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Time and Time-Before-Time: An Ancient Puzzle¹

Carlo Delle Donne

Abstract: If time began, had a “time-before-time” ever existed? What kind of time could it be? Seneca (*Ep. Mor.* 88.33) considered this question as one of utmost importance, as far as the the concept of time was concerned: “*discendum est [...] an aliquid ante tempus sit sine tempore; cum mundo coeperit an etiam ante mundum quia fuerit aliquid, fuerit et tempus*”. In ancient times, this topic had to be debated, although our knowledge is unfortunately meagre. The discussion is likely to have been raised on cosmological grounds. A passage of text by Proclus (*In Tim.* 1.277.1 ss.) is worth examining. There, both Atticus and Plutarch are told to have defined the “pre-cosmic time” as “the number of the disordered movement which existed before the birth of the world”. Such a definition seems to derive from the following theoretical assumptions. 1) Both of them proposed a “temporal” interpretation for the *Timaeus*’ cosmogony: therefore, there should have been a time when the demiurge ordered the pre-cosmic matter and its movement, 2) thus making cosmic time begin. 3) Nevertheless, the two believed that any movement had to imply time somehow; but there had been a pre-cosmic movement, so there should have been a “pre-cosmic time”. Now, we are presented with two possibilities as to how to think of such a time. For the Epicurean Velleius (*Cic.Nat.deor.*1.21), time-before-time *nulla circumscriptio temporum metiebatur, spatio tamen qualis ea fuerit intellegi potest*. This *aeternitas* needs to be deemed as a *spatium* because the pre-cosmic time is not unidirectional. Instead, Plutarch (VIII *PQ*, 1007c) describes the pre-cosmic movement as “a kind of amorphous and indefinite *matter* (ὄλη) of time”. Thus, time-before-time turns out to be a potential reality in so far as it is numerically disordered.

Keywords: Plutarch; Cicero; time; Plato

I.

Did time ever begin? If so, was there a ‘time-before-time’? And, if this is the case, what kind of time could that be? According to Plato’s *Timaeus*, time *did* come into existence along with heaven thanks to the activity of the divine craftsman. But Plato is far less clear as to which kind of time, *if any*, there was before the demiurge gave birth to the ordered world. Actually, Plato says next to nothing on the matter — plausibly because this issue was of no interest to him. Nevertheless, the description of a *demiurgic process* resulting in the generation of time seems to imply — at least on the face of it — the existence of some sort of chronological extension for that very process to occur and

¹ I would like to particularly thank the reviewers for their precious and enriching comments. I dedicate these few pages to the memory of my grandfather.

develop. Therefore, it is no surprise that the ancient readers of the *Timaeus*, regardless of their philosophical allegiance, repeatedly tackled the problem.² And by the late Hellenistic age, this debate had presumably become ‘canonical’ if, according to Seneca (*Ep.* 88.33), it was a routine question whether time came into existence along with the world, or it existed even before.³

With regard to this big issue, we can rely on some valuable pieces of evidence. For example, in Cicero’s *De natura deorum*, the Epicurean character Velleius provides us with an original account of time-before-time; moreover, two Middle Platonists too, Plutarch and Atticus, significantly elaborated on this same notion. Here, I intend to shed light on all of these philosophical proposals. I believe they are likely to present us with (at least) three different theoretical approaches to the *Timaeus*’ problem that are all worth examining in a theoretical perspective. Thus, I will also have the opportunity to offer a big picture of what can be reconstructed of this ancient debate, which stemmed from the active reading of Plato’s *ipsissima verba*.

II.

But let’s start with Plato’s very own words. From *Timaeus* 37C6 onwards, we are provided with three pieces of information regarding time:

1) *Timaeus* rather assertively states that “time was born along with heaven” thanks to the activity of the demiurge (*Tim.* 38B6: χρόνος δ’ οὖν μετ’ οὐρανοῦ γέγονεν). Therefore, it could also “dissolve” at some point along with the latter, were a dissolution ever to happen to them (cf. 38B6-7: ἵνα ἅμα γεννηθέντες ἅμα καὶ λυθῶσιν, ἂν ποτε λύσις τις αὐτῶν γίγηται). But, even though the world and time could theoretically be dissolved *only* by the demiurge (32C4), inasmuch as they were generated by him, we should expect this never to occur (38C1 ff.: τὸ μὲν γὰρ δὴ παράδειγμα πάντα αἰῶνά ἐστιν ὄν, ὁ δ’ αὖ δὴ διὰ τέλους τὸν ἅπαντα χρόνον γεγονώς τε καὶ ὄν καὶ ἐσόμενος). For the reasons that led the demiurge to give birth to heaven and, along with it, to time, grounded as they are on his unchangeable goodness,⁴ are not likely to ever lose their validity (29E1 ff.).

2) What is this ‘generated time’ like? We are told that it bears a resemblance to a “paradigm”, i.e. “the eternal nature”, to which it is meant to be “as similar as possible” (38B8 ff.). But while the “paradigm” is *eternally* “a being” (38C1 ff.: τὸ μὲν γὰρ δὴ παράδειγμα πάντα αἰῶνά ἐστιν ὄν) — and is hence unhooked from any temporality (37E5 ff.) — time is “a mobile image of eternity [...] an *eternal* image of eternity which

² See Ferrari (2014); Sorabji (1984), 268 ff.; Baltes/Dörrie (1998), 388-398, 412-415.

³ *De divinis humanisque descendum est, de praeteritis de futuris, de caducis de aeternis, de tempore. De quo uno vide quam multa quaerantur: primum an per se sit aliquid; deinde an aliquid ante tempus sit sine tempore; cum mundo coeperit an etiam ante mundum quia fuerit aliquid, fuerit et tempus.*

⁴ On this issue, see now Johansen (2014).

abides in unity — an image which moves in accordance with number (37D5 ff.)”.⁵ So, generated time proves an *endless*⁶ copy of eternity.

3) In order to make such time begin, the demiurge gave shape to seven “planets”, which were meant to “distinguish and preserve the *numbers* of time”. So, generated time is an “image” of eternity which moves “in accordance with *number*”; and such “numbers” of time depend on the *periodical* movements of some heavenly bodies — the planets.⁷

So far so good. Nevertheless, we are left in doubt as far as an eventual “time-before-time” is concerned. Actually, as I said above, Plato tells us near to nothing on the matter. He leaves it open to discussion whether:

A) *no time* at all ever existed before the birth of ordered time (and should this be the case, he could have had something like *eternity* in mind);

B) even though time didn’t exist before the birth of the world, nevertheless a sort of “embryo” of it *did* exist;⁸

C) the generation of time by the demiurge should be deemed as happening in a *different kind of time*.

Be that as it may, as we will see all of these options appear to have more than one aporetic side.⁹

⁵ For a different reading of this passage of text, see Brague (1982), who is followed by Cavagnaro (1994). Here I follow the ‘canonical’ reading by Cornford (1935), 98 ff.

