

9

The *Timaeus* on Types of Duration

T. M. ROBINSON

This paper casts another glance at a number of questions in the realm of cosmo-theology that have divided students of the *Timaeus* since the time it was written. Did Plato clearly distinguish, in this dialogue, the concepts of eternity, sempiternity, and everlastingness? If he did, with what sort of duration did he credit the Demiurge, World Soul, the Forms, and the physical universe? What relationship does the answer to the first question have to assertions, in such dialogues as the *Laws*, that “soul” is both autokinetic and the source of the motion of other things? And finally, why did Plato’s unique description of the eternal (as the “perpetuous” or “abternal,” *δαιαίωσις*) apparently fail to interest, except peripherally, the post-platonic tradition?

I start from a partial statement of the problem in Cornford (p. 98, n.1): even at 37d, he says, “where [Plato] is contrasting eternal duration (*αἰών*) with everlastingness in time, [he] will not reserve *αἰώνιος* for “eternal” and *αἰδιος* for “everlasting.” *αἰδιος* is applied both to the model and to the everlasting gods.” This apparent conceptual sloppiness disturbs Cornford, who at 37d7 is tempted to conjecture *ἀέναον* (“ever-flowing”) for *αἰώνιον*. But this seems unnecessary: a willingness to use synonyms is no indication of an author’s conceptual confusion, and in fact a careful examination of Plato’s usage of these terms in conjunction with others shows, I think conclusively, that he has in the *Timaeus* a clear and precise cosmo-theology to express.

Let us begin with the supposed terminological inexactitude that revolves round three adjectives: *αἰδιος*, *αἰώνιος*, and *δαιαίωσις*. The

first, a word going back to Homer and meaning "ceaseless," "without end," is applied to the eternal duration of the specific Form dubbed by Plato "Eternal Living Creature" and of the Form-world generally, and to the unceasing duration, once they are formed, of the gods. The second, meaning literally something like "age-long," is applied to the duration of the same Eternal Living Creature and, if the manuscripts do not deceive us, to the unceasing duration of the universe once formed. The third is applied specifically and solely to the Eternal Living Creature. Which term Plato is likely to use will turn, one may conjecture, on perspective: when he wishes to stress the unceasing nature of the Forms or the gods, the time-honored word *αἰδῖος* will serve the purpose adequately, being equally applicable to both. When he wishes to emphasize the immensity of the duration, numerical and non-numerical, of the formed universe and its paradigm respectively, an appropriate term at his disposal is *αἰώνιος*, a word he may actually have invented for the purpose; apart from its use here, and in a joking reference to *αἰώνιος μέθη* at *Rep.* 363d2, the first known use of the term in extant Greek writing is in the writings of Plato's contemporary, Demosthenes (1. 13, 1. 19). When he wishes to emphasize the "eternity," in the most exact sense, of the formed universe's paradigm he applies what is undoubtedly a coinage of his own, *διαίωνιος*, which one might translate, to catch the tone of its initial strangeness, "perpetuous" or "abternal"; the force of the *διά* seems to be that the paradigm *πάντα αἰώνιά ἐστιν ὄν* (38c1-2), in the sense that its duration is for eternity as a plenitude, the force of the (tenseless) *ἐστιν ὄν* that the paradigm's duration is non-temporal.

The noun that parallels *διαίωνιος*, "perpetuity" (= "eternity"), it should be added, is for Plato *αἰών* (37d6, 38c2, etc.), a bold piece of transference of a word which till that date had been understood by most if not all Greeks as meaning something like "a very great length of time." It is, like *διαίωνιος*, a term he frequently, though not invariably, uses as his word for eternity in the strictest sense.

In addition to the above terms, Plato has and makes use of other, remarkably exact and consistent terminology for the concepts of eternity, sempiternity and everlastingness. First, in talking of what he thinks of as eternal in the genuine sense, i.e., in talking of the Forms, the Demiurge, and Space (*χώρα*), he is careful to use either the "tenseless" *ἐστι* alone (37e5, of "eternal being"), or the tenseless *εἶναι* with *ἀεί* (27d6, of the world of Forms: 52a8, of Space: 34a8, of the Demiurge), or the participial noun derived from *εἶναι* with *ἀεί* (50c5, of the Forms of the four "natural kinds"). Eternity itself, *αἰών*, he describes as "abiding in unity" *μένοντος ἐν ἐνί* (37d6), by contrast with that which is subject to numerical progression.

