

Chapter 1

Atemporality and the Origins of the Eternal Cosmos: Debates on Timeless Simultaneity within Platonic Cosmogonies

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Abstract This Chapter endeavors to explore the notion of atemporality within selected works belonging to the Platonic tradition. Beyond providing an overview of various facets of atemporality and highlighting their mutual relations, this chapter aims to investigate their role in a range of accounts of the world's origins. By focusing on the cosmogonical views elaborated by Platonists who deny that the cosmos is generated in time, such as Plotinus, Porphyry, Calcidius, and Proclus, I will dwell on a specific kind of atemporality, namely 'timeless simultaneity,' and shed light on its theoretical advantages in explaining the demiurgic creation of the cosmos within a sempiternalist framework. Paradoxical as it may seem, within this perspective, the assertion that the Demiurge creates the cosmos at once does not conflict but, in fact, is fully compatible with the assumption that the cosmos has no temporal beginning, causally depends on a higher cause, and is always in a process of coming to be. As a result, a multi-layered taxonomy of atemporality, and especially the notion of 'timeless simultaneity,' enables Platonists adopting a sempiternalist stance to argue consistently that the cosmos is both ungenerated and created all at once, and to effectively explain in what sense it is so.

1.1 Introduction: Atemporality and Cosmogony

The aim of this Chapter is to explore the notion of atemporality within selected works belonging to the Platonic tradition by showing its various facets and by investigating its role in an array of cosmogonical accounts. Although ancient philosophers mainly contrast time with eternity, their notion of atemporality is not straightforwardly identical with eternity. In fact, their account of atemporality has a wider extension and involves several manifestations that can be ordered in a multi-layered taxonomy.

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The first chief kind of atemporality is eternity conceived of as a timeless present, and thus distinguished from perpetuity, everlastingness, or sempiternity by virtue of its durationless nature. Additionally, atemporality includes instantaneity, regarded as a timeless juncture or boundary which allows for the transition from a given state to its opposite, such as the passage from life to death. Germane to the previous kinds of atemporality, without nevertheless being exhaustively identical with neither of them, is ‘timeless simultaneity,’ which characterizes processes wherein all parts of a given whole undergo change all at once.

Beyond providing an overview of these meanings of atemporality and highlighting their mutual relations (Section 1.2), in this chapter I will narrow the focus on the last kind of atemporality, namely ‘timeless simultaneity,’ thereby investigating its impact and role in a range of accounts of the world’s origins (Section 1.3). By focusing on the cosmogonical views elaborated by Plotinus, Porphyry, Calcidius and Proclus, I will dwell on this kind of atemporality and cast light on its theoretical advantages in explaining the Demiurge’s creation within a sempiternalist framework. Paradoxical as it may seem, within this perspective, the assertion that the Demiurge creates the cosmos “at once” does not conflict but, in fact, is fully compatible with the assumption that the cosmos has no beginning, causally depends on a higher cause, and is always in a process of coming to be. As a result, a multi-layered taxonomy of atemporality, and especially the notion of ‘timeless simultaneity,’ enables Platonists adopting a sempiternalist stance to argue consistently that the cosmos is both ungenerated *and* created all at once, and to effectively explain in what sense it is so.

1.2 Atemporalities in Antiquity: An Overview

In his discussion of “Zeilosigkeit” in the *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, Thomas Sören Hoffmann emphasizes the scarcity of ancient Greek and Latin terms denoting “atemporal” (*achronos* and *intemporalis*) and describes them as a “*vox docta*.”¹ The absence of a direct equivalent for “atemporality” in Ancient Greek, along with the infrequent usage of the Latin term *intemporalitas*, further complicates the exploration of this notion. While ancient sources do not employ a singular term to encompass all kinds of atemporality, they explore the notion in various contexts and by using diverse terminology. Given the absence of a standardized vocabulary and a comprehensive taxonomy defining the various types of atemporality, the boundaries between them often remain ambiguous. Acknowledging potential overlaps among these diverse manifestations of atemporality found in ancient sources, it becomes possible to cautiously outline a preliminary taxonomy so as to highlight their salient features, to delve into their historical aspects, and to illustrate the primary examples provided by ancient authors to elucidate them.

¹ Hoffmann (2004, 1274–1275).

For ancient philosophers, a first chief meaning of atemporality is eternity (*aiôn*, *aiônios*), which is frequently set in contrast to time.² Nevertheless, this assertion requires further refinement, as eternity is a puzzling notion that can be understood in multiple ways, not all of which necessarily involve atemporality. Atemporal eternity, or eternity proper, is commonly articulated by ancient and late ancient sources as a timeless present, devoid not only of beginning and end, but also of duration and succession. Far from being an infinite stretch of time, eternity – often likened to a point³ – is conceived of as a unified, unextended being which has no past nor future, but simply always is, as suggested by the alleged etymology of *aiôn*.⁴ This understanding of eternity is widely attested at least from Plotinus onwards. While there is abundant evidence that Plotinus conceived of eternity in this way,⁵ it is matter of debate whether such a meaning was available in earlier sources and there is no consensus on when precisely it appeared. Some scholars credit Parmenides with the ‘discovery’ of eternity as timeless present,⁶ while others argue instead that this notion appears for the first time in Plato’s *Timaeus*.⁷ Moreover, evidence of eternity as timeless present is provided by Middle-platonic sources, as Plutarch⁸ and Numenius⁹ tellingly illustrate. All in all, while it is challenging to precisely determine who first ‘discovered’ eternity as a timeless present, it is reasonable to assume an awareness of such kind of atemporality even before Plotinus. Subsequently, the portrayal of eternity (*aiôn*) as a timeless present becomes customary,¹⁰ and is often accompanied by efforts to differentiate it from perpetuity, also referred to as sempiternity or everlastingness (*aidiotês*) – a distinction which becomes standard in the Middle Ages,¹¹ but is clearly

² See e.g. Pl., *Tim.* 37d3-7; 38c1-3 and Plot., *Enn.* III 7, 1.1-3; 11.45-56.