⁶ In the description of time, I take the adjective “eternal” as an instance of the canonical relationship of “predicative participation” which links, according to Plato, the ideal paradigms to their sensible copies. It goes without saying that a copy cannot encapsulate a certain property (e.g. being beautiful, or eternal) as perfectly and as exhaustively as the model does; nevertheless, they do have a relationship of *eponymia*. A different explanation of the adjective is provided by Cornford (1935), 98 n. 1.

⁷ See Fronterotta (2003), 210 ff. nn. 122-126 and Cornford (1935), 102:

Time is essentially divided into the three ‘forms’, past, present, future; and it ‘moves according to number’, being measured by a plurality of recurrent ‘parts’, the periods called day, month, year. Nothing that we can call Time can exist without these units of measurement; and these again cannot exist without the regular revolutions of the heavenly bodies, the motions of the celestial clock. Time, accordingly, is said to ‘come into being together with the Heaven’ in the sense that neither can exist without the other. [...] Plato takes first those among their number, namely the Planets, whose special utility to mankind lies in their marking off the periods of time and so teaching men to count and calculate. He remarks later (47a) that the observation of these regular periods led to the discovery of number, to all inquiry into nature, and to philosophy itself.

⁸ As will be clarified later in the paper, some Platonists seem to have put forward this theoretical proposal.

⁹ One potential problem arising from A) had to do with the very nature of eternity — how to conceive it? An interesting proposal seems to me to be put forward by Cicero’s Velleius. As for B), the major aporetic aspect regards the conceptual framework that a Platonist had to rely on in order to elaborate on the notion of “embryo”, or “potentiality”. In relation to this point, something worth discussing will emerge from the analysis of Plutarch’s writings. Actually, only C) is not likely to pose any particularly harsh difficulties in theoretical terms.

III.

As far as A) is concerned, it is possible to trace it back to Cicero and his *De natura deorum*.¹⁰ Here Velleius, the Epicurean character, launches a violent attack on both Plato's *opificem aedificatoremque mundi deum* and the Stoic *fatidicam Pronoeam, quam Latine licet Providentiam dicere*.¹¹ As for the former, the first inconsistency detected by Velleius is the following (1.8.20): "the one who represented the world not only as being generated, but even as if it were an artifact, this same person said that the world would be everlasting (*qui non modo natum mundum introduxerit, sed etiam manu paene factum, is eum dixerit fore sempiternum*"). And soon after he adds: "Can you suppose that a man can have even dipped into natural philosophy, if he imagines that anything that has come into being can be eternal? What composite whole is not capable of dissolution? What thing is there that has a beginning but not an end? (*hunc censes primis ut dicitur labris gustasse physiologiam id est naturae rationem, qui quicquam quod ortum sit putet aeternum esse posse? quae est enim coagmentatio non dissolubilis, aut quid est cuius principium aliquod sit nihil sit extremum?*)". In other words: if the world is a product of a certain cosmogonic activity, it cannot be the case that it is *sempiternum*; for what is born cannot be *aeternum*. On the face of it, one could be rather convinced by this criticism.

Nevertheless, if one pays attention to the very words employed by Velleius, a semantic fluctuation can be detected. The alleged inconsistency is first put in terms of "being born (*natum*)" vs "being everlasting (*sempiternum*)", while soon after it is said to exist between "being born (*natum sit*)" and "being eternal (*aeternum*)". Nonetheless, the two expressions are all but synonyms. Everlastingness is a temporal category, whereas eternity is unhooked from any form of temporality. But that is not the whole story.

In the end, Velleius comes back to the initial semantic opposition, as he uses expressions such as *non dissolubilis* and *nihil sit extremum*. So, what this criticism fails to properly take into account is the Platonic distinction between "being *eternal*" (Velleius' *aeternum*), which is *exclusively* peculiar to the 'ideal paradigm', and "being *everlasting*" (Velleius' *sempiternum*), which happens to be a characteristic of the ordered world. Moreover, even the allusion to the necessity for every *coagmentatio* to dissolve some time in the future is likely to neglect Plato's argument against it. For as has been briefly shown above in 2), the everlastingness of the *kosmos* depends on the unchangeable goodness of the demiurge; therefore, despite its being a *coagmentatio*, the world can be *temporally* endless.¹²

¹⁰ On these paragraphs, see Pease (1955), 182 ff.; Sedley (2007), 139 ff.; Baltes/ Dörrie (1998), 388-398.

¹¹ According to the Epicureans, the Platonic and Stoic gods were utterly engaged in a heavy and exhausting demiurgic activity, that was inevitably to put their beatitude at risk; on this polemic, see Opsomer (2005), Verde (2017), Erler (2017).

¹² See also *Plac.* 2.4.886E:

Πυθαγόρας <καὶ Πλάτων> καὶ οἱ Στωικοὶ γενητῶν ὑπὸ θεοῦ τὸν κόσμον· καὶ φθαρτὸν μὲν ὅσον ἐπὶ τῇ φύσει, αἰσθητὸν γὰρ εἶναι διότι καὶ σωματικόν, οὐ μὴν φθαρησόμενον γε προνοία καὶ συνοχῇ θεοῦ. Att. fr. 6.12: Τοσοῦτον δὲ ἀποδεῖ τοῦ διὰ τούτων βοηθεῖν τῷ Πλάτωνος λόγῳ ὥστε ἤδη τινὰς καὶ τῶν περὶ Πλάτωνος ἐσπουδακότων φοβήσας, οἷς εἶπεν, ἀπέστησε τοῦ δόγματος, οὐ δυνηθέντας συνιδεῖν ὅτι κατὰ μὲν αὐτῶν φύσιν τῶν πραγμάτων ἦν ἄνευ θεοῦ

Unlike the first one, the second criticism is more efficacious. As a matter of fact, it is likely to go to the very heart of both the Platonic and the Stoic cosmogony, even though it may suit better Plato's theory.¹³ The argument runs as follows: if there was a *time* when the demiurge (or the Stoic god) decided to give shape to our world, there had to be a *sufficient reason* for that decision to be made *at that precise time*; but what could such reason be?¹⁴ Moreover, what did the demiurge use to do *before* the beginning of his cosmogonic activity? Had he been sleeping for all that *period*?¹⁵ Now, Platonists used to counter these objections, and they sometimes reached interesting solutions.¹⁶ But, however remarkable all this controversy may be, this is not what I will focus on. For soon after asking whether *mundi aedificatores [...] innumerabilia saecla dormierint*, Velleius provides us with an interesting account of what these *saecla preceding time* were like:

Ab utroque autem sciscitor cur mundi aedificatores repente exstiterint, innumerabilia saecla dormierint; non enim si mundus nullus erat saecla non erant (saecla nunc dico non ea quae dierum noctiumque numero annuis cursibus conficiuntur; nam fateor ea sine mundi conversione effici non potuisse; sed fuit quaedam ab infinito tempore aeternitas, quam nulla circumscriptio temporum metiebatur, spatio tamen qualis ea fuerit intellegi potest, quod ne in cogitationem quidem cadit ut fuerit tempus aliquod nullum cum tempus esset) — isto igitur tam immenso spatio quaero Balbe cur Pronoea vestra cessaverit.

