Demiurge in the *Timaeus*. Furthermore, from the *Sophist* (248e) and *Philebus* (26e) we learn that soul is a part of the Platonic cosmology as basic as the Forms themselves. We also learn that the action of soul is to measure and harmonize (cf. also *Laws* X). This gives us a new picture of the timeless in man. In the *Phaedo* we were urged to approach the static contemplation of static patterns. Now, we participate in the happening of definiteness. Man is to be the ruler, the imposer of unity and harmony on himself and on the city. He is the statesman, the lawgiver, the measurer of ways of life. This activity is part of the cosmic happening of order in multiplicity which starts in the timeless realm.³

Before following our theme into Neoplatonism, we must ask if there are any timeless happenings in Aristotle's world. For him time is the measure of motion, that is, of change, and change is the transition from potency to activity. He does not speak of a flux being measured, but of substances attaining their full development and full activity. Development and activity are determined by the forms of the various kinds of substances. It makes as little sense for Aristotle as it does for Plato to speak of these patterns themselves being generated in time. But, unlike Plato, Aristotle finds no sense in speaking of their timeless mathematical generation. They are "explained," if at all, by their functional place in the teleological hierarchy that orders a harmonious world. What is supreme here is not a principle from which the forms can be generated, but an actual perfect substance whose complete timeless reality furnishes a teleological capstone for the world.

This supreme reality, the first mover, does not change from potency to activity. Yet it can scarcely be spoken of as inert. It is pure self-coincident activity, thought thinking thought (cf. *Metaphysics* 1072b13-30 and 1074b15-1075a11). Though Aristotle finds no timeless happenings of a mathematical nature, the eternal activity of the first mover is a timeless happening of another sort. Unlike Plato, Aristotle conceives of a timeless activity which belongs to a concrete individual being. It is not an activity that produces a product separate from the agent, but that pure self-coincidence, as in "life" or "thought," which Aristotle calls *enérgeia* (as opposed to *kinēsis*, cf. *Metaphysics* 1048b20-35).

Despite these changes, we can still speak of time as the moving image of eternity. The spheres of the heavens move in their unchanging circles to image the self-enclosed activity of the first mover. All natural things strive for the full development and actuality which the first mover exemplifies most completely. As for man, at his best he shares a moment of timeless contemplation like that of the highest substance. "[The first mover] is a life such as the best we enjoy, and enjoy for but a short time (for it is ever in this state, which we cannot be)" (*Metaphysics* 1072b14).⁴

When we turn to the Neoplatonists, we find that timeless happenings are the central concern of their philosophy. All things flow from the One through the complex series of subordinate hypostases.⁵ Plotinus emphatically reminds us, however, that his language of flowing and generation is not to be taken in any temporal sense: "We have to remove from our minds any idea that this is a process like generation in time, because here we are treating of eternal realities. We speak metaphorically in terms of generation, to indicate the causal relations of things eternal and their systematic order" (*Enneads* V,1,6).

The timeless events he describes contain elements from both Plato and Aristotle. This comes out most clearly in the case of the Intelligence, the second hypostasis, since it is with the Intelligence that patterns of order are

generated. Plotinus tells us that "the primal beings are in fact, sufficient unto themselves, and perfect" (V,9,4). He describes the Intelligence in terms borrowed from Aristotle: "'The Intelligence' must be understood not as intelligence in potency or intelligence evolving . . . but as intelligence in actuality and for all eternity. It does not acquire thoughts; it has thoughts of itself. It thinks of itself and by itself; it is its own thoughts. Were its thoughts a reality other than itself, its own reality would not be the object of its thinking and it would be in potency and not in act" (V,9,5). The eternal happening that is the Intelligence is thus a movement of self-coincident pure activity along Aristotelian lines. But Plotinus uses this language of self-coincident substances only to subvert it. There can be no independent, enclosed substances in the Neoplatonic world. The deepest reality of any being is its flowing from a higher being. To be something is to be unified in a certain way, to be a multiplicity that receives its unity from a higher unity (*cf.* VI, 9, 1-2). Self-presence at its most acute leads to, in fact *is*, a receptive contemplation of the higher. Thus "in turning towards itself the Intelligence turns towards its origin" (VI, 9, 2) and contemplates the first hypostasis, the One. This contemplation is not something the Intelligence does as if its reality were founded elsewhere, and it then turned inward toward the One. Its reality, its self-presence, its contemplation of the One and reception of unity from it—all these are the same activity described differently.