In the very strictest sense, only the Forms appear to be thought of by Plato as eternal, since no manner of *κίνησις* can be attributed to them. Hence the ascription to Forms, and to Forms alone, of the term *δαιώνιος*. The Demiurge, by contrast, is subject to at least the *κίνησις* of thought and emotion, and in general of intellectual/moral “process”—a *κίνησις* which is in fact *αὐτοκίνησις*,¹ and the only exact instance thereof in the dialogue, that Plato will describe elsewhere as the condition of in fact *all ψυχή*. Space, too, in eternal motion, is forever moving and being subjected to (further) motion by that which it contains (52e3–4). On these grounds Plato can use language of the Demiurge which suggests both the changelessness of eternity and “process”; while he is subject to the *κίνησις* of thought and emotion, such that he can “intervene” to form the world, he nonetheless (42e5–6) “continued to abide by the wont of his own nature” (*ἔμεινεν ἐν τῷ ἑαυτοῦ κατὰ τρόπον ἦθει*; tr. Cornford). (Cf. 37d6, where Eternity is described as *μένοντος ἐν ἐνί*). Likewise Space, while still being dubbed eternal, has a structure and manner of existence so different from that of the Forms that it can only be ascertained by at best a “bastard form of reasoning” (52b2).

When Plato wishes to speak of “everlastingness” (i.e., duration without end but with a beginning in time and measurable by time)² he will still talk of “abiding” (*μένειν*), but of abiding forever (*ἀεί*) (the astral gods are so described at 40b6), or of being “in motion forever” (at 58c3 he talks of *ἡ ἀεί κίνησις* of the four primary bodies). The crucial verb *εἶναι*, which would with *ἀεί* have signalled eternity rather than everlastingness, is conspicuously and to my mind studiously avoided.

¹ See below, p. 149. Efforts by many to “collapse” Demiurge and World Soul (or Demiurge and the *νοῦς* within World Soul) founder on this point. The entire description of World Soul in the *Timaeus* emphasizes its dependence—whether in time or *ab aeterno*; the argument is unaffected—on something other than itself. The Forms moreover are portrayed as wholly paradigmatic; there is no hint of any supposed role for them that might be understood as one of efficient causality. (Compare in an earlier dialogue the Form of the Good, which, says Socrates, “produced” the sun.) This can only mean that the Demiurge himself is expected to be seen as what he purports to be—the formed world’s efficient cause, including that of its soul. If he is meant further to be understood as a personal divinity (and nothing in the text suggests convincingly that he is not; the “account” is described as “likely,” not “unlikely”), then his soul, and his alone, can be said to possess the non-dependent *autokinesis* that Plato will eventually extend to all rational soul in the *Phaedrus* and to all soul as such in the *Laws*.

² By contrast with a stance adopted in an earlier article (see below, note 5), I prefer now to talk for clarity’s sake of “everlastingness,” rather than of “sempiternity” in some secondary sense of the word.

For the sempiternal as such Plato does not have an exact term. There are, however, it seems, four necessary conditions for the ascription of sempiternity to X: these are (a) that X be a potential object of perception; (b) that it be, from a beginningless past to an endless future, dependent upon an entity that is itself eternal; (c) that it be in a state of beginningless and endless motion; (d) that it possess a form of duration not measured, except incidentally, by time. Space, for example, is eternal (albeit in some less strict sense of the term: see above) rather than sempiternal; it is in no way dependent on anything else for its existence, and it is the object, not of perception, but of (bastard) reasoning. The "traces" (*ἰχνη*) of the Forms that are "in" Space are, by contrast, sempiternal, being (a) "visible" (*ὄρατά*, 30a3); (b) in beginningless and endless motion; (c) ceaselessly dependent upon Space as a condition both of their activity and, in some measure, of the quality of that activity; and (d) unmeasured by time, except in the incidental instance of their ever being constituted, by an external agent, into formed bodies. The dependence relationship between the traces of matter and Space is further reinforced by Plato's asseveration that it is the "nature" of the Wandering Cause to "sustain (sc., in motion)" (*φέρειν*, 48a6-7).³

Strategic uses of verbs such as *εἶναι*, *μένειν* and *φέρειν*, with the addition, where necessary, of the adverb *ἀεί*, are in effect "fail-safe" techniques adopted by Plato to guide the reader to his exact intentions when more time-honored terminology alone might perhaps have confused. At 40b6, for example, when discussing the manner of duration of the astral gods, he uses the term *ἀίδιος*, an adjective we have already noticed him applying to the Form-world generally and the archetypal Form Eternal Living Creature in particular. That it is the gods' everlastingness that is in question, however, not eternity is, as we have seen, made clear in the very same sentence when he talks of their *μένειν ἀεί* not their *εἶναι ἀεί*. At 37e4-6, by contrast, where the manner of duration of Forms such as Eternal Living Creature is described as *ἀίδιος*, the case for the meaning "eternal" in duration, as distinct from sempiternal or everlasting, seems clinched by Plato's