Moreover I would put to both of you the question, why did these deities suddenly awake into activity as world-builders after countless ages of slumber? For though the world did not exist, it does not follow that ages did not exist — meaning by ages, not periods made up of a number of days and nights in annual courses, for ages in this sense I admit could not have been produced without the circular motion of the firmament; but from the infinite past there has existed an eternity not measured by limited divisions of time, but of a nature intelligible in terms of extension; since it is inconceivable that there was ever a time when time did not exist. Well then, Balbus, what I ask is, why did your Providence remain idle all through that extent of time of which you speak. (trans. after Rackham¹⁷)

Now, in this passage of text, there are at least two aspects which need to be taken into account and (hopefully) clarified. First, we are expected to have a precise understanding of the point being made, and to be able to accurately reconstruct how the

βουλήσεως καὶ δυνάμεως ἐπινοῆσαι οὔτε τὸ γενόμενον ἀφθαρτον οὔτε τὸ μὴ φθαρησόμενον γεννητὸν ὄν. Ὅταν δὲ τὴν ἀρίστην τις αἰτίαν ἐπιστήσῃ τὴν ἐκ θεοῦ, δεῖ ταύτην ἡγεμόνα τῶν πάντων λαβόντα μηδὲν αὐτὴν τῶν ἄλλων αἰτίαν ἀποφαίνειν χειρόνα. Γελοῖον γὰρ διότι μὲν γέγονέ τι διὰ τοῦτο φθαρῆναι, εἰ δὲ ὁ θεὸς βούλεται, μὴ φθαρῆναι, καὶ διότι μὲν τι ἀγέννητὸν ἐστὶ ἔχειν ἰσχὺν τοῦ μὴ φθαρῆναι, τὴν δὲ παρὰ τοῦ θεοῦ βούλησιν ἐνδεῖν πρὸς τὸ ἀφθαρτον τηρῆσαι τι τῶν γενομένων.

¹³ Baltes/ Dörrie (1998), 394. Baltes (1998), 395 interrogatively alludes to Panaetius, fr. 64-69 van Straaten as the possible Stoic target of Velleius' criticism.

¹⁴ The archetype of this criticism is to be found in Parm. fr. 8.10-11 D.K.: τί δ' ἄν μιν καὶ χρέος ᾤρσεν/ ὕστερον ἢ πρόσθεν, τοῦ μηδενὸς ἀρξάμενον, φῶν; On this text, see Sedley (2007), 142 n. 20.

¹⁵ See also Lucr. 5.156 ff. and Diog. Oen. fr. 20-21 Smith.

¹⁶ E.g. see Atticus fr. 45 Baltes and Baltes/Dörrie (1998), 393.

¹⁷ Rackham (1933).

general argument runs; second, we should wonder whether the piece of philosophy concerning the *saecla* is to be deemed as Epicurean — hence, one Velleius *does* side with — or not. And should the second option be the case, it would be necessary to reconstruct the argumentative function of that *dialectical* assumption. In order to shed light on the latter points, a look at the relevant Epicurean literature will be beneficial.

The first assumption emerging from the text deals with the split between the existence of the world and that of time: *non enim si mundus nullus erat saecla non erant*. Or rather, it is not exactly ‘time’ at issue here, but what Velleius calls *saecla*. One can be sure of the importance of this linguistic choice because Velleius himself stresses its relevance. But what does *saecla* precisely allude to? The Epicurean immediately rules out one possible reading: the *saecla* are *not* to be identified with those “temporal ranges” which result from the “number of days and nights, or the annual revolutions” (cf. *saecla nunc dico non ea quae dierum noctiumque numero annuis cursibus conficiuntur*). For it is exactly this kind of *ordered* time, depending on the movements of the planets, that Platonists (along with Plato) describe as being generated “together with heaven” (cf. *nam fateor ea sine mundi conversione effici non potuisse*)

So, it is at this point that Velleius introduces a version of option A)¹⁸ above as the proper reading of *saecla*. When considering time-before-time, we should refer to an *aeternitas*, which ought to be thought of as “infinite” and “uncountable” (cf. *fuit quaedam ab infinito tempore aeternitas; innumerabilia saecla*). But how could we conceive such an *eternity*, given that it cannot be measured or described by means of any “temporal delimitation” (cf. *quam nulla circumscriptio temporum metiebatur*)? Velleius soon provides us with an interesting piece of information: *spatio tamen qualis ea fuerit intellegi potest*. How are we expected to read (and, hence, translate) the word *spatium* here? As every Latin dictionary shows, the word covers two semantic fields: both that of extension in time and that of extension in space. I think that it is precisely this constitutive ambiguity of the word that is being exploited here. In other words, in order to think of and describe an *extension* deprived of any temporality like *aeternitas*, a non-temporal word, and yet one somehow related to the idea of ‘extension’, is required; I mean, what is needed is a word which could allude to an extension ontologically different from that of time: to a *spatial extension*, for example. Therefore — Velleius seems to me to put forward — let’s think of *saecla*, or *aeternitas*, even as if they were something *spatial*, provided that any reference to “time” is utterly eliminated.¹⁹

¹⁸ I.e. *no time* at all ever existed before the birth of ordered time.

¹⁹ One reviewer has put forward the following objection to my argument:

The author argues that *spatium* should be understood as spatial extension as opposed to temporal extension. This view calls for explanation. Particularly, what does it mean that spatial extension existed before time? This claim leaves open the possibility that there was a time before time; a time when spatial extension existed.

Now, when I maintain that the semantic richness of *spatium* (and particularly its spatial meaning) turns out to be useful in order to make something of *aeternitas*, I do not mean that *aeternitas* equates to a spatial extension. Rather, what I am speculating upon is the *datum* of the aporetic nature of the notion of *aeternitas*. Since this idea exceeds the limits of any temporal terminology, it seems to me that, to Velleius’ eyes, *another dimension* like that of space (along with its semantic field) appeared more promising. In other words, *aeternitas* is

So, the general argument against Plato turns out to run as follows: let's assume that time comes into existence along with the world; and let's also assume that there was no time before the birth of time, so that the very process of generation of time held by the demiurge took place in something like an *aeternitas*;²⁰ let's then think of this *aeternitas* as if it were a dimension intrinsically different from time, thus being much more similar to space (*spatium*) than to time; according to the Epicurean, it is still open to question why, in that *spatium*, the Stoic *Pronoea* and the Platonic demiurge remained cosmologically motionless (*isto igitur tam immenso spatio quaero Balbe cur Pronoea vestra cessaverit*).