³ See e.g. Plot., *Enn.* III 7, 3.19-23; VI 5, 11.14-21.

⁴ A commonplace in several sources is that *aiôn* (eternity) etymologically derives from *aei* (always) + *on* (being); see Ar., *de cael.* I 9, 279a25-28; Plot., *Enn.* III 7, 4.42-43; Syrian., *In Tim.* fr. 17 (Klitenic Wear) = Procl., *In Tim.* III, 15.11-16 (Diehl); Procl., *In Tim.* III, 9.15-16 (Diehl); Simpl., *In Phys.* 1155.13-16.

⁵ See at least Plot., *Enn.* III 7, 2.31-35; 3.11-38; 6.15-36. On Plotinus’ account of time and eternity, see Beierwaltes (1967b); Plass (1977, 1-4); O’Brien (1985, 67-72); Graeser (1987); Strange (1994); and – more recently – Wilberding (2016, 32-45); Nikulin (2019); Chiaradonna (2022).

⁶ DK 28B8; cf. Owen (1966).

⁷ See esp. *Tim.* 37e-38a, where Plato notes that the forms of time of *was* and *will be* should not be applied to the eternal being (*tên aidion ousian*), whose only appropriate characterization is *is*. On the much-debated issue of whether Plato envisioned eternity as a timeless present, see at least Owen (1966), Whittaker (1968), Tarán (1979), Sorabji (1983, 108-112); Mohr (1986) and Ilievski (2015).

⁸ See Plut., *De E* 393A-B, which Opsomer (2009, 159) has considered as the first “more or less unambiguous statement of the concept of eternity as durationless being” in Greek philosophy. *Contra* O’Brien (1985, 68).

⁹ Num., fr. 5 (Des Places). See, however, Burnyeat (2005, 155-160), according to whom the eternity referred to in this fragment does not involve timelessness but is rather to be understood as *present* being.

¹⁰ See e.g. Porph., *Sent.* 44.3; Calc., *In Tim.* chs. 25 and 106; Iambli., fr. 64 (Dillon); Procl., *El. theol.* prop. 55.

¹¹ See Steel (2001).

foreshadowed in varied fashions and terminologies in late ancient writings.¹² Another important notion to express atemporality is that of instantaneity. A *locus classicus* on this subject is Plato's *Parmenides* (156c-157b), where the instant (*exaiphnês*) is described as that paradoxical nature (*physis atopos*), lurking between motion and rest, which is in no time at all (156d6-e1) and which allows for the sudden transition from a given state to its opposite. Since it is not in time but allows for changes taking place in time, the instant may be described, following Brisson, as a double threshold, horizontal between the past and the future, and vertical between time and eternity, forming a golden chain that connects time to the unchanging point of eternity.¹³ In the tradition, a classical example of a process that occurs instantaneously is the *moriendi momentum*, which is represented as the sudden passage from life to death, i.e., from being to its contrary state of non-being.¹⁴ Another example of instantaneous transition is the embodiment of the souls as it is described in the myth of Er, in which the souls, likened to shooting stars, are suddenly (*exapînês*) carried to their birth.¹⁵

However, ancient and late ancient sources bear witness to an additional dimension of atemporality, which I propose to call 'timeless simultaneity.' The latter closely aligns with the two meanings of atemporality explored thus far, and in certain instances, it even appears to overlap with them, without nevertheless being entirely identical to either. This is expressed by a cluster of terms, such as "together," "simultaneous(ly)," and "at once" (*hama*; *homou*; *athroôs*), which are often used to qualify the grasping of a thing (through perception or intellection) and characterize processes of generation or alteration in which all parts of a whole come to be or change simultaneously. Typical examples of this kind of change are the freezing of water, visual perception, intellectual apprehension, and illumination, whether portrayed as

¹² Procl., *El. theol.* prop. 55, 52.30-54.3 distinguishes eternal from temporal perpetuity (*aidiotês*), and describes the former as "a perpetual steadfastness," "having its existence concentrated in a simultaneous whole" (*homou pan*) and being "entire in itself," whereas the latter as a process that unfolds "in temporal extension" and composed of parts in succession (trans. by E.R. Dodds); on this passage see Phillips (1997, 177); Steel (2001, 6-7 and 11); Lang (2005, 164-165). A similar distinction is drawn in Procl., *In Tim.* I, 239.2-6 (Diehl): the temporal forever (*to aei to chronikon*), located "in extension," stretches over the "the entire continuity of time"; the eternal forever (*<to aei> to aiônion*), by contrast, is "wholly all together" (*athroôs pan*) and located in the "now" (*nun*) (trans. by D.T. Runia, and M. Share). Cf. also *In Tim.* I, 278.9-11 (Diehl). On Proclus' conception of time, eternity, and perpetuity, see O'Neill (1962), Plass (1977, 4-15), Kutash (2009), and Vargas (2021). In similar vein, Simplicius distinguishes eternity proper from everlastingness in the world of becoming (*In Phys.* 1155.13-20). As Simplicius notes, the world is everlasting, "but not *qua* eternal," in that its existence unfolds "throughout all time," while that which is eternal (*aiônion*) "possesses all its substance, its capacity and its activity at once" (trans. by I. Bodnár, M. Chase, and M. Share). See also Olymp., *In Meteor.* 146.15-23. For further elaboration on these distinctions, see Steel (2001), Siniossoglou (2005) and Wilberding (2016). These distinctions are likely prefigured by Plotinus (*Enn.* III 7, 2.28-29; 5.15-18; 6.21-36); for more details refer to Graeser (1987).