³ Cf. [Pl.] *Epin.* 983b, where Cornford, following Harward and followed by Tarán, translates *φέρειν* as "set in motion," and *Tim.* 43a7, where he translates *βία ἐφέροντο καὶ ἔφερον* as "cause and suffer violent motions." But this places an intolerable strain upon the verb *φέρειν*, whose natural sense is "support" (of a pedestal bearing a statue) or "carry" (of a ship carrying a passenger). At *Tim.* 48a6-7 and *Epin.* 983b it is probably best construed in terms of sustentation, in the first case the sustentation of basic matter by the Errant Cause, in the second the sustentation of all living things by *θεός*. (See LSJ⁹, s.v., A1). At *Tim.* 43a7 the sense is surely that soul-circles both "carry (along)" and are to their detriment "carried (along) by" the body and its movements.

immediate statement, in the very next sentence, that he means by the term *αίδιος* that (and only that?) sort of existence to which *τὸ ἔστιν μόνον κατὰ τὸν ἀληθῆ λόγον προσήκει*. A little earlier, at 37d7, he had talked of the formed universe as an *αἰώνιον εἰκόνα* of eternity, an adjective Cornford found so inappropriate (see above, p. 143) that he was tempted to conjecture *ἀένανον*, as in *Laws* 966e. I have already suggested, in terms of the immensity and perhaps awesome duration of the universe and its paradigm, one possible reason why Plato used the adjective *αίδιος* here, in spite of any *prima facie* confusion it could have generated. However that may be, the status of the formed world's duration as everlasting, not sempiternal or eternal, whatever Plato's choice of adjective for it, is demonstrated by the subsequent reference to it as that to which *τὸ ἦν τό τ' ἔσται . . . πρέπει λέγεσθαι* (38a1–2).

Fail-safe techniques of this type are, of course, unnecessary when Plato's exact, technical terminology — *αἰών*, *διαίωσις* — is in question. They signify, univocally, (a) "perpetuity" (= "eternity"), the manner of duration of the Form-world in general and the formed universe's paradigm in particular, and (b) "perpetuous," the noun's neologistic adjectival counterpart.

Whether Plato believed, when he wrote the *Timaeus*, that the world and its guiding Soul were sempiternal, rather than everlasting, as many have thought, seems to me very doubtful. Here, as before, Plato has what looks like a fail-safe technique to direct the reader to his precise intention. This consists in the exercise of remarkable carefulness in the use of the mood and tense of verbs, not least in those contexts where he might be thought to be offering hints that the dialogue is to be read figuratively rather than literally. At 37b5, for example, the world is described as *τὸ κινούμενον ὑφ' αὐτοῦ*, and scholars have been quick to find here a reference to the uncaused, self-moving soul of *Phaedrus* 245c, the clear inference being that the world and its soul are sempiternal, not, as the surface-interpretation of much of the *Timaeus* might suggest, everlasting entities. But the equivocity of the term "self-moving" is apparent in Cornford's own description (note *ad loc.*) of "the heaven as a whole, which, as a living creature, is self-moved by its own self-moving soul"; in what sense, except some trivial one, is X self-moving if its supposed self-motion is dependent upon the (real or supposed) self-motion of Y? As it happens, Plato goes on (37c6–7) to make it clear that the *Phaedrus* doctrine of soul is not in question when he says, "When the father who had begotten it (sc., the world) saw it set in motion (*κινηθέν*) and alive," etc. (the mood and tense are significant); the "autokinesis" of the formed universe is revealed, for anyone who had ever doubted

his meaning, as analogous in all important respects merely to the commonplace, non-technical type of self-motion Plato attributes to any animal as distinct from any plant (77c4–5)—that is, it is dependent self-motion (i.e., in the strictest sense not self-motion at all), and had a beginning in time.

