Time and Eternity in Proclus

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The nature of eternity and time and their interrelation were briefly outlined by Plato in the Timaeus 37d-38c.\(^1\) This outline was the basis for various attempts at definition, of which Aristotle’s aimed at the plain meaning of the terms. Time was: ‘a reckoning of movement with regard to antecedent and subsequent’\(^2\); eternity: ‘the sum of existence of the whole heaven, the sum which includes all time even to infinity’.\(^3\)

Plotinus tries to arrive at an understanding of the more ultimate nature of eternity and time, in the course of which he is strongly critical of Aristotle.\(^4\) For Plotinus both eternity and time are kinds of life. Eternity is life boundless, complete, unchanging and ever present: ‘If someone should thus denominate eternity, calling it life which is now infinite, because it is all, and nothing of which is consumed, because nothing pertaining to it is either past or future, ... he would be near to defining it.’\(^5\) Eternity in Plotinus is the life of ‘Nous’, but the soul, since it does not intuit its object but must use discursive reasoning, is thereby necessarily involved in time, which is a sign of movement away from unity to multiplicity: ‘It would be sense to say that time is the life of the soul in a movement of passage from one way of life to another’.\(^6\)

Proclus seems to evolve notions of time and eternity that differ considerably from the views of his predecessors.\(^7\) In the Alcibiades commentary he mentions time and eternity principally in two passages\(^8\) and adopts a simple division: eternity, first and second time correspond to ‘Nous’, Soul and ‘principles divided in association with bodies’.

In Elements of Theology,\(^9\) Proclus goes somewhat deeper and posits

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\(^{1}\) cf. A. E. Taylor’s Commentary pp. 186-191 and Appendix IV ‘The Concept of Time in the Timaeus’.

\(^{2}\) cf. Physics 219b2.

\(^{3}\) cf. De Caelo 279a26 Loeb trans.

\(^{4}\) cf. Enneads III 7.

\(^{5}\) cf. Enneads III 7 5 tr. Taylor who compares Boethius’ definition: ‘Interminabilis vitae tota simul et perfecta possessio’ – De Consolatione c. 5.

\(^{6}\) Enneads III 7 11 tr. Armstrong.


\(^{8}\) cf. in Alc. p. 4, 5-18; p. 237, 1-14.

\(^{9}\) cf. props. 52-5 trans. & comment. by E. R. Dodds.
an eternity before all things eternal, a time prior to all things temporal. Eternity is cause of things existing and acting as simultaneous wholes. Time is either the perpetual duration of things that ever come-to-be or the limited duration of things that come-to-be only for a while. E. R. Dodds notes that Proclus was indebted for his concept of eternity to the Chaldaean Oracles, which describe it as the 'Father-begotten light' that irradiates all beings with the intelligence and love of the supreme principle. The Orphics, perhaps influenced by Iranian ideas, had regarded Time as a primary principle in cosmogony, and had identified the god Kronos with Time (Chronos). Both these sources were regarded by Proclus as divinely inspired, and the effort to adapt their views to Neoplatonism results in considerable intricacy in his thought when he discusses time and eternity in the Timaeus commentary.

Proclus himself is well aware of the difficulties involved in explaining his views: 'But to understand and explain convincingly the nature of eternity and of time that imitates it in mobile fashion, is a matter of the greatest difficulty'.

To begin with eternity: the later Neoplatonists had introduced various divisions within the second principle 'Nous', forming a triad from its closely related aspects of Being-Life-Intellect. Proclus is anxious to locate eternity precisely; in the process of emanation it is the last form of the principle Being and immediately precedes the Living Creature that is the supreme model of the universe. Eternity itself is immediately preceded by the One-that-Is: 'It seems to have the Monad of Being and the One-that-Is prior to it, and to abide in this One.' This is because 'the One-that-Is' is cause of existence to beings, but eternity is cause of their existence as constant simultaneous wholes. Eternity coordinates and unites the intelligible henads: 'So what else would eternity be but the one embracing principle of the intelligible henads and of the summit of their multitude (by henads I mean the forms of the intelligible creatures and the classes of all these intelligible forms);

1 cf. ibid. p. 228.
5 In Tim. Ill p. 8, 22-4.
7 In Tim. Ill p. 15, 13-15.
8 For the intelligible henads cf. El. Theol. prop. 162 & notes by E. R. Dodds.