¹³ Brisson (1970, 394). For further discussion about instantaneity, see e.g. Beierwaltes (1967a).

¹⁴ See Taurus *apud* Gell., *Noct. Att.* VII, 13.1-12 = T 13 (Petrucci). See also Iambl., *De an.* 36 (Finamore/Dillon) and Simpl., *In Phys.* 983.25-984.2.

¹⁵ See Pl., *Resp.* X, 621b2-4, along with Procl., *In Remp.* II, 352.23-353.7, who explicitly connects this passage of the *Republic* to Plato's account of the instant in the *Parmenides*.

lightning, an eclipse, or as the emission of light from the sun or fire.¹⁶ Although these processes differ from each other, they are all taken to exhibit a common feature: the change involved therein does not affect some parts first and other parts later, but all parts at the same time. In this sense, these processes do not require a temporal progression for completion and can thus be said to occur atemporally, regardless from the fact that in nature they occur in time.

Having explored various facets of the ancient notion of atemporality and underscored the significance, alongside timeless eternity and instantaneity, of timeless simultaneity, I will now turn to examine the implications of this last kind of atemporality in ancient debates about cosmogenesis. Given its involvement in the generation or alteration of wholes, timeless simultaneity is exploited as a metaphysical tool within certain Platonists' accounts of the creation of the world. Most importantly, and perhaps unexpectedly, this kind of atemporality proves to be crucial not only for creationists elucidating a punctual beginning of the cosmos, but also for Platonists defending the world's beginningless and ungenerated nature.

1.3 Timeless Simultaneity in Cosmogony

Among the Platonists, it is particularly in Porphyry that timeless simultaneity, i.e., the kind of atemporality described as "at once," proves to be crucial for explaining the Demiurge's generation of the cosmos. This insight is gleaned from various sources reporting Porphyry's perspective, namely Proclus, Simplicius and Philoponus.¹⁷ As we will delve into more extensively below, these three accounts highlight different facets of Porphyry's cosmogonical views, but all converge in suggesting that the significance of this form of atemporality in cosmogony serves as a benchmark of Porphyry's doctrine. Admittedly, the view that the cosmos was created all at once can be traced back to authors predating Porphyry. Therefore, prior to our examination of Porphyry, let us briefly review some earlier views in which timeless simultaneity may appear to surface in cosmogonical discourse.

¹⁶ See Ar., *Eth Nic.* X 4, 1174a14-b14; *De sens.* VI, 447a1-11; *Phys.* VIII 3, 253b23-26; Alex. Aphr., *Mant.* 143.4-35; 144.34-145.7; Plot., *Enn.* I 6, 3.9-16; II 8, 1.39-43; IV 4, 1.19-20; V 5, 10.5-10; V 8, 6.7-12; *passim*; Porph., *Ad Gaur.* 11.3 (Kalbfleisch); Calc., *In Tim.* ch. 60; Procl., *In Parm.* 1237.24-28; 1237.36-41; *In Tim.* II, 102.7-16 (Diehl); Simpl., *In Phys.* 106.24-107.11; Ps.-Simpl., *In de an.* 131.16-132.7; Philop., *In Aet.* IV 4, 65.13-24; *In de an.* II 5, 297.2-10; Philop. *apud* Simpl., *In Phys.* 1173.3-8 (= fr. 129 Wilberg).

¹⁷ Procl. *In Tim.* I, 395.10-22 (Diehl); Simpl., *In Phys.* 106.24-107.11; Philop., *In Aet.* VI 8, 148.25-149.11, on which see below.

1.3.1 Foreshadowings?

The emphasis on the simultaneous creation of the cosmos can already be found, for instance, in Philo of Alexandria. In *De opificio mundi*, Philo connects the Bible's account of creation with the cosmogonical story expounded in Plato's *Timaeus*. In opposition to those who hold that the cosmos is uncreated and eternal, Philo explicitly asserts that the cosmos did indeed have a beginning (*Opif.* 7-12). On the other hand, when commenting on the opening line of *Genesis* (1.1), which states, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth," Philo emphasizes that the expression "in the beginning" should not be understood in temporal terms (*Opif.* 26-27). In this work, he repeatedly stresses that God's created everything simultaneously (*hama*).¹⁸ Philo's insistence on the notion of simultaneity, coupled with his assertion of a timeless beginning of the cosmos, may suggest that God's creation occurred as a punctual, albeit non-temporal, event.¹⁹ Although Philo places considerable emphasis on the notion of simultaneity (*hama*) in explaining the creation of the cosmos by God, his exploration of atemporality implies less philosophical elaboration compared to later Platonists like Porphyry and Proclus. By asserting that God created everything at once, Philo does not delve into unraveling the role of a specific form of atemporality in cosmogony. Rather, his main concern appears to be the reconciliation of the *Genesis* account of creation in six days with the assertion that God was not "in need of a length of time" for the cosmos' creation, "not only in giving commands but also in his thinking."²⁰