A second supposed hint of a doctrine of the sempiternity of the world in the *Timaeus* is to be found at 30a3, where the pre-cosmos is described as *πάν ὄσον ἦν ὄρατόν*. Since the organized cosmos had already been called (28b 7–8) *ὄρατός . . . ἀπτός τε . . . καὶ σῶμα ἔχων*, some have inferred that talk of a pre-cosmos is clearly to be taken as figurative only. No fail-safe technique, however, on Plato's part is needed this time to see that the two descriptions are totally different, in spite of the use of the common word "visible." The formed world is composed of specified objects, and has bulk (*σῶμα*); that is why it is both *ὄρατός* and *ἀπτός*. The pre-cosmos possesses merely "traces" of reality. A strong hint of what Plato meant in nonetheless calling it *ὄρατός*, despite the fact that it did not consist of formed objects, is to be found at *Phaedo* 79a6 ff., where *ἀδής* seems to be a Platonic synonym for "non-physical" or "non-corporeal." The pre-cosmos, however, while not corporeal (it possesses no formed *σώματα* within it), is not wholly incorporeal either; it is apparently something like one of the ghosts Socrates describes at *Phaedo* 81c4, creatures hovering somewhere between materiality and immateriality, but not graspable (*ἀπτά*) because they do not consist of formed bodies (*σώματα*).

A third "hint" at 28a1, where according to the Oxford text the Forms are contrasted with a world described as *γιγνόμενον ἀεί* turns out to be illusory. Quite apart from the dubiousness of the manuscript evidence and ancient secondary evidence for *ἀεί*,⁴ parallel texts in the *Timaeus* itself, where *ἀεί* is conspicuously absent, make it clear that Plato is attempting to contrast Forms, which do not have a *γένεσις*, with material objects, which do.⁵

One final point. On the far from obvious assumption that the *Phaedrus* ante-dates the *Timaeus*, many have inferred that all *κίνησις*, whether the *Timaeus* is read literally or figuratively, must have as its source some form of *ψυχή*, since at *Phaedrus* 245c *ψυχή* is said to be the self-moving source of all *κίνησις*. This has led to various claims, ranging from the existence of an Irrational World Soul behind the motions of pre-matter (Plutarch) to an irrational element in World Soul that is never fully mastered by rationality (Cornford). But Plato himself offers an account, in the pages of the *Timaeus* itself, that

⁴ See John Whittaker, *Phoenix* 23 (1969), 181–82 and *ibid.*, 27 (1973), 387–88.

⁵ See *Tim.* 37b2–3, 48e6–49a1, and T. M. Robinson, *Phronesis* 24 (1979), 105–109.

suggests much more precisely what his thinking is. At 57e ff. we read:

Motion will never exist in a state of homogeneity. For it is difficult, or rather impossible, that what is to be moved should exist without that which is to move it, or what is to cause motion (*τὸ κινήσον*) without that which is to be moved by it. In the absence of either, motion cannot exist; and they cannot possibly be homogeneous. Accordingly, we must always presume rest in a state of homogeneity, and attribute motion to a state of heterogeneity (*ἀνωμαλότητα*). Further, inequality (*ἀνισότης*) is a cause of heterogeneity, and the origin of inequality we have already described. (tr. Cornford)

While for an instant the reader may imagine that the *κινήσον* mentioned here will be an existent of some sort—like, say, *ψυχή*—the subsequent references, in the same passage, to *ἀνισότης* and *ἀνωμαλότης* make it clear that Plato is referring to particular *conditions* under which, according to the passage in question, the “primary bodies” operate. As it happens, exactly the same conditions obtain, as Cornford sees (p. 240), for the movements in Space of the *δυνάμεις* of the pre-cosmos, which are described (52e2–4) as “neither alike nor evenly balanced” (*μήθ’ ὁμοίων . . . μήτε ἰσορρόπων*), as having “no equipoise within any region of it” (*κατ’ οὐδέν αὐτῆς ἰσορροπεῖν*), and as being “everywhere swayed unevenly” (*ἀνωμάλως πάντη ταλαντομένην*). The natural conclusion to be drawn from this can only be that, just as the eternal equipoise of a given Form (or of the World of Forms as a whole) is the basis of its/their eternally unchanging state, the sempiternal lack of such equipoise among the *δυνάμεις* of pre-matter accounts for their sempiternal *κίνησις*; no further doctrine of a supposed presence of *ψυχή* need be imported.

