I. Introduction

The discussion of ‘time’ in the *Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* starts by listing the classical definitions of time by Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, and Augustine, only to conclude that all of these are unhelpfully circular because they employ temporal notions. Time, the reader is told, might be too basic to admit of definition, but fortunately modern philosophy has made some progress in understanding time ‘by analysis both of how we ordinarily experience and talk about time and of the deliverances of science’.¹

Even though the *Cambridge Dictionary* suggests otherwise, this approach to time is not something new. Ever since the Stoics and the Epicureans, ancient philosophers frequently appeal to concepts, often referred to as ‘common notions’, that are based on experience and that coincide with the meaning of words. Earlier generations of scholars had already noted that such common notions also figure in Plotinus’ celebrated discussion of eternity and time. However, since their interest was mainly in Plotinus’ doctrines about the nature of eternity and time, it is only now that there is a growing interest in Plotinus’ arguments for his views, that the role of these notions receives closer scrutiny. In this paper I will examine their role in the treatment of time by Plotinus and other Neoplatonists. The first part of the paper will argue that in Plotinus we should distinguish between two types of common notions, one based on our perception of the phenomena in the physical world, the other on intuitions of metaphysical reality. To this difference in origin corresponds a difference in epistemological status and hence a

difference in the role that these two types of notions play in Plotinus’ argumentative strategies. The failure to distinguish between these two types has obscured our understanding of Plotinus’ argument so far. In the second part of the paper, we will turn to two other Neoplatonic philosophers of note, Proclus and Augustine. It will appear that they make the same distinction in their discussions of time. In fact, this distinction underlies Augustine’s famous, yet enigmatic remark that he knows perfectly well what time is, provided that no one asks him.

II. Stoic common notions and Epicurean preconceptions

The Neoplatonists had inherited the theory of the common notions from the Stoic and the Epicureans. According to the Stoics, sense-perception gives rise to certain basic beliefs that are shared by everyone, which for that reason are called ‘common notions’ (κοιναὶ ἡ ζωὴ). Since this happens spontaneously, these notions are not the products of philosophical speculation but of nature, hence they are also known as natural notions (φυσικαὶ ἡ ζωὴ). Because they are natural, the Stoics assume them to be true. These common notions play an important role in philosophical arguments in two ways. On the one hand, they are the self-evident starting points of philosophical proof. Philosophical enquiry consists in filling out the initial knowledge contained in our common notions by articulating them. On the other hand, these notions also provide a criterion of truth: any theory that conflicts with them has to be rejected.

The Epicurean equivalents to these common notions are called preconceptions (προληπτικαὶ).

Repeated and remembered perception of, say, dogs will result in the preconception ‘dog’. Literally it is what we have grasped (ἐπικράτησα) about dogs before a scientific enquiry. All our subsequent investigations ought to be conducted by reference

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2 At least according to the standard account, see, e.g., Frede (1999a) 319–320. Brittain (2005) 185, however, argues that some of the common notions, including the more interesting philosophical ones, are not common to all rational animals.


4 Cf., e.g., Brittain (2005) 183.

5 In fact these preconceptions are not exclusively Epicurean. The also appear in Stoic philosophy. According Brittain (2005) 179, in Stoic philosophy, common notions are probably regarded as a sub-set of preconceptions.

6 On this etymology, see Asmis (1984) 22.