An intriguing precursor to Porphyry's doctrine is discernible in the works of Plotinus, who, to some extent, anticipates the significance of simultaneity in connection with cosmogony. Notably, while Plotinus extensively explores the notion of simultaneity (*athroos*, *athroōs*) in several places, he does not usually address it within a cosmological or cosmogonical framework, but primarily in relation to visual perception and intellectual apprehension.²¹ Both sight and intellection, Plotinus explains, occur simultaneously in that the eye and the Intellect, when they focus on an object of perception or contemplation, do not fixate progressively on each single part of which it is made, but grasp it as a whole and all at once. It is noteworthy that Plotinus only explicitly applies the feature of "at once" to the generation of the cosmos on a single occasion (*Enn.* II 9, 12.12-23). While presenting his own cosmogonical account, Plotinus refrains from asserting this view explicitly, yet it

¹⁸ *Opif.* 13; 28; 67.

¹⁹ See Runia (1986, 426-433); Runia (2001, 157). A similar view has been defended by Baltes (1976-1978, vol. 1, 32-38), who argues that Philo envisioned creation as a punctual, timeless event. Conversely, according to Sterling (1992, 40-41), Philo's account entails a *creatio aeterna* whereby creation did not actually take place, but signifies an ontological dependence of the cosmos on God. For further elaboration on Philo's views of eternity, time, and cosmogony, see Sorabji (1983, 203-209); Runia (1986) and Runia (2011); Sterling (1992, 33-41); Calabi (2008); De Luca (2022, 109-110; 123).

²⁰ *Opif.* 13 (trans. by D.T. Runia), on which see Runia (2001, 124-127).

²¹ See, already, Aristotle and Alexander of Aphrodisias, among others. Selected passages are provided above, fn. 16.

becomes apparent through his critical examination of a view held by the Gnostics, who maintained that God began creation by generating fire.²² In addressing the problematic implications of this view, Plotinus contends that the divine cause of the world had a conception not only of fire but also of the cosmos as a whole, and indeed, he had to conceive the whole first. Consequently, Plotinus notes, the divine cause did not create fire first and then the other elements, but rather fashioned the cosmos as a whole all at once (*athroôs Enn.* II 9, 12.16). In further support of the earlier assertion, Plotinus explains why cosmogenesis is not procedural, but occurs at once, namely because it is a kind of natural generation. Just as in natural, i.e., biological generation, where “there is an outline and sketch plan of the whole living thing impressing the form on the menstrual fluid,” in the creation of the world, too, matter is impressed with a sketch of the whole cosmos, containing all its elements simultaneously.²³ This stands in contrast to the Gnostics’ view of cosmogenesis as a sequential process, where fire is generated first, followed by the other elements. All in all, while Plotinus may be seen as laying the groundwork for Porphyry’s doctrine, he does not strongly thematize the aspect of “at once” atemporality when explaining how the cosmos came to be. It is only with Porphyry that this view is fully developed within the cosmological context, as we will see more closely in the next section.

1.3.2 Porphyry’s Voice

The significance of simultaneity in Porphyry’s cosmogony and its equation with atemporality becomes evident, sometimes more, sometimes less explicitly, through at least three sources. The first relevant passage in this respect is found in Proclus’ *Commentary on the Timaeus*. Comparing God’s creative act to that of an artisan who has no need of tools, Porphyry characterizes cosmogenesis as occurring both simultaneously and timelessly:

Fourth and next is the section of [Porphyry’s] arguments in which he shows that divine Intellect practises a mode of creation [which is performed] just by being and establishes [this] by a number of arguments. Even artisans [he says] need tools for their activity [only] because they do not have mastery over all [their] material. They show this themselves by using these tools to get [their] material ready for use by drilling, planing or turning it, all of which [operations] do not add form, but [merely] eliminate the unreadiness of the [material which is] to receive the form. The actual conformation [of the work], on the other hand, supervenes upon the material atemporally (*achronôs*) from the art once all inhibiting factors have been removed. And if there were no inhibiting factor in the case of [artisans] either, they [too] would add the form to the matter all at once (*athroôs*) and have absolutely no need of tools. And likewise the imagination too produces many effects in the body simply by its own action.²⁴

²² For an analysis of Plotinus’ attitude towards Gnostic cosmology, see Chiaradonna (2015).

²³ Plot., *Enn.* II 9, 12.17-23 (trans. by A.H. Armstrong).

²⁴ Procl., *In Tim.* I, 395.10-22 (Diehl) (trans. by D.T. Runia, and M. Share, slightly modified).