Now, one should wonder whether this argument is shared by Velleius or not. In other words, is such a conception of time-before-time as a *spatial-like eternity* a piece of genuine Epicurean philosophy? As far as the extant Epicurean texts dealing with time are concerned,²¹ a negative answer seems likely. For, inasmuch as time is defined as an "accident of accidents",²² it actually depends on *any* world-like atomic configuration. To state it more precisely: since atoms are as eternal in their motion as the existence of void is, the number of such accidental world-like compounds is infinite. As a consequence, since time depends on the atomic motion, and this motion is eternal, time has no beginning at all. Therefore, there could not be any time-before-time, according to the Epicureans.

In light of this, Velleius' argument should be deemed as merely dialectical. So, as a general reconstruction, I propose to place all the pieces in the following order:²³

1) The initial Epicurean criticism against 'creationism',²⁴ was likely to be directed against the possibility of a birth of time along with the voluntary generation of the world by the demiurge. For the demiurge had to choose a certain *time* in order to start his cosmological activity; but, what 'time' could that be, if the 'cosmological time' was born *later*, along with the world? And, as far as that pre-cosmic phase is concerned, in

so different from time that, paradoxically, it might be more properly described as if it were something *spatial*. See also Ferrari (2014), 274-275, who nonetheless observes that this spatial conception is likely to rule out the idea (that is typical of time) of irreversibility; in fact, even if this problem was perceived as such by the Epicureans, it is precisely because eternity is utterly other than time that the idea of irreversibility too should simply be put aside.

²⁰ Baltes/Dörrie (1998), 393-394.

²¹ See Verde (2007), (2008), (2009), (2009a).

²² See Sext. *P.* 3.137: Ἐπίκουρος δέ, καθὼς Δημήτριος ὁ Λάκων φησί, σύμπτωμα συμπτωμάτων, παρεπόμενον ἡμέραις τε καὶ νυξὶ καὶ ὥραις καὶ πάθεσι καὶ ἀπαθείαις καὶ κινήσει καὶ μοναῖς and Sext. *S.* 10.181: Δοκεῖ δὲ καὶ εἰς τοὺς περὶ Ἐπίκουρον καὶ Δημόκριτον φυσικοὺς τοιαύτη τις ἀναφέρεσθαι τοῦ χρόνου νόησις "χρόνος ἐστὶν ἡμεροειδὲς καὶ νυκτοειδὲς φάντασμα", καθ' ἣν πάλιν ἄπορός ἐστιν ἢ [περὶ] τοῦ χρόνου φύσις. See also Lucr. 1.418 ff.: *tempus item per se non est, sed rebus ab ipsis/ consequitur sensus, transactum quid sit in aevo,/ tum quae res instet, quid porro deinde sequatur;/ nec per se quemquam tempus sentire fatendumst/ semotum ab rerum motu placidaque quiete* (459 ff.), along with Zinn (2016).

²³ See also Sedley (2007), 144-145.

²⁴ The term might sound odd and even misleading; I use it in the same sense as Sedley (2007) does.

which sense is it possible to use expressions such as ‘later’ and any other temporally qualified one, if time did not exist at all?²⁵ More generically, is it possible to think of and describe that phase in non-temporal terms at all? The Epicureans were likely to give a negative answer to the question.

2) Nevertheless, the Platonists could reply that any temporal expression, if referred to the pre-cosmic phase, had to be read metaphorically, and not literally.²⁶ For time-before-time is not time at all, but *eternity*, whose nature might be conceived e.g. even in *spatial* terms, provided that it is not conceived in temporal terms.

3) At this point, the Epicureans could decide to take such an account of eternity into account, for the Platonic conception appeared to them to be as aporetic as it was at the very beginning. Even if one admits that before the birth of time something like a “spatial” eternity existed, it still remains problematic to identify the *sufficient* reason for the demiurge to have decided to interrupt his eternal motionlessness.

IV.

An instance of the line of thought stated in B) is to be found in Plutarch’s VIII *Platonica Quaestio* (hereafter *PQ*), where the author provides us with a rather different solution as far as the nature of time-before-time is concerned. As will soon become clear, he originally elaborates on the notion of “matter”, presumably combining both Platonic and Aristotelian themes. But I will come back to this later. Let’s start with some general remarks on Plutarch’s cosmology,²⁷ which are likely to be necessary to fully understand his conception of time.

Plutarch was utterly convinced of the fact that Platonic philosophy was *potentially* systematic and coherent.²⁸ Nevertheless, Plato had not always been clear and consistent in his works; therefore, he had himself made it necessary, for his followers, to explain “the untold” so to speak, and to solve all the possible inconsistencies. For example, a) in the *Phaedrus* (245C 5 ff.), he had written that there could not be any movement unless there be a soul responsible for it; but b) in the *Timaeus* (e.g. 30A 5 ff.), he had stated that, before the birth of the world and of its soul, there was a *chora* which *did* move in a disorderly manner; c) therefore, should Plato ever be consistent, he had to believe in the existence of a *pre-cosmic soul*, which should be responsible for pre-cosmic movement. Or rather, this was the consequence Plutarch considered to be inevitable for Plato’s argument to run successfully.

But what are we to think of time? In the VIII *PQ*, we are told that time is inextricably linked to the cosmic soul, and that it “was born” just as the cosmic soul “was born”. Actually, they were born together. In particular, time turns out to be ‘coextensive’ with the movement of the cosmic soul inasmuch as that movement is *mathematically ordered* (1007C: μάλλον δὲ κίνησις οὐσα καὶ τάξις αὐτὴ καὶ συμμετρία χρόνος καλεῖται). Therefore, time should not be defined through the means of a mere “accident” (1007B: ἀπὸ συμβεβηκότος ὀριζόμενοι) — e.g. by making it a ‘supervening property’ of

²⁵ See *Io. Aet.* 117-118, 141-142 for an attempt at a solution, with Sorabji (1984), 269.

²⁶ On these hermeneutic approaches, see now Petrucci (2019).

²⁷ See Ferrari (1995).

²⁸ Ferrari (2016), (2017); Donini (2011).

movement in general²⁹ (1007B: οὐ γὰρ πάθος οὐδὲ συμβεβηκὸς ἧς ἔτυχε κινήσεως ὁ χρόνος ἐστίν) as Aristotle,³⁰ Speusippus³¹ and the Stoics³² had done. On the contrary, it is its “essence” or “power” that should be considered (1007B: τὴν δ’ οὐσίαν αὐτοῦ καὶ τὴν δύναμιν οὐ συνορῶντες), were a true definition of it to be provided. And that is what even Pythagoras³³ and Pindarus³⁴ had — however inchoatively — done.

So, time needs to be credited with a stable ontological status. And Plutarch believes himself to be properly delivering on such a requirement when he provides us with the following description (1007B, 1007D, trans. after H. Cherniss):

For time is [...] cause and potency and principle (αἰτία δὲ καὶ δύναμις καὶ ἀρχή) of that which holds together all the things that come to be, *i.e.* of the symmetry and order in which the nature of the whole universe, being animate, is in motion (τῆς πάντα συνεχοῦσης τὰ γινόμενα συμμετρίας καὶ τάξεως, ἣν ἡ τοῦ ὅλου φύσις ἐμψυχος οὕσα κινεῖται). [...] Time, then, since it is thus necessarily implicated and connected with the

²⁹ So, the mistake proves twofold: 1) time should not be defined by means of one of its “accidental properties” (ἀπὸ συμβεβηκόντος ὀριζόμενοι), such as its being numerical somehow; 2) and it should not be reduced to a mere “affection” or “accident” of another substance (οὐ γὰρ πάθος οὐδὲ συμβεβηκὸς ἧς ἔτυχε κινήσεως).

