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Everlastingness in the *Timaeus*

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Everlastingness in the *Timaeus*

In the following set of essays, my object is to show how Plato differentiates the everlastingness of Eternity from the everlastingness of time in the cosmogony of his *Timaeus*, wherein time is classified as the everlasting 'moving image' of 'Eternity-remaining-in-unity' (*Tim.* 37c 6-d 7). Of course, as many scholars know, this distinction between Eternity and time follows from his distinction between unchanging Being and ever-changing Becoming. So much so, in truth, that our understanding of what it is that makes time the 'image' of Eternity—and yet also something *other than* Eternity—is fundamental to our understanding of Platonic ontology.

However, our understanding of Being and Becoming and the relation between them is complicated by the view that what exists in time *was* and *is* and *will be*, whereas what exists in Eternity '*is*' alone (*Tim.* 37e 4-38a 8). Does this mean that Eternity is temporal, given that it '*is*' in some sense? Or is Eternity atemporal, given that it is itself distinguishable from time? Also, if Eternity is atemporal, how should one conceive of atemporality in this particular respect? Does this entail existing altogether apart from time? Or can one speak of Eternity as just another type of time—a timeless time, as it were? Not surprisingly, it has long been a matter of controversy among scholars whether the eternal '*is*' is actually tensed or tenseless, temporal or timeless. Furthermore, the very fact that Eternity is said to be something which is '*remaining in unity*' has led some scholars to conceive of Eternity as *durational*, and thus temporal in some sense, on the assumption that duration entails temporality. And then again, there are still other scholars who would speak of Eternity as an 'eternal present' which is really *non-durational*, precisely because it has its being '*in unity*'.

By contrast, I suggest that the Platonic distinction between Being and Becoming entails a twofold notion of *everlastingness*, the one temporal, the other extra-temporal, where the latter is signifying timelessness unqualifiedly. For I show that Plato conceives of time and temporal passage as the imperfectly everlasting image (*aiónios eikón*) of Eternity whilst understanding Eternity itself to be perfectly everlasting (*diáionios*), since eternal Being is subject to no passage from its essential '*being*'. Only in this way can one explain how the temporality of Becoming is akin to—yet also distinguishable from—the extra-temporality of Being, and then again why it is that both should be thought of as *durational*. Hence, in my opinion, the scholarly assumption that duration entails temporality, an assumption commonly encountered in modern thought, is foreign to Plato. Nor again does it make much sense to speak of some 'eternal present' apart from everlastingness, and thence apart from duration, for Eternity is characterized as impassable and abiding.

So as to clarify this twofold notion of everlastingness, it has proven necessary for my argument to touch upon another controversy surrounding the cosmogony of the *Timaeus*, namely, whether the universe, the realm of Becoming, has had a beginning at some time in the remote past (i.e., at the very *first* moment of time) or has had no single beginning, at least in a temporal sense (i.e., that it will have come into being 'always' (*aet*)). Scholars have given various arguments for both of these readings. However, I argue that one can resolve this issue by more closely analysing the possible meanings of the verb *gegonen* (viz. 'It has come into being'), which is said of the universe as well as time (thus *Tim.* 28b 7, 38b 6). With respect to *gegonen*, the temporal ambiguity of its perfect aspect means that it might refer to a past event in the immediate past no less than in the remote past. Hence one can speak of the generation of time and the universe as *everlasting*, as a process of genesis having no single or distinct beginning *at* a time or even *in* time, but infinitely many temporal beginnings, extending from the infinite past into the ever-emerging present. And that *gegonen* is ambiguous between past and present time is shown by the cosmological argument at *Timaeus* 28b 2-c 2 and the status of god relative to creation.

All in all, my argument reveals that time, being generate, is a feature of Becoming and not of Being. Moreover, my argument reveals that time and the universe need not have had a temporal beginning at the very *first* moment of time.

My argument is furnished in five papers, each standing as an essay unto itself. In my first and second papers, I articulate notions of everlastingness relative to Being, Becoming, time, and Eternity, first by reflecting upon exegetical issues surrounding their respective characteristics and the manner in which Becoming images Being, then by establishing how time and Eternity are related in terms of *everlastingness*, not temporality. Accordingly, in my first chapter, I clarify how the expressions 'everlastingness' and 'everlasting duration' ought to be understood relative to the ontology and cosmogony of the *Timaeus*, and I show that Being and Eternity are *extra-temporally* everlasting, whilst the universe of Becoming and time are *temporally* everlasting. However, what it means to speak of extra-temporality in this respect calls for further clarification. For certainly, one may aver that extra-temporal everlastingness is really signifying another type of time, not timelessness *simpliciter*. So, in my second paper, I focus upon the extra-temporal status of Eternity, so as to establish whether extra-temporality in this respect should be thought of as timeless time or timelessness without qualification.

As a corollary, one must also clarify in what sense the everlastingness of time images the everlastingness of Eternity. For one might speak of time having a beginning at some *first* moment of time or infinitely many beginnings extending from an infinite past into the ever-emerging present. But if one wishes to resolve this uncertainty, one must then turn to the cosmogony and consider the scope of cosmogenesis. Only in this way can one clarify the sense in which time is everlasting, for *its* everlastingness is contingent upon that of the universe, *qua* all-encompassing image of Being. Hence, in my third paper, I dwell upon the cosmogony proper and the scope of cosmogenesis, so as to validate my understanding of cosmogenesis as an everlasting mode of genesis which had no *first* beginning in time. Having thereby validated my understanding of the cosmogony, in my fourth paper I clarify how time and the universe, the realm of Becoming, can be said to image Eternity and Being, *qua* complex unity remaining always the same.

