

## **Ancient and classical Embryonic Thoughts on the Concept of Time**

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The earliest contributions to the understanding of the philosophy and concept of time were made thousands years ago in ancient cultures and civilisations. Millennia before the advent of any historical documentation on Earth, Palaeolithic man tried to express the passing of time in his cave paintings. However, the oldest recorded views on the nature of time available to modern scholars seems to date back to ancient Egypt and Egyptian philosophers and thinkers. Among these, Ptah Hotep (c. 2650–2600 BCE), a city administrator and vizier of ancient Egypt, wrote instructional and religious texts referring to the irreversibility of the flow of time. “Do not lessen the time of following desire,” says the vizier Ptah Hotep to his own son and successor, “for the wasting of time is an abomination to the spirit.” (Lawrence S. Cunningham, John J. Reich, Lois Fichner-Rathus: 2015, p.26). Roughly around the same period in history, i.e. the late 2nd millennium BC, Indian as well as Hindu philosophers pondered the view of time, and described accurately the ancient Hindu cosmology, in which the universe revolves eternally around and around in an process of recurring cycles of rise and fall, and of creation, annihilation and re-creation. (Mark W. Muesse: 2011, p.16). In fact, the majority of antique civilisations understood and believed that TIME was cyclical in its progress since the natural world surrounding them displays time repeatability; in plain words, the time of the rising and the falling tides of rivers and oceans, the eternal successions of the seasons and of the cycles of the heavens.

Nevertheless, the greatest efforts and the finest achievement in the conceptualisation and appreciation of the nature of time started during the classical antiquity with the founding fathers of Hellenic philosophy. Why?

### The Issues of Being and Becoming

To answer the above-mentioned question, Aristotle postulates in a well-known passage, “That it was the Greeks’ “wonders” about their world and themselves that gave birth to science and philosophy.” (S. Morris Engel, Angelika Soldan, Kevin Durand: 2008, p.16). Among those “wonders,” ancient Greece thinkers focused on the examination of this life and this world. Who are we? Where do we come from? Does the universe have a purpose? What exists? “What is it that is constantly changing?” Most importantly, what is it that which is called change or becoming, since change itself becomes a source of puzzlement and perplexity? (Note: The notion of change is a fundamental assumption to modern-day treatment of temporal experience. (Jon E. Roeckelein: 2000, p.21).

Heraclitus (535-475 BCE) and Parmenides (515-445 BCE) were among the first Pre-Socratic thinkers and philosophers in Ancient Greece who attempted to ask the most fundamental question on the reality of change and becoming. Although they wrote essays on the nature and philosophy of time, neither Parmenides, nor Heraclitus advanced any theory about this key concept. Rather, they struggled with an elementary philosophical issue: is our representation of the reality through the common senses a distorted copy of the world and therefore imperfect and illusory, or accurate and accordingly identical and unchanging? Their respective hypothetical views were fundamental and revolutionary. At the first sight Heraclitus and Parmenides support

opposed principles, while the former sustains change, becoming and cyclic recurrence of things, the latter denies their existence.

The arguments advanced by both Heraclitus and Parmenides could not be left unnoticed; rather, their significance resides in the challenging representation of the different features of the temporal system of the world. More importantly, what makes their assertions relevant for later debates on the concept of time is their ideas that different aspects of man's immediate apprehension of time is the basis for all philosophical misconceptions and metaphysical failures. (Adrian Bardon, Heather Dyke: 2016, p.9).

In fact, Parmenides was the first thinker to tackle the concept of change, i.e. the human experience of time. For him, there is no such thing as a SPACE for the MOTION in which FLUX can occur. He utterly denies any change in reality. As Ronald C. Hoy is reported to have said, "Parmenides' rejection of time is complete" (ibid. p.10). He thought that, guided by one's own reason and not deceived by the world of senses and opinions, one must see change as an illusion. He argued, "The higher reality does not come into being and does not pass out of being," he goes on, "It is uncreated and indestructible; for it is complete, immovable, and without end. Nor was it ever, nor will it be; for now it is, all at once, a continuous one" (Charles M. Sherover: 1975. p.319).