³⁰ 1007A: ῥητέον οὖν τοὺς ὑπὸ τούτων τατατομένους δι’ ἀγνοίαν οἶεσθαι τὸν χρόνον “μέτρον εἶναι κινήσεως καὶ ἀριθμὸν κατὰ τὸ πρότερον καὶ ὕστερον”, ὡς Ἀριστοτέλης εἶπεν.

³¹ *ibid.*: ἢ “τὸ ἐν κινήσει ποσόν” ὡς Σπεύσιππος. See Parente (1980), 334-335; at page 335, the scholar maintains: ‘Speusippo definisce anzi il tempo per mezzo del puro concetto di quantità, forse aggiungendo ἐν κινήσει proprio per chiarire che qui sta la diversità dalla grandezza spaziale, immobile.’

³² *ibid.*: ἢ “διάστημα κινήσεως” ἄλλο δ’ οὐδὲν ὡς εἶναι τῶν Στωικῶν, ἀπὸ συμβεβηκόντος ὀριζόμενοι τὴν δ’ οὐσίαν αὐτοῦ καὶ τὴν δύναμιν οὐ συνορῶντες.

³³ 1007B: ὁ τε Πυθαγόρας, ἐρωτηθεὶς τί χρόνος ἐστίν, τὴν τούτου ψυχὴν εἶπεῖν. This attempt at a definition is to be compared with that provided by Aristot. *Phys.* 218B1: οἱ μὲν γὰρ τὴν τοῦ ὅλου κίνησιν εἶναι φασιν, οἱ δὲ τὴν σφαῖραν αὐτήν. It should be noticed that, according to Cherniss (1935), 214-216, here Aristotle is not alluding to ‘the Pythagorean definition of time at all, but merely [to] a traditional symbolic name for the heavens’ (p. 216; see *Cael.* 279a11-18, where Cherniss sees a reference to this Pythagorean doctrine: Ἄμα δὲ δῆλον ὅτι οὐδὲ τόπος οὐδὲ κενὸν οὐδὲ χρόνος ἐστὶν ἔξω τοῦ οὐρανοῦ. Ἐν ἅπαντι γὰρ τόπω δυνατόν ὑπάρξει σῶμα· κενὸν δ’ εἶναι φασιν ἐν ᾧ μὴ ἐνυπάρχει σῶμα, δυνατόν δ’ ἐστὶ γενέσθαι· χρόνος δὲ ἀριθμὸς κινήσεως· κίνησις δ’ ἄνευ φυσικοῦ σώματος οὐκ ἐστίν. Ἐξω δὲ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ δέδεικται ὅτι οὐτ’ ἐστὶν οὐτ’ ἐνδέχεται γενέσθαι σῶμα. Φανερόν ἄρα ὅτι οὐτε τόπος οὐτε κενὸν οὐτε χρόνος ἐστὶν ἔξω). The scholar gives much more importance to fr. 201 Rose (Πυθαγόρου φιλοσοφίας πρώτῃ γράφει Ἀριστοτέλης τὸν μὲν οὐρανὸν εἶναι ἓνα, ἐπεισάγεσθαι δ’ ἐκ τοῦ ἀπείρου χρόνον τε καὶ πνοὴν καὶ τὸ κενὸν ὃ διορίζει ἐκάστων τὰς χώρας αἰεὶ), which he reads together with Zeno’s disproof of the conception of time as a continuum of discrete units (Aristot. *Phys.* 239B8-9: οὐ γὰρ σύγκειται ὁ χρόνος ἐκ τῶν νῦν τῶν ἀδιαίρετων, ὥσπερ οὐδ’ ἄλλο μέγεθος οὐδέν; 29-30: συμβαίνει δὲ παρὰ τὸ λαμβάνειν τὸν χρόνον συγκεῖσθαι ἐκ τῶν νῦν· μὴ διδομένου γὰρ τούτου οὐκ ἔσται ὁ συλλογισμὸς). Such a “granular” conception of time is considered as Pythagorean by Cherniss.

³⁴ 1007B: τὴν δ’ οὐσίαν αὐτοῦ καὶ τὴν δύναμιν οὐ συνορῶντες, ἣν ὁ τε Πίνδαρος εἶπεν οὐ φαύλως ὑπονοῶν εἶπεῖν ἄνακτα τὸν πάντων ὑπερβάλλοντα χρόνον μακάρων’. Both Pythagoras and Pindarus credited time with a form of substantiality, for the former reduced it to the world soul, whereas the latter described it as a ‘lord [...] who excels all the beatified Gods’.

heaven (οὕτως οὖν ἀναγκαίαν πρὸς τὸν οὐρανὸν ἔχων συμπλοκὴν καὶ συναρμογὴν ὁ χρόνος), is not simply motion (οὐχ ἀπλῶς ἐστὶ κίνησις), but, as has been said, motion in an orderly fashion that involves measures, limits and revolutions (κίνησις ἐν τάξει μέτρον ἐχούση καὶ πέρατα καὶ περιόδους).

But this is not the whole story. For, as long as he is a loyal Platonic philosopher, Plutarch also needs to consider Plato's definition of time as the "mobile image of eternity". Thus, he sets out to integrate it within his theoretical framework: just as the sensible world is an image of the *essence* of god, i.e. of his being "what really is", time is the image of the *eternity* of god (1007D, trans. after Cherniss):

They are both semblances of god, the universe of his essence and time a semblance in motion of his eternity, even as in the realm of becoming the universe is god (εἰκόνες δ' εἰσὶν ἄμφω τοῦ θεοῦ, τῆς μὲν οὐσίας ὁ κόσμος τῆς δ' ἀδιότητος ὁ χρόνος ἐν κινήσει, καθάπερ ἐν γενέσει θεὸς ὁ κόσμος).