The broader framework of this text is a discussion of Porphyry's arguments against Atticus,²⁵ who advocates for a literal reading of the creation story in the *Timaeus* and argued in favor of a temporal beginning of the cosmos. In the quoted passage, Proclus documents one of Porphyry's key objections: divine Intellect engages in creation simply by being. His mode of creation differs from the one performed by artisans, who require tools in order to overcome all obstacles related to their material and to make it apt to receiving the form. Once all hindrances are removed, matter receives form atemporally (*achronôds*) and at once (*athroôds*). Porphyry illustrates God's role as analogous to that of an artisan who, devoid of the need for tools, can impress form upon matter in a timeless manner.²⁶

Another significant text providing insights on Porphyry's application of the "at once" feature to the genesis of the cosmos can be found in Philoponus' treatise entitled *On the Eternity of the World against Proclus*. The passage in question immediately follows the well-known discussion of the multiple meanings of "generated" (*genêton*), as expounded by Taurus and by Proclus.²⁷ The focal point of such distinctions is to highlight that being generated in time is only one among the various meanings that the term *genêton* can encompass. This clarification allows sempiternalist Platonists for the assertion that the cosmos has been generated²⁸ without necessarily implying that it had a temporal beginning. After dealing with Taurus and Proclus, Philoponus scrutinizes three supplementary meanings that are attributed to Porphyry.²⁹ The second meaning of "generated" is articulated as follows:

In addition, Porphyry says that things which derive their existence from a [process of] generation and coming to be, for example a house or a ship or a plant or an animal, are also said to be generated. For this reason we do not describe a flash of lightning or a snapping of the fingers or anything else that exists and ceases to exist in an instant (*exaiphnês*) as generated; as Aristotle also says, all such things come to be without [a process of] generation and switch to non-existence without [a process of] decay. It is clear that nobody would hold that the world is generated in the sense of having come to be through a [process of] generation, for God brought all things into existence (*eis ousiôsin*) at once (*hama*) with the thought (*noêmati*). This being so, we shall have no need of this sense [of 'generated'] in our investigation of Plato's meaning.³⁰

The meaning of generated (*genêton*) highlighted in this passage concerns things that come to be through a *process* of generation. Their coming to be unfolds over an extended period, involving duration, and progressing through various stages. This

²⁵ Procl., *In Tim.* I, 391.4-396.26 (Diehl) = Porph., fr. 51 (Sodano).

²⁶ On this passage, see Theiler (1933, 14); Baltes (1976-1978, vol. 1, 227-229); Chase (2011, 146) and Chase (2017, 343-344; Michalewski (2018, 127).

²⁷ See, respectively, Philop., *In Aet.* VI 8, 145.13-147.25 and 147.25-148.7. For a comprehensive overview of this excursus see at least Phillips (1997). More specifically on Taurus' classification, see Petrucci (2018, 32-45; 230-233). On Proclus' meanings of "generated," see also Procl., *In Tim.* I, 279.30-281.13 (Diehl) along with Baltes (1976-1978, vol. 2, 19-23).

²⁸ See Pl., *Tim.* 28b7 (*gegonen*) along with Baltes (1999 [1996]).

²⁹ Philop., *In Aet.* VI 8, 148.7-149.16; a brief overview of these meanings is offered by Sodano (1962, 103 and 109-110).

³⁰ Philop., *In Aet.* VI 8, 148.25-149.11 (trans. by M. Share, slightly modified) = Porph., fr. 36 (Sodano).

is the kind of generation that characterizes the coming to be of houses or ships, plants or animals. By contrast, examples like a flash of lightning and the snapping of the fingers are used to illustrate phenomena that come into being and cease to exist instantaneously (*exaiphnês* 149.3). In Porphyry's view, the generation of the cosmos falls into this latter type of generation. Notably, when he shifts from the physical processes described in the examples to the metaphysical account of cosmogenesis, he stresses that this specific kind of "instantaneity" amounts to simultaneity; indeed, as Porphyry clarifies, God "brought all things into existence at once with the thought" (*hama* [...] *noêmati* 149.9-10).

To gain a deeper insight into how Porphyry applies this distinction to cosmogony, let us examine Philoponus' examples more closely. The first set of examples is nicely illustrated by Simplicius, who mentions animals, plants and houses as substances whose coming to be has a starting-point from some part of the object, i.e., the navel or the hearth (animals), roots (plants), foundations (houses).³¹ He opposes these instances of coming into being with processes like freezing and illumination, wherein change does not start from a specific part, but concerns the whole and occurs all at once, devoid of any sequential progression. As you may recall, these are classical examples used to illustrate phenomena occurring at once. Simplicius' examples of freezing and illumination correspond, in Philoponus' passage, to the flash of lightning and the snapping of the fingers, the former of which also elsewhere serves as a standard illustration of an atemporal phenomenon.³²

In the light of these examples, it becomes evident that, according to Philoponus, Porphyry denies that the cosmos is generated in the sense that it is not brought into existence gradually, piece by piece, but it comes to be all at once through God's act of intellection. At this juncture, an intriguing question arises: is this simultaneous act atemporal? In this passage, instantaneousness and simultaneity (cf. *exaiphnês* and *hama*) do not imply, at least explicitly, atemporality. However, although Philoponus does not expressly mention atemporality, this hypothesis should not be dismissed. First, the contrast between what is brought into being at once and what requires a certain interval of time for generation suggests that God's act of intellection is atemporal, as it necessitates no process and implies no duration. Another argument supporting the idea that the Demiurge's creative activity, as referred to by Porphyry, entails atemporality is the inclusion of the example of lightning, often mentioned in other sources as an instance of a timeless process.³³ Indeed, the examples of lightning and snapping fingers may seem to capture atemporality only to a limited extent. Certainly, in a sense, they occur in time. Nevertheless, if read as metaphors introduced for illustrative purposes, these examples elucidate the nature of processes that do not

³¹ Simpl., *In Phys.* 106.24-27. Roughly the same set of examples features, in similar contexts, also in earlier sources. Both Atticus (fr. 4, *Des Places*) and Calcidius (*In Tim.* ch. 228) mention ships and houses, along with statues, in their respective discussion of the creation of the cosmos and of the World Soul. Further references to these examples in Alexander of Aphrodisias and Galen are provided by Baltes (1976-1978, vol. 1, 65 and fn. 181; 219).

