

Metaphysics and myth in Plotinus' account of time

Ancient accounts of time are sometimes divided into cosmological and psychological theories. Plotinus develops a theory that accounts for the phenomenon of time in terms of the soul. I shall argue, however, that his theory cuts across the cosmological/psychological dichotomy. He treats the soul primarily as a cosmological principle which exercises its ordering function by means of a cognitive process, that is to say, discursive thinking. In addition to philosophical arguments, Plotinus constructs a mythical narrative about the birth of time from eternity that, while alluding to Gnostic myths of fall, mainly relies on the tradition of Greek cosmogony (III.7.11, 6–43).

Time is characterised by extendedness, the distinction between 'earlier' and 'later', and a perpetual striving towards the future. Plotinus' myth ascribes the same structural features to the 'vertical' motion leading to the generation of time. This suggests that time is the result of the mapping of a higher, atemporal dynamic onto a lower, horizontal level of reality. The generation of time is an aspect of the constitution of Soul (more precisely, the world-soul). Plotinus regularly describes the unfolding of reality from the One (the 'emanation') in terms of motion and generation. The Plotinian notion of atemporal, non-physical processes paves the way to a systematic integration of mythical and religious traditions into philosophy that we witness in later Platonism.