And yet, there remains one final puzzle, and its resolution will enable one to see yet more clearly why cosmogenesis is everlasting, even if one believes that the universe has had some *first* beginning in time. It is a puzzle about the agelessness of the universe and how agelessness entails existing *extra-temporally*. For this reason, in my fifth and final paper, I explain how the universe can be thought of as 'ageless', given that agelessness implies *extra-temporality*, and given that the universe 'ages', being a temporal existent.

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Abstract

My aim in this thesis is to show how Plato differentiates the everlastingness of eternity from the everlastingness of time in the cosmogony of his *Timaeus*, where time is classified as the everlasting ‘moving image’ of ‘eternity-remaining-in-unity’ (*Tim.* 37c 6-d 7). Of course, as many scholars know, this distinction between eternity and time follows from his distinction between unchanging Being and ever-changing Becoming, so much so that our understanding of what it is that makes time the ‘image’ of eternity—and yet also something *other than* eternity—proves fundamental to our understanding of Platonic ontology.

However, our understanding of Being and Becoming and the relation between them is complicated by the view that what exists in time *was* and *is* and *will be*, whereas what exists in eternity ‘*is*’ alone (*Tim.* 37e 4-38a 8). Does this mean that eternity is temporal, given that it ‘*is*’ in some sense? Or is eternity atemporal, given that it is itself distinguishable from time? Also, if eternity is atemporal, how should one conceive of atemporality in this particular respect? Does this entail existing altogether apart from time? Or can one speak of eternity as just another type of time, a timeless time, as it were? Not surprisingly, it has long been a matter of controversy among scholars whether the eternal ‘*is*’ is actually tensed or tenseless, temporal or timeless. So too, the very fact that eternity is said to be ‘*remaining in unity*’ has led some scholars to conceive of eternity as *durational*, and thus temporal in some sense, on the assumption that duration entails temporality. But then again, still other scholars speak of eternity as an ‘eternal present’ which is *non-durational*, precisely because it has its being ‘*in unity*’.

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So as to clarify this twofold notion of everlastingness it has proven necessary for my argument to touch upon another controversy surrounding the cosmogony of the *Timaeus*, namely, whether the universe, the realm of Becoming, has had a beginning at some time in the remote past (i.e., at the very *first* moment of time) or has had no single beginning, at least in a temporal sense (i.e., that it will have come into being 'always' (*aet*)). Scholars have given various arguments for both of these readings. However, I argue that one can resolve this issue by more closely analysing the possible meanings of the verb *gegonen* (viz. 'It has come into being'), which is said of the universe as well as time (*Tim.* 28b 7, 38b 6). With respect to *gegonen*, the temporal ambiguity of its perfect aspect means that it might refer to a past event in the immediate past no less than in the remote past. Hence one can speak of the generation of time and the universe as *everlasting*, as a process of genesis having no single, distinct beginning *at* a time or even *in* time, but infinitely many beginnings, extending from the infinite past into the ever-emerging present. And that *gegonen* is ambiguous between past and present time is shown by the cosmological argument at *Tim.* 28b 2-c 2 and the status of god relative to creation. All in all, this reveals that time, being generate, is a feature of Becoming, not Being. It also reveals that time and the universe need not have had a beginning at some *first* moment of time.

Contents

Introduction	1
1 On the ἀεί at <i>Timaeus</i> 28a 1	11
I. <i>Timaeus</i> 27d 5-28a 4	14
II. <i>Timaeus</i> 28a 1 and the indirect tradition	19
III. <i>Timaeus</i> 52a 6 and 52c 3	24
IV. ‘Everlastingness’ and ‘Everlasting Duration’	26
Appendix I. <i>Parisinus graecus</i> 1807 (MS A)	31
2 Atemporalist approaches to <i>Timaeus</i> 37e 4-38b 3	32
I. Plutarch, Numenius, and Origen on timelessness in the <i>Timaeus</i>	32
II. On the eternal ‘is’ at <i>Timaeus</i> 37e 4-38b 3	40
3 ‘χρόνος δ’ οὐδὲν μετ’ οὐρανοῦ γέγονεν’	48
I. γέγονεν and the perfect aspect in Ancient Greek	49
II. γέγονεν at <i>Timaeus</i> 28b 2-c 2	56
III. Cosmogogenesis and divine creation	66
IV. <i>Timaeus</i> 52d 2-53b 5	83
V. <i>creatio perpetua</i> and the ‘pre-cosmos’	87
Appendix I. <i>Timaeus</i> 41a 7-8	92
4 On the translation of <i>Timaeus</i> 38b 6-c 3	94
I. Some possible readings	96
II. A new approach	110
5 Ἀγήρων at <i>Timaeus</i> 33a 2-b 1	114
I. ἀγήρων in pre-Platonic literature	116

II. Growing younger	120
III. Agelessness in the <i>Timaeus</i> and the <i>Politicus</i>	122
Epilogue	126
Bibliography	127