³² See also Porph., *Ad Gaur.* 11.3, Iambl., *De an.* 36 (Finamore/Dillon), and Procl., *In Parm.* 1237.36-41, who mention the flash of lightning as an example to illustrate atemporal phenomena.

³³ Cf. previous note.

involve temporal duration. Thus, they prove effective in explaining phenomena of atemporal simultaneous generation, including the origin of the world through God's intellection.³⁴

While the passage we have just examined supports Porphyry's stance on simultaneous cosmogenesis without explicitly establishing the identity between simultaneity and atemporality, the connection between the two becomes unmistakably clear in Simplicius.³⁵ After having distinguished the substances which have a starting point in some part of the object (e.g. animals, plants, house) from changes which occur all at once (e.g. freezing, illumination), Simplicius argues that the fact that the latter happen at once (*athroôs*) does not imply that they are timeless (*achronos*), spelling out that this was the way in which Porphyry understood it.³⁶ Disagreeing with Porphyry, Simplicius asserts that "at once" does not entail timelessness, but only indicates that all the parts change simultaneously. Accordingly, he notes, freezing and illumination "do not happen timelessly, but they have their beginning in time, at this special part of time, but all the parts undergo the effect together."³⁷ In other words, these changes are not necessarily atemporal for Simplicius, but involve processes in which all parts change simultaneously. Although Simplicius does not extensively delve into a discussion of Porphyry's perspective in this passage, he provides clear evidence of Porphyry's equation of the simultaneous with the atemporal, thus confirming what we have already encountered in Proclus' testimony.

All in all, within Porphyry's sempiternalist perspective on cosmogenesis, timeless simultaneity is helpful to better elucidate how the cosmos, albeit devoid of a temporal beginning, is brought about by the Demiurge. In that it depends on a higher cause, the cosmos has a causal, non-temporal beginning; viewed from the standpoint of its generation by the Demiurge, in turn, the cosmos is generated all at once and can be seen as the product of an atemporal creation. Thus, it is eternal and ungenerated on the one hand, yet the outcome of a timeless creation on the other. Accordingly, the perspective of a simultaneous, timeless creation is made compatible with sempiternalism, and the reference to this specific aspect of atemporality proves to be fruitful to better grasp the derivation of the world from a higher cause.

1.3.3 Echoes

Porphyry's perspective on atemporality within cosmogenesis, as it has been outlined so far, has notable echoes in the other authors. In what follows, I will consider the

³⁴ As noted persuasively by Chase (2011, 115), Porphyry "seems to draw an analogy between these processes of instantaneous generation or change and God's creation of the universe. As in the case of these examples, the world did not have to undergo a process of generation in order to come being, but God brought it into substantification (*ousiôsis*) simultaneously with his thought (*hama noêmati*)."

³⁵ See Simpl., *In Phys.* 106.24-107.11 = Porph., fr. 131 (Smith).

³⁶ Simpl., *In Phys.* 106.33-107.2.

³⁷ Simpl., *In Phys.* 107.2-5 (trans. by P. Huby, and C.C.W. Taylor).

reappearance and reappraisal of Porphyry's view in three selected, telling cases, namely those of Calcidius, Proclus, and Philoponus. Although Porphyry is not explicitly mentioned by any of these authors, his influence is detectable, to varying degrees, in all of them. Interestingly, while the first two share Porphyry's sempiternalist approach, Philoponus integrates the notion of a timeless, simultaneous beginning within a distinctively creationist framework.

A subtle echo of Porphyry's "at once" feature may be perceived in Calcidius, who is the author of an exceptionally influential translation and commentary on Plato's *Timaeus*. Throughout his commentary, Calcidius advocates for a metaphorical interpretation of cosmogenesis, leaving little doubt about his sempiternalist stance in understanding the *Timaeus*' creation story. He explicitly states that the world's origin "is causative (*origo causativa*), not temporal (*non temporaria*)," pinpointing the generation of the world to its ontological dependence on a higher cause, namely God.³⁸ In this context, although devoid of a temporal starting point, the cosmos can be said to be generated due to its reliance on a higher cause. Yet, this portrayal becomes more intricate when considering certain remarks that seemingly conflict with Calcidius' customary approach, which introduce an element of tension and prompt questions about the commentator's overall exegetical consistency. In a few cases, for instance, both in the translation and in the commentary, Calcidius uses a vocabulary strongly connotated by temporalism.³⁹

Another statement contributing to this complexity is Calcidius' assertion that the world was completed "at one and the same moment" (*uno eodemque momento*).⁴⁰ Interpreting this remark within the framework of Calcidius' usual perspective, i.e., his commitment to sempiternalism, makes it unlikely that he is advocating for a temporal beginning of the world based on a literal reading of the *Timaeus*. Now, the "at one and the same moment" Calcidius mentions does not necessarily imply a temporal aspect; furthermore, it is distinguished in the previous lines from the eternity of the intelligible paradigm and chiefly characterizes the generation of the whole cosmos. Hence, "at one and the same moment" is most likely to imply timeless simultaneity. This resonates with Porphyry's perspective⁴¹ – a hypothesis which gains support when considering the very probable influence that Porphyry's exerted

³⁸ Calc., *In Tim.* ch. 23, 74.17-19 (Waszink) (trans. by J. Magee). Calcidius draws a distinction between the birth of the works of nature, which occurs in time, from the works by God, which is causal and atemporal.