It [what is] never was nor will it be, since it is now, all together, one, continuous. For what birth will you seek for it? How and whence did it grow? I shall not allow you to say nor to think from not being: for it is not to be said nor thought that it is not; and what need would have driven it later rather than earlier,

beginning from the nothing to grow? Thus it must be completely or not at all . . . And the decision about these things lies in this: it is or it is not. But it has in fact been decided, as is necessary, to leave the one way unthought and nameless (for it is no true way), but that the other is and is genuine. And how could what is be in the future? How could it come to be? For if it came into being, it is not: nor is it if it is ever going to be in the future. Thus coming to be is extinguished and perishing unheard of.

(Adrian Bardon, Heather Dyke: 2016, p.20).

Parmenides' opponent, Heraclitus, on the contrary, adopts a diametrically opposite stand point, and argues that the interplay of opposites in life and in the world creates equilibrium, and constitutes the foundation upon which lies the unity of the universe. Day becomes night and hot converts to cold, alive changes to dead, waking turns into sleeping, young grows into old, etc "All thing are in flux," he says, "nothing abides." (ibid, p.321) Moreover, and since everything is in a continuous move; therefore, the ideas of change and becoming is not an accidental aspect of the reality of the world. Rather, its actual essence constitutes the sense of life itself. Accordingly, life precedes death and each death is followed by a new birth and so on throughout the years. Indeed, it is an eternal and constant process revolving around and around through the creation of life followed by its annihilation and then its reincarnation into another form of life from the ashes. According to Heraclitus, there would be no world without change, and that the one ultimate constancy is change itself. For him, there is no such thing as permanence. He considers the latter notion as a mere illusion of man's sensory perception. In fact, the philosopher does not contest the importance of the world of

senses, and insists: "The things of which there is sight, hearing, experience, I prefer".<sup>1</sup> Hence, one may say that unlike Parmenides, the philosopher relies neither on reason, nor on knowledge, save on the accumulation of his wisdom and the world of his memory, his senses and his opinions, in order to state that "far from being unreal, change is the most real thing there is." (S. Morris Engel, Angelika Soldan, Kevin Durand: 2008, p.32). "No man ever steps in the same river twice, for fresh waters are ever flowing in upon you." (Adrian Bardon, Heather Dyke: 2016, p.15). Just that which is seen is that appears the same to the senses. However, the unseen remain hidden, but intrinsically different. This is the reason why the river is no longer the same, and so is the man. This is the reason why that each moment is unique and unmatched. "It has never been before and will never be again"

Heraclitus' philosophy is the result of taking a particular view of time very seriously. Beginning with the common belief that reality is primarily constituted by what exists in the present, he takes the present to include what is presented in perceptual experience. When he examines what is presented he finds primarily flux, ceaseless change. He finds not only the opposites involved in change, but also the co-presence of these opposites. It does not bother him that such co-presence might, in cases of succession; violate the logic of temporal order. Instead, he is transfixed by the logos he sees. It does not bother him that his articulation of this logo seems to attack the endurance and identity of things common mortals take to persist through time.

(Adrian Bardon, Heather Dyke: 2016, p.16).

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<sup>1</sup> cited by Graham, Daniel W., "Heraclitus", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2015 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = [<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2015/entries/heraclitus/>](https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2015/entries/heraclitus/).

## Plato: Reconciling Being and Becoming

Plato's theory of time is basically affected by cosmological contemplations (considerations) He categorises time with process, and specially, with the periodic motion of the celestial bodies and their revolution in the outer space, "as that in which things come to be. In fact, Plato attempts to resolve the paradoxes of change and identity, of flux and permanence that were ignited by his Pre-Socratic predecessors, both Parmenides and Heraclitus. His answer equally combines and transcends theirs. Subsequently, Plato's famous remark in which he treats time symbolically as the moving image of eternity: (Philip Turetzky: 1998, p.14) "When he [the demiurge] ordered the heavens, he made, of eternity that abides in unity, an everlasting likeness moving according to numbers, that to which we have given the name 'time'." (Timaeus 37d) (Luc Brisson, F. Walter Meyerstein: 1995, page 39).

