The "Eternity" of the Platonic Forms

JOHN WHITTAKER

Are the Platonic Forms eternal in the sense that they endure everlastingly, or is their eternity such that it transcends duration? The latter alternative is defended by H. Cherniss and is in fact the traditional interpretation of Plato's doctrine, whereas the former view was held by F. M. Cornford. My present purpose is to show that the traditional interpretation rests upon an insecure basis.

In fact, Professor Cherniss' case, and with it the traditional viewpoint, depends on an interpretation of the word ἀεί as used by Plato with regard to the being of the Forms. Cherniss supposes that ἀεί is used by Plato in two senses—one referring to time and involving in consequence duration, and the other referring to eternity which transcends duration—and quotes Proclus in support of this contention:

ἀλλο γὰρ τὸ ἀεί τὸ χρονικὸν καὶ ἀλλο τὸ αἰώνιον· τὸ μὲν ἄθροιως πάν δὲν, τὸ δὲ τῇ δὴ ἱερ οὐκεταίσι τοῦ χρόνου συνεκπεινόμενον καὶ ἐπειρον, τὸ μὲν ἐν τῷ νῦν, τὸ δὲ ἐν διαντάσει, τῆς διαντάσεως ἀκατάλαμπτου τυγχανούσης καὶ ἀεί γιγνομένης. (In Tim. 73C-D (1. 239. 2-6 Diehl).)

As Cherniss is well aware, the opinion of Proclus in a matter of this nature is worthless unless it receives corroboration from the written word of Plato. As a good Neoplatonist Proclus no doubt believed that here as elsewhere he was interpreting Plato rather than formulating a new philosophy, but it is matter of common knowledge that Neoplatonism was very much more than a restatement of Plato's teaching. The notion of non-durational eternity is an accepted feature of Neoplatonic doctrine from Plotinus onwards. Any Neoplatonist will therefore feel constrained to regard the notion as genuinely Platonic and to acknowledge in consequence the terminology of Plato in those

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2 Cf. Plato's Cosmology, p. 98 n. 1 and p. 102.
3 Aristotle's Criticism of Plato and the Academy, p. 420 n. 351.
4 Cf. Enn. III. 7. 6.
passages which he considers pertinent to this notion. Thus ἄξις was used with reference to non-durational eternity by Plotinus as well as later Neoplatonists and it was at the same time assumed that Plato himself had employed the word in this sense in speaking of the being of the Forms.\(^5\) But this assumption on the part of Neoplatonists is in itself no proof that Plato ever used the word in the second of the two senses indicated by Proclus. To prove such a point conclusively it would be necessary to produce evidence from the writings of Plato himself.

Cherniss must have felt that the form of expression used by Plato at Tim. 27 D-28A militates against his interpretation of the Forms as exempt from duration. It is in connection with this particular passage that he quotes Proclus in support of his viewpoint. In particular the use of ἄξις in the question τὶ τὸ ὑπὸ ἄξις, γένεσιν δὲ οὐκ ἐχον, καὶ τὶ τὸ γεγονόμενον μὲν ἄξις, ὅν δὲ οὐδέποτε; is hard to reconcile with Cherniss’ thesis. In the second instance ἄξις must necessarily indicate duration. It would seem difficult, accepting the text as it stands, to suppose that Plato is using the word differently in the first instance. In fact, however, this passage cannot provide a basis for attacking the traditional interpretation, if for no other reason than that there is more than a little doubt regarding the correct reading in 28 A 1. This was pointed out by Hackforth,\(^6\) who drew attention to the fact that two MSS. omit the ἄξις in τὶ τὸ γεγονόμενον μὲν ἄξις as also do Simplicius and Proclus, whilst it seems that ἄξις was lacking in the texts that Cicero and Calcidius were translating. To this evidence we should add numerous citations of the passage in question omitting the relevant ἄξις in ancient writers (for a detailed treatment of the evidence on this topic see my paper “Timaeus 27 D5ff”. forthcoming in Phoenix). That some of these writers may be quoting from memory is not necessarily relevant, for ἄξις is more likely to have been inserted into the text (to balance οὐδέποτε or to parallel ἄξις in τὶ τὸ ὑπὸ ἄξις) than to have been omitted. Thus all in all the evidence would seem in favour of deleting ἄξις from 28 A 1. But, however this may be, in order to form a reliable conclusion regarding the meaning of ἄξις when used with reference to the being

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\(^6\) CQ N.S. IX (1959), pp. 18-19.