CHAPTER TEN

PLOTINUS’ CRITIQUE OF ARISTOTELIAN MOTION

In the final chapter of his discussion of eternity (chapter 6 of his treatise), Plotinus insists that his conception of eternity be distinguished from the notion just of something’s being everlasting or unending. It is especially in this regard that a proper understanding of intelligibly real substance explicates the proper denotation of our common notion of eternity, while thereby also clarifying it. Our common notion of eternity lacks precision, in other words, in not clearly distinguishing eternity from everlastingness; whereas, a proper notion of eternity should.

Plotinus observes that it is difficult for us not to think of eternity in some sort of temporal, or quasi-temporal, terms—for example, as something which just can never (at no time) change, or as something which has no past or future but in the sense that it always and forever just is (and so never is not). His earlier suggestion that we “compress the otherness” betwixt intelligibly real substances into a singular unity and recognize that even their own “unceasing self-sameness” is unextended and indivisible, and his more recent insistence that Intellect cannot be “dispersed nor unrolled nor prolongated nor stretched out,” seem in part attempts to develop conceptions which help us circumvent this difficulty.

Nevertheless, it remains tempting (perhaps even to a degree unavoidable) for us to insist that eternity not only is such-and-such but that it always is, even must always be, such-and-such. In particular, Plonus avers, to say that something always is means, in its primary sense, something like: “It is not the case that it is real at one time but not real at another time” [III.7.6, 23]. Thinking of eternal existence as something which always is, accordingly, tempts one to imagine its existence as akin to “an ever-increasing expanse, though one which shall never play out at any time” [III.7.6, 26]. Whereas, something which “has no need for the future” (an eternal existent) cannot be measured in any way, whether with respect to some particular (extent of) time nor in virtue of some sort of indefinite and unending time [III.7.6, 38f.].

It is even misleading (even if somewhat useful) to think of eternal existence as akin to an indivisible point, Plotinus recognizes, or for
example as akin to an indivisible Aristotelian now. To be sure, like a point or an Aristotelian now, eternity’s immeasurability may be characterized as an indivisibility of sorts, inasmuch as anything measurable must be divisible (either discretely or continuously) and vice versa. Accordingly, Plotinus’ earlier insistence that intelligibly real existents are indivisible is partly a way of positing that they are not measurable. Whereas, we tend to think of a point, or an Aristotelian now, as indivisible inasmuch as they are in effect too minute (albeit indefinitely, even vanishingly, so) to measure.

As noted in discussing Aristotle in Part II, there are two main senses in which something may be thought of as too minute to measure, as indivisible. Something may be too minute to measure insofar as it exceeds a certain threshold beyond (that is, below) which a more minute measure or measurement is no longer possible. In this sense, indivisible may be equivalent to atomic (atomos). In contemporary science this sort of notion of indivisibles surfaces in discussions of so-called Planck measures.

But, something may also be too minute to measure insofar as, though we may approach ever more closely to measuring it as our measure or measurement becomes more and more minute, no matter how minute our measure or measurement becomes (for example, as we unendingly bisect a magnitude to actualize its non- or vanishing-dimensionality), it still is even more minute than that. This is the sense in which indivisible is the same as strictly indivisible (adiaireton). In contemporary science an equivalent might be the notion of singularities, if such thingies properly speaking do in fact exist.

In this second sense, though, the very notion of minuteness may seem no longer applicable or appropriate. Is something purportedly more minute than every degree of minuteness whatsoever somehow still minute? It may be more appropriate to think of strict indivisibles as immeasurable in that there just is nothing about them to be measured. And yet, we do relate indivisibles to quantities or measures in our conception of them, and do so in the direction of minuteness (as opposed to immenseness, or with respect to any specific quantities). Something like this conundrum may ultimately underlie Aristotle’s qualms regarding the real existence of indivisibles. It may also explain partly why Plotinus employs such indivisibles as geometric points, or geometric centers of circles or spheres, in characterizing metaphorically aspects of preternatural reality (for example, the One’s relation to all the rest of existence).