In all this, one cannot but notice the strong similarity between Plutarch's and Plotinus' accounts.³⁵ First of all, both of them identify time with the regular and ordinate activity of the cosmic soul — even though Plotinus considered this soul as a metaphysical principle;³⁶ moreover, both of them rely upon and elaborate on *Plato's* conception of time as the 'image of eternity'; and, last but not least, the doxography they quote and comment on is rather the same.³⁷ So, it seems to me that all this points to a significant dependence of Plotinus on Plutarch's theoretical elaboration. That is why, if one compares the passage of text quoted above with the following ones by Plotinus, the similarities will appear to be striking (3.7.12.1-4; 22 ff.; 11.40 ff., trans. after Gerson³⁸):

We must think of the nature of time as the extent of the kind of life which consists of changes that are even and uniform in their silent procession, while it maintains continuity of activity (ἡ φύσις αὐτῆς χρόνος, τὸ τοιούτου μήκος βίου ἐν μεταβολαῖς προῖον ὁμαλαίς τε καὶ ὁμοίαις ἀσφορητὶ προιούσαις, συνεχὲς τὸ τῆς ἐνεργείας ἔχον) [...]. For this reason, it is also said that time came to be at the same time as this universe, because soul generated it along with it. For it was in an activity of this kind that this universe, too, was generated. And this activity is time, but the universe is in time (Διὸ καὶ εἴρηται ἅμα τῷδε τῷ παντὶ γεγονέναι, ὅτι ψυχὴ αὐτὸν μετὰ τοῦδε τοῦ παντὸς ἐγέννησεν. Ἐν γὰρ τῇ τοιαύτῃ ἐνεργείᾳ καὶ τότε γεγένηται τὸ πᾶν· καὶ ἡ μὲν χρόνος, ὁ δὲ ἐν χρόνῳ). [...] Would it, then, make any sense to say that time is the life of the soul in its changing motion from one way of living to another (Εἰ οὖν χρόνον τις λέγει ψυχῆς ἐν κινήσει μεταβατικῇ ἐξ ἄλλου εἰς ἄλλον βίον ζῶν εἶναι, ἄρ' ἂν δοκοῖ τι λέγειν)? For if eternity is life in stability, identity, and sameness, and is unlimited from the start, and time must be an image of eternity, just as this universe is related to the one above, then instead of the life above we must say equivocally, in a way, that there is another life, that of this power of the soul; and instead of intellectual motion, there is the motion of a part of the soul (Εἰ γὰρ αἰὼν ἐστὶ ζωὴ ἐν στάσει καὶ τῷ αὐτῷ καὶ ὡσαύτως καὶ ἄπειρος ἤδη, εἰκόνα δὲ δεῖ τοῦ αἰῶνος τὸν χρόνον εἶναι, ὡσπερ καὶ τότε τὸ πᾶν ἔχει πρὸς ἐκεῖνο, ἀντὶ μὲν ζωῆς τῆς ἐκεῖ ἄλλην δεῖ ζωὴν τὴν τῷδε τῆς δυνάμεως τῆς ψυχῆς ὡσπερ ὁμόνυμον λέγειν εἶναι καὶ ἀντὶ κινήσεως νοεῶς ψυχῆς τινος μέρους κίνησιν).

³⁵ See Thévenaz (1938), 96; Cherniss (1976), 86, n. a; Chiaradonna (2003).

³⁶ That is to say, as a *hypostasis*: see Chiaradonna (2003), 243.

³⁷ See 3.7.7-10.

³⁸ Gerson (2018).

So, according to both Plotinus and Plutarch, time is to be considered as the *energeia* of the cosmic soul, which both of them describe as being essentially regular (μεταβολαῖς προῖον ὁμαλαῖς τε καὶ ὁμοίαις ἀψοφητῖ προιούσαις VS τῆς πάντα συνεχούσης τὰ γιγνόμενα συμμετρίας καὶ τάξεως) and continuous (συνεχῆς τὸ τῆς ἐνεργείας ἔχον VS εἰ μέλλει ... μηδέποτε διαλύεσθαι γιγνόμενον³⁹). Moreover, while Aristotle argued for the dependence of time on the *individual* soul inasmuch as the latter “counts” the movement and thus makes time “exist”,⁴⁰ Plutarch maintains that there cannot be any ordered movement of the *world soul* without time, inasmuch as time *is* the ordered movement of the world soul. So, when the pre-cosmic soul was ordered by the divine demiurge — thus turning into the cosmic soul — its movement became numerically ordered as well; therefore, at that moment, time too came into existence.⁴¹ But, if a pre-cosmic disorderly movement did exist and, hence, a disorderly moving soul existed as well, are we to conclude the existence of a disorderly pre-cosmic time too? Is that possible? On the face of it, as far as Plutarch is concerned, we are given two different answers by the texts at

³⁹ 1007D: ὅθεν ὁμοῦ γεγονότας φησὶν ὁμοῦ καὶ λυθήσεσθαι πάλιν, ἂν τις αὐτοὺς καταλαμβάνη λύσις: οὐ γὰρ οἷόν τ' εἶναι χωρὶς χρόνου τὸ γενητὸν ὥσπερ οὐδὲ τὸ νοητὸν αἰῶνος, εἰ μέλλει τὸ μὲν αἰεὶ μένειν τὸ δὲ μηδέποτε διαλύεσθαι γιγνόμενον.

⁴⁰ *Phys.* 4.14.223A16 ff.:

πότερον δὲ μὴ οὐσίας ψυχῆς εἴη ἂν ὁ χρόνος ἢ οὐ, ἀπορήσειεν ἂν τις, ἀδύνατον γὰρ ὄντος εἶναι τοῦ ἀριθμήσοντος ἀδύνατον καὶ ἀριθμητὸν τι εἶναι, ὥστε δῆλον ὅτι οὐδ' ἀριθμὸς, ἀριθμὸς γὰρ ἢ τὸ ἠριθμημένον ἢ τὸ ἀριθμητὸν. εἰ δὲ μηδὲν ἄλλο πέφυκεν ἀριθμεῖν ἢ ψυχὴ καὶ ψυχῆς νοῦς, ἀδύνατον εἶναι χρόνον ψυχῆς μὴ οὐσίας, ἀλλ' ἢ τοῦτο ὃ ποτε ὄν ἔστιν ὁ χρόνος, οἷον εἰ ἐνδέχεται κινήσιν εἶναι ἀνευ ψυχῆς, τὸ δὲ πρότερον καὶ ὕστερον ἐν κινήσει ἔστιν· χρόνος δὲ ταῦτ' ἔστιν ἢ ἀριθμητὰ ἔστιν.

The argument runs as follows: 1) should it be impossible for “what is supposed to count” to exist (ἀδύνατον γὰρ ὄντος εἶναι τοῦ ἀριθμήσοντος), 2) it would be impossible for something countable to exist as well (ἀδύνατον καὶ ἀριθμητὸν τι εἶναι); 3) moreover, in this case, not even number could ever exist (ὥστε δῆλον ὅτι οὐδ' ἀριθμὸς); but, 4) since it is soul, or its intellect, that is expected to be naturally capable of counting (εἰ δὲ μηδὲν ἄλλο πέφυκεν ἀριθμεῖν ἢ ψυχὴ καὶ ψυχῆς νοῦς), 5) it is impossible for time, inasmuch as it is a number, to exist in the absence of soul (ἀδύνατον εἶναι χρόνον ψυχῆς μὴ οὐσίας). See the commentary by Castelli (2012), 241-243:

mi pare che la problematicità dell'argomento intenda sottolineare la modalità presente nella definizione del tempo come *numerabile*. [...] Avrebbe senso parlare di un ente numerabile anche qualora la potenzialità ad essere numerato [...] non possa mai venire attualizzata per ragioni legate alla costituzione ontologica del cosmo, che non include dei numeranti (ovvero degli enti razionali)? (p. 242)

See also Ross (1936), 611, *ad loc.* on the meaning of ὃ ποτε ὄν.