In his philosophy of forms and ideas, Plato uses his best endeavour (The Allegory of the Cave) to unify Being (ousia) and Becoming (genesis); and by ways of consequences, to reconcile between two mutually exclusive extremes. In fact, Plato attempts to resolve the paradoxes of change and identity, of flux and permanence that were ignited by the Pre-Socratic predecessors, Parmenides and Heraclitus. His answer equally combines and transcends their respective theories. More importantly, the philosopher supports an ontological dualism the foundation of which relies on two patterns of realities, and therefore two contradictory worlds. By the first, he means the realm of Being. "Being refers to the 'metaphysical' in the strict transcendent sense, to that which always is but never comes to be." (Mark Anderson: 2014, p.48). It is the timeless, undividable and unchanging world of the ideas (the forms—eidos), that is

apprehended by the intellect, and not perceived by the senses. The latter is a pure reason, which transcends experience; and thus, is supernatural par excellence. He calls it the intelligible world. It is the invisible world and it is stuck in unity and harmony. Whereas by the second, he points toward the sphere of Becoming. The world of becoming is that in which everything “comes to be and passes away, but never really is” (ibid). It is an ephemeral, multiple and eternally changing world of appearances (the particulars—eidoron), that is grasped by man’s sensory perception and opinion, save by his understanding. The abovementioned world is practically based on sensory experience, and hence, it is quintessentially natural. Plato names it the sensible world. It is the visible world, and it is diverse and continuously changing.

As I see it, then, we must begin by making the following distinction: What is that which always is and has no becoming, and what is that which becomes<sup>7 28</sup> but never is? The former is grasped by understanding, which involves a reasoned account. It is unchanging. The latter is grasped by opinion, which involves unreasoning sense perception. It comes to be and passes away, but never really is. Now everything that comes to be<sup>8</sup> must of necessity come to be by the agency of some cause, for it is impossible for anything to come to be without a cause. So whenever the craftsman<sup>9</sup> looks at what is always changeless and, using a thing of that kind as his model, reproduces its form and character, then, of necessity, all that he so completes is beautiful. But were he to look at a thing that has come to be and use as his model something that has been begotten, his work will lack beauty.

(John M. Cooper & D. S. Hutchinson: 1997, p.1234-5)

On his account of the formation of the world, Plato states that the Demiurge, as a master artisan, inserted order into the primeval chaos in an attempt to give the shape of

the original eternal forms to the shapeless sensible material. In view of that, it is neither impossible nor unlikely that Plato might have imagined the Eternal (the invisible world) in the form of an ideal cosmic womb in which the changing was first conceived as its extension into the visible world, and then procreated as its manifestation in time and space. He generated, thus, an imitation of the immutable ideal forms and established the actual world of appearances, which the philosopher identifies as the cosmos. Since the newly born visible world came into being, it belongs therefore to the realm of becoming, and subsequently cannot be eternal as the ideal forms are.

Now when the Father who had begotten the universe observed it set in motion and alive, a thing that had come to be as a shrine for the everlasting gods, he was well pleased, and in his delight he thought of making it more like its model still. So, as the model was itself an everlasting Living Thing, he set himself to bringing this universe to completion in such a way that it, too, would have that character to the extent that was possible. Now it was the Living Thing's nature to be eternal, but it isn't possible to bestow eternity fully upon anything that is begotten. And so he began to think of making a moving image of eternity: at the same time as he brought order to the universe, he would make an eternal image, moving according to number, of eternity remaining in unity. This number, of course, is what we now call "time." (Ibid p.1241)

More significantly, and as far as time is concerned, what is the relation of time to Plato's cosmological creation account?