Aristotle's self-sufficient activity has become a movement into and beyond itself. In this movement Plato's timeless happening returns, for in being itself, that is, in its self-presence and contemplation of the One, the Intelligence generates the patterns of order for our world. "The One is without form, even intelligible form" (VI, 9, 3). But the Intelligence cannot receive such formless unity in its contemplation. Contemplation is only reception of unity, not a pure identity with it; difference and multiplicity are involved from the beginning. The pure unity of the One can only be received as unity in multiplicity, that is, as patterns of unity, the Platonic Forms. In a complex geometrical metaphor, Plotinus describes the emanation of the Intelligence from the One as the movement from a pure center (a "one without a second"?) to the differentiated center-and-circumference of a circle. The circle contains a multiplicity of higher and lower points, that is, the Forms with their various dignities and places in the hierarchy of the world.

The Intelligence does not contemplate unity, for, even when it contemplates the One, it does not contemplate it as a unity. Otherwise there would be no Intelligence . . . It deploys itself like a circle which in its deployment becomes figure and surface, circumference, center, radii, higher and lower points—the higher whence come the radii being the better, and the lower, whither the radii extend being the less good. The originating center is not equivalent to both center and circumference, nor the two to center alone. In other words, the

Intelligence is not the thought of a single thing but is universal, and, being universal, is the thought of all things (III, 8, 8).

Timeless patterns of order for our world are thus generated through the activity of the Intelligence. Temporal beings are in turn born from a further act of contemplation, that of the Soul, the third hypostasis.

Were one to ask Nature why it produces, it might—if willing—thus reply: “You should never have put the question. Silently, as I am silent and little given to talk, you should have tried to understand. Understand what? That what comes to be is the object of my silent contemplation; mine is a contemplative nature. The contemplative in me produces the object contemplated much as geometricians draw their figures while contemplating. I do not draw. But, contemplating, I drop from within me the lines constitutive of bodily forms. Within me I preserve traces of my source and of the principles that brought me into being. They, too, were born of contemplation and without action on their part gave me birth. But they are greater than I: they contemplated themselves and thus I was born” (III, 8, 3).

On each descending level of the hierarchy, there is more multiplicity, less self-sufficiency and pure inwardness, more division of beings from each other. But despite these differences of modes of being and activity, all beings produce by turning to their center to receive and give form. Plotinus speaks in this manner (III, 8) of the actions of the earth, of trees, of pregnant animals, and of human lovers and craftsmen. Time is the moving image of eternity.

Man’s creative activities participate in the cosmic happening of unity in multiplicity, which begins in the timeless realm. But while Plato emphasizes man’s ability to continue and extend that process, Plotinus concentrates on man’s return to its source. “Self-knowledge reveals to the soul that its natural motion is not, if uninterrupted, in a straight line, but circular, as around some inner object, about a center, the point to which it owes its origin” (VI, 9, 3). Meditation can bring us to our center and let us touch that from whence we come. “Raising itself above the body by the part of us that is not submerged, we are, by our own center, attaching ourselves to the center of all. And so we remain, just as the centers of the great circles coincide with that of the sphere that surrounds them” (VI, 9, 8). Eventually, the soul will return wholly to the timeless, but even while it is in the body, ecstatic union with the One can remove it from time. It is true that this event can be temporally located: we can know that we were in ecstasy after breakfast and before lunch. But this is due to the continuity provided by the body; the content of the experience of union has no internal links with the rest of the temporal series. It is a pure union with the purely timeless (*cf.* VI, 9, 10–11). Yet in his descriptions of mystical experience and the future life, Plotinus talks as enthusiastically of the soul’s dwelling among the Forms as he does of its union with the One.

All determination is not swallowed up. Plotinus retains Plato's love of determinate perfection (*cf.* I, 6).

I have tried to return at each stage of this discussion to the question of man. If thinkers want to understand or make assertions that there is something timeless about man, can they merely say that man instantiates timeless patterns or knows timeless truths? At most, this makes of the timeless a source of guiding patterns. Granted, this is already more than might be admitted today, but it remains far less than has been traditionally asserted, for it makes man only a product of the timeless, not its participant. To speak of something timeless in man in any stronger sense seems to require that the timeless itself be conceived as more than static. I have suggested that the Greeks provided two models for doing so: the determining of patterns of order, and the pure activity of self-coincidence. It is the synthesis of these two which has provided much of the distinctively Western mode of dealing with the relation of time and the timeless.