I conclude from the above that for the Plato of the *Timaeus* the Forms, God, and Space are eternal, the Forms in the most basic sense and God and Space in another, logically differentiable sense involving *κίνησις*, if only in God’s case the *κίνησις* involved in thought and volition. The *ἔχνη* or *Urstoff* that characterize Space are by contrast sempiternal, and the formed world, including its soul, everlasting. It is a scenario he sees only as “likely”; he is in no way bound by it, and will in later dialogues, notably the *Philebus* and *Laws*, make significant modifications to it. But that is another essay. For the moment I wish to turn briefly to the post-platonic tradition and ask what happened to some of the key transformations and neologisms we have noticed in the *Timaeus*, particularly that of the “perpetuous.” The first thing that can be said is that the use of *αἰών* to mean (in certain contexts) “eternity” is largely accepted by subsequent philos-

ophy; this group includes not only Aristotle (*passim*), Philo (1. 496, 619), and Plotinus (3. 7. 5), it also encompasses Epicurus (*Sent.* 20), much exercised to allay “fears concerning eternity.” The same goes for the cognate adjective *αἰώνιος* and adverb *αἰώνίως*, though a growing commitment to a much more technical philosophical vocabulary is very apparent. One notable exception is however Aristotle. The omission of both words throughout the Corpus is striking, and can hardly have been accidental. One can only assume that for Aristotle the new terminology was superfluous; he himself is content to rely on context and the time-honored Homeric word *ἀίδιος* to describe both the eternal life of God (*Metaph.* 1072^b29) and the sempiternal duration of the cosmos.⁶ The neo-platonic tradition, by contrast, sees virtue in Plato’s terminology. In a well-known passage Plotinus carefully distinguishes the “eternal” (*αἰώνιος*) from the “sempiternal” (*ἀίδιος*), and Proclus (*Inst.* 172) has the same commitments when he writes of *νοῦς* as being *ἀκίνητος αἰώνίως πάντα ὄν*.⁷ They differ from Plato in that the language is now truly technical; no fail-safe techniques are needed to guard against possible misinterpretation. Their case is aided by the relative simplicity of their own cosmology vis-à-vis Plato’s; once the doctrine of a pre-cosmos is discarded (as it was within a generation of Plato by Xenocrates, if not by others), the notion of temporal everlastingness, which only made sense in terms of such a doctrine, can also be quietly jettisoned, leaving simply the notions of the eternal (time-transcendent) and the sempiternal (time-measured). With these two concepts now finally clarified, the concept of the *διαίωνιον* can also be discarded as at best a superfluous synonym for the *αἰώνιον*, dreamed up by Plato to cover his own failure to make appropriate distinctions between the terms *αἰώνιος* and *ἀίδιος*. That is, of course, to state the case most strongly; in practice, *pietas* toward the master was such that a word like *διαίωνιος* was unlikely to be abandoned in so unfeeling a manner. We find it used, for example, of *εὐδαιμονία* in Philo (2. 569), in Philodemus (*de piet.* 80), and nearer the end of classical antiquity, in the Emperor Julian (*Or.* 4. 144c); Philodemus also used it of “living creatures” (*de piet.* 111). Philo in particular finds the word to his liking—so much so that he coins the verb *διαίωνίζειν* (a coinage which, perhaps because Philo is not Plato, enjoys a brief day of glory in his own works and is never heard of again). It is only in the fifth century that Proclus (*Theol. Plat.* 5. 37) and Syrianus (*in Metaph.* 103. 28) return to the use of the word in the way that Plato had originally planned—and then in its adverbial

⁶ For references see Bekker *s.v.*

⁷ See also Simplic. in *Epictet.*, p. 77D.

form only. Even at this stage it still appears to be little more than complimentary and complementary; its value is at best that of emphatic synonym.

It is worth emphasizing that the distinctions with which Plato wrestled in the *Timaeus* constitute one of the history of philosophy's success-stories, not one of its failures. On the debit side, to be sure, from Plato's point of view, lies the fact that his doctrine of the everlastingness (measured in time) of the formed cosmos was largely rejected, albeit by the rough technique of denying that he ever espoused any notion of the world's temporal formation in the first place. Parasitic upon this was the large-scale rejection of the notion of the sempiternal as the non-temporal or perhaps extra-temporal mode of duration that Plato considered to be a characteristic of the world's pre-matter; the sempiternity of (formed) matter is understood, from Aristotle onwards, as being unequivocally in the temporal mode, though without beginning or end. On the credit side, the seminal nature of Plato's discussion is such that the relationship of eternity to sempiternity does in fact finally get clarified, and three of the four basic neologisms and verbal transformations he employed to meet the problem, αἰών, αἰδῖος and αἰώνιος, have become, along with other major Platonic coinages such as the notion of ποιότης, part and parcel of subsequent Greek thinking, and in various translations part and parcel of the western heritage.

University of Toronto