⁴¹ That is why, at 1007C, Plutarch states that ‘in fact, the ancients even held that the essence of soul is number itself moving itself (καὶ γὰρ ἢ ψυχῆς οὐσία κατὰ τοὺς παλαιούς ‘ἀριθμὸς ἦν αὐτὸς ἐαυτὸν κινῶν’)’ (transl. after Cherniss). Even though Plutarch rejects this definition in *DAP* 1012D-F, he cites it here as testimony in support of his own interpretation because in it three crucial elements happen to be “mingled”: the soul, its being movement, and the numerically ordered nature of this movement. All of them are revealing here *as far as the definition of time, not of the soul, is concerned*. See however the discussion by Cherniss (1976), p. 86-87, n. c.

our disposal. For the VIII *PQ* (1007C) denies the existence of a time-before-time (χρόνος δ' οὐκ ἦν), even though there Plutarch states that the pre-cosmic disorderly movement was, as it were, “the matter of time” — whatever this may exactly imply. Rather differently, Proclus⁴² (*in Tim.* 1.276.30 ff. = Atticus fr. 19 des Places) tells us that both Plutarch and Atticus *did* believe in the existence of a time-before-time. According to both of them, such a ‘time’ should be deemed as “the number of the disorderly pre-cosmic motion”, just as cosmic time was “the number of the movement of the world”:⁴³

Πλούταρχος μὲν καὶ Ἀττικὸς καὶ ἄλλοι πολλοὶ τῶν Πλατωνικῶν κατὰ χρόνον τὴν γένεσιν ἤκουσαν καὶ φασὶ γίνεσθαι τὴν ζήτησιν, εἴτε ἀγέννητος κατὰ χρόνον ὁ κόσμος, εἴτε γενητός· εἶναι γὰρ πρὸ τῆς κοσμοποιίας ἄτακτον κίνησιν, ἅμα δὲ κινήσει πάντως ἐστὶ καὶ χρόνος, ὥστε καὶ χρόνον εἶναι πρὸ τοῦ παντός· ἅμα δὲ τῷ παντὶ γεγονέναι χρόνον ἀριθμὸν ὄντα τῆς τοῦ παντός κινήσεως, ὡς ἐκεῖνος ἦν τῆς πρὸ τῆς κοσμοποιίας οὐσίας ἀτάκτου κινήσεως ἀριθμός.

Plutarch and Atticus and many other Platonists take ‘generated’ in a temporal sense, and say that the point at issue is whether the cosmos is, in a temporal sense, ungenerated or generated. For before the cosmos was made, there was disorderly movement; but time always accompanies movement, so there was time before the universe. But time which counts movement in the universe came into being with the universe — the other sort counts the unordered movement before creation. (trans. After Boys-Stones⁴⁴)

As is evident, such a conception of time-before-time is a version of C)⁴⁵. Now, one should try to see whether these testimonies are really contradictory or not. In order to do that, a deeper understanding of the expression ‘matter of time’ from the VIII *PQ* is

⁴² On Proclus and Plutarch, see Baltes (1978), 9-14, Rescigno (1998), Opsomer (2001).

⁴³ It seems to me that, should Atticus *consistently* argue for the existence of a precosmic time, the sharing of the following assumption proves crucial: ἅμα δὲ κινήσει πάντως ἐστὶ καὶ χρόνος. Now, the problem is that the impossibility for movement to exist without time is never defended by Plato; rather differently, it was Aristotle who was likely to maintain it; moreover, we know from Simp. *in Phys.* 9.702.24 ff., 702.34 ff., that Eudemus (and Alexander in the wake of him) criticised Plato’s inconsistency as far as the birth of time was concerned *exactly on the basis of the interdependence of time and movement*:

ὁ δὲ Ἀλέξανδρος φιλονεικῶν δεῖξει τοῦ Πλάτωνος οὐσαν δόξαν τὴν λέγουσαν χρόνον εἶναι τὴν τοῦ οὐρανοῦ φορὰν πρῶτον μὲν τὸν Εὐδήμιον μαρτύρεται λέγοντα ‘ἠκολούθησε καὶ Πλάτων τῇ δόξῃ ταύτῃ καὶ μάλα ἀτόπως· πρὶν γὰρ οὐρανὸν γενέσθαι, φησὶ κίνησιν εἶναι ἄτακτον. οὐ λίνον δὴ λίνῳ συνάπτει, εἴπερ πᾶσα κίνησις ἐν χρόνῳ’. [...] Ἐμὲ δὲ ὑποδείξει γρεῶν, πρῶτον μὲν πόθεν ὁ Εὐδήμιος ὑπενόησε χρόνον λέγειν τὸν Πλάτωνα τὴν τοῦ οὐρανοῦ περιφορὰν, εἴτα ὅτι οὐκ ἀκολουθεῖ τούτῳ τὸ ἄτοπον τῷ Πλάτωνι, ὡς ὁ Ἀλέξανδρος συνελογίστατο, τὸ χρόνον εἶναι πρὸ χρόνου. ‘εἰ γὰρ πᾶσα κίνησις, φησὶν, ἐν χρόνῳ, δῆλον ὅτι καὶ ἡ πλημμελής καὶ ἄτακτος κίνησις ἐν χρόνῳ. εἰ οὖν ἡ τοιαύτη κίνησις ἦν πρὶν οὐρανὸν γενέσθαι, δῆλον ὅτι καὶ χρόνος ἦν πρὸ τῆς τοῦ οὐρανοῦ περιφορᾶς, εἰ οὖν αὕτη ὁ χρόνος, εἴη ἂν χρόνος πρὸ χρόνου.’

So, in my opinion, Atticus was trying to take exactly such criticism into account when proposing his theory.

⁴⁴ Boys-Stones (2018).

⁴⁵ I.e. the generation of time by the demiurge should be deemed as happening in a *different kind of time*.

required. What does it mean? Let's start with Plutarch's words (1007C, trans. after Cherniss):

That is just the reason too why Plato said that time had come to be simultaneously with heaven, but there had been motion even before the generation of the heaven (κίνησιν δὲ καὶ πρὸ τῆς τοῦ οὐρανοῦ γενέσεως). Time there was not, however (χρόνος δ' οὐκ ἦν), for there was not order either or any measure or distinction but motion indeterminate (οὐδὲ γὰρ τάξις οὐδὲ μέτρον οὐδὲν οὐδὲ διορισμός, ἀλλὰ κίνησις ἀόριστος), amorphous and unwrought matter, as it were, of time (ὥσπερ ἄμορφος ὕλη χρόνου καὶ ἀσχημάτιστος); but providence, when she took in tow and curbed matter with shapes and motions with revolutions (καταβαλοῦσα τὴν μὲν ὕλην σχήμασι τὴν δὲ κίνησιν περιόδοις), simultaneously made of the former a universe and of the latter time (τὴν μὲν κόσμον ἅμα τὴν δὲ χρόνον ἐποίησεν).