I would like to close with some sweeping comparative comments on this last point. The Neoplatonic synthesis of Platonic and Aristotelian modes of conceiving the timeless furnished the basis for most of the Medieval speculation on the nature of God. The forms of temporal things were generated by limitation of the pure formless actuality of God's essence. This mode of thought reaches its zenith in the theories of the Trinity derived, through Augustine, from Neoplatonic sources. God has life, not just static perfection. Temporal activities, especially man's inner life of knowledge and love, image God's eternal activities. Even the anti-Platonic tradition of Divine Voluntarism from Ockham to Descartes invokes a timeless happening of definiteness: the determination of the order of things by an act of God's will, which is itself a pure power with no internal structure.⁶

What seems to me peculiarly Western in all this is the Platonic emphasis on the generation of patterns of order. Richard Robinson has pointed out how much can depend on what kind of science first appears in an intellectual tradition.⁷ It was mathematics that first taught the West to *know*, and this has influenced our conceptions of the relation of time and the timeless in at least two ways. First, it gave the Greeks an insight into a realm of timeless patterns of order. For Platonists, the contrast between absolute and derived reality is not an opposition between the indeterminate and the determinate, between the formless *Brahman* and the realm of *nāmarūpa*. It is a contrast between a level of determinate forms and the world of temporal becoming. Even the formless perfection of the Plotinian One is only a part of the eternal realm, which includes patterns of order as well. Second, mathematics has led to the demand for some account of why the patterns of order are what they are. The statement that they arise from some formless ground is not considered a complete answer. Plato himself, or Spinoza, or Hegel, exemplify a typically Western

demand for a necessary generation of the determinate patterns of order. Whatever the actual success of this Platonic tradition in carrying out its program, it has exercised a profound influence.⁸ This tradition can provide some content for the vague claim that the West emphasizes "rationality."

1. Quotations from Plato are taken from *Plato The Collected Dialogues* edited by Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1961). The Aristotle citations are from Richard McKeon's *Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: Random House, 1941), and the Plotinus from Elmer O'Brien's *The Essential Plotinus* (New York: New American Library, 1964).

2. J. N. Findlay attempts to do just this in a forthcoming book on Plato.

3. This is as close as Plato comes to resolving the dichotomy in man's vocation symbolized by the need to force philosophers back into the Cave. But perhaps Plato cannot wholly resolve this as long as he insists that the function of soul always consists in imposing forms glimpsed in a model, and does not deal with the "creation" of "new" forms by the poet, the lover, and the community.

4. Aristotle's doctrine of the Agent Intellect casts a further light on man's participation in the timeless, but I am here avoiding the notorious difficulties of the relevant texts. (The picture of Aristotle drawn in this article may be too Platonized in at least one respect. While it is clear that the first mover is not in space, it may be that Aristotle thought of eternity as endless temporal duration rather than as strictly timeless existence. But this latter sense is how he was understood by the Neoplatonists, so it is appropriate to our discussion.)

5. A brief reminder of Plotinus' doctrines may be helpful:

"The One is every thing and not every thing. It is not every thing because it is the source of every thing. It is—transcendentally (*ekeinos*)—every thing because there every thing is—or, more exactly, is not yet but is to be.

Yet how can every thing come from the One, which is simple and apparently has within it no multiplicity or duality whatever? Every thing can come from it precisely because there is no thing in it. In order that being be, the One must be not being but being's begetter.

This, then, it may be said, is the primal begetting: perfect, seeking nothing, having nothing, needing nothing, the One overflows and its excess begets an other than itself; begotten turns back towards begetter and is filled and becomes its contemplator, the Intelligence. Its abiding with the One constitutes its Being, its contemplating the One constitutes it being Intelligence; because it abides with the One in order to see, it becomes—at one and the same time—Intelligence and Being.

Image of the One, the Intelligence produces as does the One, with, like its prior, a mighty show of strength. This activity is the Soul welling up from Being, the Intelligence the while remaining quite unchanged as its prior, the One, remained unchanged.

But the Soul does not remain unchanged in begetting its image, but is altered. Contemplating its source it is filled and goes out (a motion different in kind and direction) and begets its own image: Sense, and the vegetal principle, Nature.

However, nothing is separated from what is prior."

(*Enneads* V, 2, 1)

6. *Chapters in Indian Civilization*, ed. Joseph Elder, I (Madison, Wisconsin: Department of Indian Studies, The University of Wisconsin, 1967), p. 25.

7. This notion of a will from which all determinations result, rather than the Aristotelian-Thomistic will which fulfills some basic determination of its inner structure, can be found secularized in the "infinite extent of the will" in Descartes' *Meditations*, as well as in some modern political theories, where it becomes one of Hegel's favorite targets. Again, time is the image of eternity.

8. There is also, of course, the anti-Platonic countertradition of Divine Voluntarism which refuses to seek "rationality" in the patterns that order the world, our life, or our discourse. The conflict between the two approaches can be seen in quite diverse thinkers: Thomas vs. Ockham, Hegel vs. Schelling, Russell vs. Wittgenstein. (Outside the West, Sung Neo-Confucianism would, I suspect, provide a revealing example of a predominantly *nommathematical* attempt to unify patterns of order.)