³⁹ A reference to the temporal generation of the cosmos can be identified in Calcidius' translation of Pl., *Tim.* 28b6-8. Another related tension surfaces within the commentary, between chs. 23 and 25. For further elaboration on this matter, see Galonnier (2009), Hoenig (2014), and Reydams-Schils (2020, 50-51).

⁴⁰ Calc., *In Tim.* ch. 105, 154.18 (Waszink) (trans. by J. Magee).

⁴¹ According to a different interpretation put forward by Gersh (1986, vol. 2, 472), the expression *uno eodemque momento* indicates "that the creative process took place in the first instant of time which was itself not temporally extended." An alternative reading has been defended by Reydams-Schils (2010, 503) and Reydams-Schils (2020, 56 and fn. 15), who equates *uno eodemque momento* with the "divine eternal present."

on Calcidius.⁴² If Calcidius, in the wake of Porphyry, understands *uno eodemque momento* in terms of a timeless simultaneity, then his remark is not at odds, but fully consistent with his broader account of a non-temporal origin of the world.

Embedded within a sempiternalist framework, Porphyry's distinctive "at once" perspective finds notable resonance in Proclus. As widely acknowledged, for Proclus the generation of the world must be understood in non-temporal terms, as an ontological dependance and as a non-durational process of derivation from a higher cause.⁴³ Since the Demiurge "belongs to the beings that always exist," Proclus notes, asserting that he creates "at one point in time" is absurd. Instead, it must be concluded that "he is always creating;" to suggest otherwise would imply idleness on the part of the Demiurge, which is impossible.⁴⁴ With that being said, let us now examine how Proclus incorporates the "at once" feature within this sempiternalist framework. Following in the footsteps of Porphyry,⁴⁵ he characterizes the Demiurge's 'creation' as an instantaneous event, drawing a parallel with the Sun's instantaneous emanation of light:

God brings forth all things all at once (*athroôs*) and throughout eternity (*diaiôniôs*). For it is through his very being and through his eternal thinking of wholes (*kata tēn aiônion tōn holōn noêsin*) that he engenders all the things that result from him – the totality of things both hypercosmic and encosmic: intellects, souls, natures, bodies and matter itself. If you ask me, demiurgic creation exhibits this 'all at once' (*athroon*) aspect more than the Sun's illumination does. In the latter case, the entire light proceeds simultaneously (*hama*) from the Sun. But even though the Sun imitates the Father through visible creation, this is clearly inferior to the Father's eternal (*diaiôniou*) and invisible production. Therefore, as we said, though all things have come about from the act of creation all together (*homou*) and eternally (*aiôniôs*), nonetheless the order of effects is still preserved; for all things proceed all together (*athroôs*) and each with its own order since there was present in that which produced it an eternal intelligence and an order prior to the things that have been ordered. Hence, even if all things result at once (*homou*) from one thing, nonetheless some of them are of primary worthwhile others have a lesser value.⁴⁶

Proclus does not use the term 'atemporal' in this passage, but resorts to the image of the simultaneous emanation of light from the Sun, thereby effectively conveying

⁴² The extent of Porphyry's influence on Calcidius is matter of debate. For an exploration of Porphyrian echoes in Calcidius' treatment of time, eternity, and the origins of the world, see Waszink (1964, 37-82); Baltes (1976-1978, vol. 1, 177-184). Skeptical about Porphyry's impact on Calcidius is Dillon (1996 [1977], 403-4), who emphasizes instead Calcidius' deep-rooted affiliation within Middle Platonism. Also Reydamas-Schils (2020, 172-90) expresses reservations about considering Porphyry a primary source for Calcidius and urges caution regarding an overestimation of such an impact. This position is partially revised in Reydamas-Schils (forthcoming), section II, where the author is more inclined to acknowledge Calcidius' dependence on Porphyry in the light of the edition of the treatise *On Principles and Matter* (PM), which Arzhanov (2021) attributes to Porphyry. It cannot be ruled out that in this connection Philo of Alexandria – mentioned by Calcidius in *In Tim.* ch. 278 – may have played a role too.

⁴³ See Procl., *In Tim.* I, 276.30-282.22; 285.7-286.19; 381.26-383.22 (Diehl).

⁴⁴ Procl., *In Tim.* I, 288.12-27 (Diehl) (trans. by D.T. Runia, and M. Share). More generally, on the 'Why not sooner?' argument and on the 'Idleness argument' see Sorabji (1983, 232-238; 249-252).

⁴⁵ The Porphyrian inspiration of Procl., *In Tim.* II, 102.7 ff. has been acknowledged by Theiler (1933, 15).