On Plato's own report, no sooner, the Demiurge had fashioned the universe, then



time emanated into the realm of becoming. Correspondingly, he declares: “time” came to be together with the universe so that just as they were begotten together.” In his book, *Time, Eternity, and the Trinity: A Trinitarian Analogical Understanding of Time and Eternity*, Eunsoo Kim says that “Plato insisted that time was co-created with the world of appearance.” (Note 23, N.P.). Following the same line, as a co-creation, time is of essence to the world of appearance. One may asserts that Plato’s theory of this concept is fundamentally affected by cosmological considerations. He categorises the above-mentioned notion with process, and specially, with the periodic motion of the celestial bodies and their revolution in the universe.

“[The Demiurge] brought into being the Sun, the Moon, and five other stars, for the begetting of time. These are called “wanderers” [planêta], and they stand guard over the numbers of time. ... And so people are all but ignorant of the fact that time really is the wanderings of these bodies...” For Plato, Time is, indeed, a kind of celestial clockwork that does not measure in numbers the unmeasurable motion of the universe, but it constitutes the very actual revolution of the heavenly bodies, that is to say, the motion itself. This movement and, by ways of consequences, Time have started once together with the beginning of the visible world, and would probably end up at the spell of its culmination. Simply because Time belongs to the realm of becoming. It is, indeed, a created being, and must by necessary “that which becomes but never is” is the moving image of eternity. Plato’s understanding relies on the point that while the invisible world, i.e. Eternity is stuck in its platitude and remains immutable in its unity; Time, (chromos) is continually in motion “according to numbers” in the visible world. It is, indeed, the moving image of eternity”

## Plato's Receptacle

“To be the Receptacle, that is, to nurse in itself all becoming” (Reshotko, 127)

It is said that, “Aristotle himself... remarks that there is only one person who had in fact tried to give an account of space before him, namely Plato with his notion of the receptacle in the *Timaeus*.” (Sattler, Barbara: 2012, 159-195). Indeed, in a genuine creative endeavour to describe the creation of the universe, Plato, firstly, proposes the real Forms, that constitute the intelligible, and secondly the tangible Phenomena, which set up the sensible. Subsequently, the Athenian philosopher advances the concepts of being and becoming on the one hand. On the other, he introduces an important revolution and a fundamental idea, “the receptacle of all becoming” (John M. Cooper: 1997, p.1251), so that to establish the connection between the eternal Forms (the paradigm) and the tangible copies (interpreted by Plato as the observable particulars). He chooses the Greek word (*chōra*) to name this fundamental concept, by which he means the place, or space. (52b) (Paul S. Fiddes: 2013, p.224). In fact, Plato defines the receptacle as “space.” which is “neither being nor non-being but an interval between in which the "forms" were originally held. (ibid) It shares the features of both of the above-cited realms, but as Plato proposes, it is neither the former, nor the latter. Through which everything passes, as a funnel, but into which nothing is maintained. Following the same line of thought, the French philosopher Jacques Derrida notices that the “Chora cannot receive for itself thus it cannot receive, it only lets itself borrow the properties (of that) which it receives” (Edward Casey: 1998, p. 353) Plato recognises, however, that this concept is confusing and difficult to apprehend. “It is, of course, ambiguous.” As Catherine Osborne is reported to have said. She carries on,

“[It occupies] the dividing-line between being and becoming, or indeed between what is and what is not.” (Christopher Gill, Mary Margaret McCabe: 2004, p.200). This is the reason why, the philosopher attempts to make it clear by drawing analogies. In this respect, the Receptacle is metaphorically compared to a mother, that in which all becoming takes place. “She is the “receiving principle” and may therefore be likened to the mother of the cosmos, whereas the Demiurge is the father (50d).” Thus, it will be sufficient to say that Plato’s three constituents: the sensible, the intelligible and the receptacle are respectively equated with “the father, that which is the model for that which becomes”, “the offspring, that which becomes” and “the mother, that in which all becoming takes place”.

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