In the pre-cosmic phase, the “matter” (ὕλη) was in “motion” (κίνησις). Neither of the two was mathematically ordered, since matter was deprived of any “shape” (σχήματα), whereas movement lacked any “periodicity” (περιόδοις). But, when god set out to give an ordered shape to both matter and movement, he exploited two different means: he drew upon “geometrical shapes” (σχήμασι) as far as the ordering of matter was concerned, whereas he introduced “periods” into movement. In the first case, the product was a geometrically ordered materiality, whereas in the second the result was a ‘recursive’ movement. Now, the very being *recursive*, or *orderly*, of movement is to be called ‘time’. So, it is not surprising that here Plutarch rejects the possibility of a *real time* before the birth of cosmic time, given that a) real time is the principle of *order* of movement and b) in the pre-cosmic phase there was *no order* at all. Nevertheless, the principle of *nilhil ex nihilo* was crucial to Plutarch.⁴⁶ Therefore, he could not help but look for a sort of “matter of time”, whence he could bring “cosmic time” into existence. And, since the ordered movement is like the ‘substance’ of cosmic time, a pre-cosmic ‘embryo of time’ — as it were — had inevitably to be traced back to the disorderly pre-cosmic movement. In this sense, such a movement could be described as the “matter of time”, at least inasmuch as it functions as a ‘substrate’ for the following numerical arrangement held by the demiurge. In other words, the pre-cosmic movement is the “matter of time” so long as it plays a role which is *functionally analogous* to that played by the *chora* during the cosmogony. The pre-cosmic movement is like the *chora* of the generation of time, and the means through which the god accomplishes the ordering of that movement is *number*. Thus, mathematical entities play an *intermediary* role - as usual in Platonic texts dealing with cosmology.

But there is more to it than this. For it seems to me that such an employment of the notion of “matter” owes much more to Aristotle's reflection than may appear.⁴⁷ As a consequence, the pre-cosmic movement is the “matter of time” in the sense that it *can* give birth to time somehow. Time is *potentially* contained in that movement. Thus, such a movement can be described as “matter” in fully Aristotelian terms since it provides the

⁴⁶ See *IV PQ* 1003A.

⁴⁷ Even though the extent of Plutarch's acquaintance with Aristotle's writings is highly controversial: see Sandbach (1982), Donini (2004), Karamanolis (2006), 85-126 and Roskam (2011). On other Middle Platonist readings of Plato's *Timaeus*, see also Ulacco-Opsomer (2014).

‘material cause’ whence to ‘extract’ time. And if this is the case, numbers turn out to be the ‘formal cause’, while the god plays the role of the ‘efficient cause’.⁴⁸ Now, in my opinion, this reading might be right; nevertheless, it should be remembered that, when Plutarch talks of “matter”, he is likely to have the widespread Aristotelian-like reading of Plato’s *chora* in mind. So, the sense of potentiality (which *might* be concealed in the expression “matter of time”) could be, so to speak, nothing but a piece of *tradition*. And, if so, it would not imply on the part of Plutarch a real ‘concession’ to Aristotle’s theory of matter and form.

So, is there any inconsistency between Proclus’ report and Plutarch’s own words? I think that Proclus is not accurate in attributing the same conception to both Plutarch and Atticus. For Plutarch would not admit the existence of a pre-cosmic time to be thought of as the “number of the pre-cosmic disorderly movement”. It is the very notion of number that appears to be lacking in the pre-cosmic phase. Rather differently, Plutarch does maintain that the pre-cosmic movement was, in a manner of speaking, the ‘substrate’ for its subsequent ordering. I think that Proclus identified Atticus and Plutarch’s accounts in light of a superficial analogy. As fr. 31 des Places⁴⁹ shows, Atticus thought that “time did exist also before the generation of heaven, but *no ordered time did exist* (χρόνος μὲν ἦν καὶ πρὸ οὐρανοῦ γενέσεως, τεταγμένος δὲ χρόνος οὐκ ἦν)”: to Proclus, this might have sounded similar to Plutarch’s statement according to which the pre-cosmic “indefinite movement” was ὥσπερ ἄμορφος ὕλη χρόνου καὶ ἀσχημάτιστος.

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⁴⁸ It should be noticed that, at certain point (1006D) of the VIII *PQ*, Plutarch wonders whether a Platonic passage of text (*Tim.*42D4-5) could be read in Aristotelian terms; in particular, it is there at issue the relationship between the body and the soul of the heavenly bodies. What Plutarch suggests (and soon after rejects) is to read that relationship along the lines of Aristotle’s definition of soul:

δεκτέον ὄργανα μὴ τοὺς ἀστέρας ἀλλὰ τὰ σώματα τῶν ζώων λέγεσθαι; καθάπερ Ἀριστοτέλης ὠρίσατο τὴν ψυχὴν ‘πρώτην ἐντελέγειαν σώματος φυσικοῦ ὀργανικοῦ δυνάμει ζωὴν ἔχοντος.’ ὥστε τοιοῦτον εἶναι τὸν λόγον: αἱ ψυχαὶ εἰς τὰ προσήκοντα ὀργανικὰ σώματα ἐν χρόνῳ κατεσπάρησαν. ἀλλὰ καὶ τοῦτο παρὰ τὴν δόξαν ἐστίν: οὐ γὰρ ἅπαξ ἀλλὰ πολλάκις ὄργανα χρόνου τοὺς ἀστέρας εἴρηκεν, ὅπου καὶ τὸν ἥλιον αὐτὸν ‘εἰς διορισμὸν καὶ φυλακὴν ἀριθμῶν χρόνου γεγονέναι’ φησὶ μετὰ τῶν ἄλλων πλανήτων.

This shows, at least, that Plutarch was aware of the Aristotelian hylomorphism.

⁴⁹ Procl. *in Tim.* 3.37.11 ff.:

εἰ δὲ κίνησις οὐκ ἦν, οὐδὲ πλημμελὴς κίνησις. μάτην ἄρα λέγουσιν οἱ περὶ Ἀττικόν, ὅτι χρόνος μὲν ἦν καὶ πρὸ οὐρανοῦ γενέσεως, τεταγμένος δὲ χρόνος οὐκ ἦν· ὅπου γὰρ χρόνος, ἐκεῖ καὶ τὸ παρελθόν ἐστὶ καὶ τὸ μέλλον, ὅπου δὲ ταῦτα, ἐκεῖ καὶ τὸ ‘ἦν’ καὶ τὸ ‘ἔσται’ πάντως. ἀλλὰ μὴν τὸ ‘ἦν’ καὶ τὸ ‘ἔσται’ χρόνου ἐστὶν εἶδη γεγονότα παρὰ τοῦ δημιουργοῦ· διὸ καὶ γεγονότα αὐτὰ προσεῖπεν. οὐδ’ ἄρα χρόνος τις ἦν πρὸ τῆς δημιουργίας.

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