⁴⁶ Procl., *In Tim.* II, 102.7-22 (Diehl) (trans. by D. Baltzly, slightly modified).

the atemporal nature of the demiurgic creation process.⁴⁷ This allows Proclus to claim that the Demiurge creates the cosmos “all at once” (*athroôs*) and “throughout eternity” (*diaiônîôs*) while dismissing the hypothesis of a temporal cosmogenesis, both in terms of a specific point in time and in processual, durational terms. The cosmos can thus be said, from a viewpoint, ungenerated, eternal, and always in a process of coming into being; at the same time, from another perspective, it can be conceived of as a whole that derives from an instantaneous act of intellection by the Demiurge, a process that clearly resides outside the realm of time.⁴⁸

In later times, a somewhat paradoxical revival of Porphyry’s perspective is evident in the writings of Philoponus. Remarkably, despite Philoponus outright rejecting the sempiternalist paradigm, he incorporates Porphyry’s instantaneous act of demiurgic creation into a creationist framework.⁴⁹ In this sense, he draws upon the Porphyrian timeless simultaneity to challenge the prevailing Neoplatonic account of an eternal act of creation. For instance, in one of his refutations of Proclus’ arguments, he contends that the Demiurge, when producing the cosmos, “brings everything into existence just by willing it and has no need of time,”⁵⁰ and elucidates this timeless creation by using standard examples, such as the emanation of light, visual perception, and noetic intellection.⁵¹ The Porphyrian shaping of Philoponus’ perspective is also evident in some quotations reported by Simplicius, where God is portrayed as creating the heavens and the world not gradually, but immediately and timelessly (*amesôs*; *achronôs*), solely through his will.⁵² As a result, while in Porphyry, Proclus (and arguably in Plotinus and Calcidius as well), timeless simultaneity coexists with a commitment to sempiternalism, Philoponus rejects the latter by advocating for a timeless, punctual act of creation by God.⁵³ Strikingly, he describes this act using terminology and examples akin to those used by the thinkers he opposes.

⁴⁷ That for Proclus “simultaneous” (*athroos*) and “atemporal” (*achronos*) may go hand in hand can also be gleaned from other passages, see e.g. Procl., *In Tim.* III, 21.32-22.13 (Diehl).

⁴⁸ Cf. also Procl., *In Tim.* I, 281.14-282.22; III, 1.10-12; III, 322.1-11 (Diehl).

⁴⁹ See Chase (2011, 147), who speaks of a “wonderful case of historical irony.”

⁵⁰ Philop., *In Aet.* IV 4, 64.22-26 (trans. by M. Share); cf. also *In Aet.* I 3, 6.2-12; I 6, 18.11-12.

⁵¹ Philop., *In Aet.* IV 4, 65.13-24. See also Philop., *In de an.* II 5, 297.2-10; Philop. *apud* Simpl., *In Phys.* 1173.3-8 (= Philop., fr. 129 Wilberg). Cf. also above, fn. 16.

⁵² Philop. *apud* Simpl., *In Phys.* 1141.24-30; 1173.11-13 (= Philop., fr. 115 and fr. 129 Wilberg). Porphyry’s impact on Philoponus is also discernible in Philop., *In Aet.* IV 4, 66.25-27, where it is said that God creates solely through his will and without the need for any instrument. Compare with Porph. *apud* Procl. *In Tim.* I, 395.10-22 (Diehl), discussed above.

⁵³ Incidentally, this might explain why Simplicius, a resolute opponent of Philoponus, diverges from Porphyry’s equation of the simultaneous with the timeless (cf. Simpl., *In Phys.* 106.33-107.5, on which see above). For a discussion of the polemical debate between Philoponus and Simplicius on the eternity of the cosmos, see Wieland (1960) and Chase (2011).

1.4 Conclusion

In sum, the notion of atemporality manifests in a spectrum of meanings throughout antiquity and Late Antiquity. Notably, timeless simultaneity, sharing similarities with both timeless eternity and instantaneity, prominently figures in the cosmogonical narratives of various ancient authors rooted in the Platonic tradition. The emphasis on this kind of atemporality within cosmogony surfaces, though not yet fully developed, in Philo of Alexandria and, among Platonists committed unequivocally to a sempiternalist framework, in Plotinus. However, a comprehensive articulation of timeless simultaneity in explaining the Demiurge's creation is found in Porphyry, whose influence is perceptible in Calcidius and, more distinctly, in Proclus. Later, a rather strong echo of Porphyry's perspective is discernible in Philoponus, who, dismissing Proclus' arguments for the eternity of the world, draws upon Porphyry to argue in favor of a timeless beginning for the cosmos.

Remarkably, while in Philoponus timeless simultaneity aligns with creationism, in Plotinus, Calcidius, Porphyry and Proclus, this kind of atemporality operates within a sempiternalist framework. In their accounts, the Demiurge's simultaneous act of creation not only is fully compatible with the assumption of an eternal creation, both being atemporal, but also offers significant theoretical advantages in explaining the actual occurrence of cosmogenesis. As a matter of fact, this kind of atemporality allows these Platonists to effectively explain how the sempiternal cosmos was generated by a higher cause within a derivational causal model. Indeed, remaining firmly anchored within sempiternalism, these thinkers leverage timeless simultaneity to capture the nature of the Demiurge's creative activity as a simultaneous act of intellection of the world, not *qua* sensible, but *qua* whole. In this way, their cosmos can be said to be both generated all at once and always in a process of coming into being.

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