

# Bryn Mawr Classical Review

Bryn Mawr Classical Review 2012.01.52

---

**Michael F. Wagner, *The Enigmatic Reality of Time: Aristotle, Plotinus, and Today. Ancient Mediterranean and medieval texts and contexts. Studies in Platonism, Neoplatonism, and the Platonic Tradition v. 7.* Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2008. Pp. viii, 384. ISBN 9789004170254. \$182.00.**

---

Reviewed by José Baracat, Jr., Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul  
([baracatjr@hotmail.com](mailto:baracatjr@hotmail.com))

Preview: [Preview](#)

[I wish to apologize to the author and to BMCR editors and readers for the tardiness of this review.]

As its title announces, Wagner's book comprises three large parts: "Dimensions of Time's Enigma", "Aristotle's Real Account of Time", and "Plotinus' Vitalistic Platonism and the Real Origins of Time". The avalanche of themes discussed can in outline be described as follows.

In the first part, roughly the "today" of time's enigma, Wagner considers the possibility of time's reality, exploring the meanings of two primary senses in which time may be said to be unreal, and the consequences they may bring to the investigation of time's reality. The first is that the concept "time" would not actually denote anything; the second, that what the term "time" denotes would not be in fact time. Through the three chapters of this part, Wagner discusses (not only, but mainly) contemporary approaches to time, especially approaches based on internalization of time and approaches based on the Theory of Relativity; also discussed is McTaggart's contribution to the philosophy of time, which has been rendered fallaciously until now as a denial of time's reality, according to Wagner (6).

Wagner boldly avers his conception of time right from the outset: there are two epigraphs to the book, one by Saint Augustine and the other by Wagner himself, in which he states: "time is the feature of existence in virtue of which, as its contents and constituents proceed and change, what was *no longer is* and what will be *is not yet*" (v). With such conception of time, one can foresee that Wagner will refute internalization approaches (since they "either in fact constitute denials of time's reality or else they simply do not address the question", 4), and also "static conceptions" of time (e.g. Relativity's space-time, which, being "static conceptions of time in fact are not conceptions of time's real nature but rather constitute denials of its reality", 5).

It is impossible to fairly reproduce Wagner's long discussions, but I am afraid that other readers will feel the same as I did: the elements of Wagner's conception of time, by which he measures, analyses, and refutes other conceptions, are not philosophically clear and defined:

what is “a feature of existence”? Whose existence? Is there a difference between “contents” and “constituents”? Even the distinction between “static” and “dynamic” conceptions of time requires more elaboration than that given in the book (60-2): the classification of Einstein’s conception of time (or “contemporary scientific Eleaticism”) as a “static” one, suggesting that it cannot account for the change implied by time, is a *petitio principii*, for its fundamental argument is the vague and instinctive assertion that time’s nature is “dynamic”, and that discussing the question otherwise is not addressing the question or failing to see time’s “real” nature (cf. 62-3).

The second part is a study of Aristotle’s investigation of time in *Physics* IV and VI. To Wagner, “contemporary scholarship has treated Aristotle’s investigation superficially and piecemeal”, failing to see that, for him, “time is real in some intermediate sort of way” (p. 8), being neither entirely real nor entirely unreal. As with part one, this second part comprises dozens of interrelated investigations.

Part three focuses on Plotinus, to which Wagner also claims to take “a novel approach”, “positing that Plotinus’ account of time is most properly and accurately understood by locating it firmly in the Classical tradition of Greek naturalism, wherein time is real if and only if the natural universe is in reality a (the) temporal universe. This aspect of Plotinus’ account is typically overlooked owing...to an inadequate understanding of and attention to his philosophical methodology” (12).

I cannot understand why Wagner overlooks many complexities of Plotinus’ treatise “On Eternity and Time” (III.7 [45]). One single example: the striking first person plural *eirgasmetha*, in III.7.11.20 (“*we have constructed* time as an image of eternity”), is not even mentioned by Wagner, who seems to take for granted that the World Soul is responsible for the production of time.

Having so crudely summarized the book’s content, I must state my admiration for Wagner before presenting features of this book which I find difficult to assess and sometimes even unacceptable.

The bibliography does not contain a single work not written in English. There are important studies of Aristotle and Plotinus written in other languages. Since they are neglected by Wagner, the reader may doubt whether he can so openly claim to be presenting innovative interpretations, or the “real” account of a philosopher.[1](#)

As a matter of fact, the bibliography is decorative: few titles are cited in the book. The chapters on Aristotle and on Plotinus does not refer to any Aristotelian or Plotinian scholar, despite important authors (such as Michael Inwood and Andrew Smith) being included in the bibliography.

The absence of discussion of secondary literature raises suspicion that the book is aimed at non-specialists. And there are other signs. See for example the characterization of philosophers (“an extraordinary classical Greek thinker named Parmenides”, 8; see 276) and loose assertions like this: “Like all classical Greek philosophers, Aristotle uses ‘nature’ [*physis*] in a general way to designate our cosmos (universe) as a whole” (151), which, if not wholly false, is nonetheless far from being wholly true, for in Plato and Aristotle *physis* denotes more often the intrinsic form or constitution of a thing, nearer to “*ousia*” than to *kosmos*. But I think that neither Brill nor Wagner intended this book to be in the hands of

laymen.

There is no conclusion to the investigations pursued in the book. More importantly, it is not always clear whose translations Wagner is quoting; for Husserl or Bergson, e.g., the translations seem to be those listed in the bibliography; but, for Aristotle's *Physics* and *Metaphysics*, and for Plotinus' *Enneads*, information is confusing or lacking: the bibliography mentions only Ross' and Jaeger's Oxford editions of Aristotle, so we deduce that Wagner is responsible for the translations. For Plotinus's *Enneads*, Wagner employs Armstrong's Loeb translation for longer quotations in chapter 9, but for short quotations in that chapter and for all quotations in chapters 10-12 the translations are his own, without warning. As for the Greek text of Plotinus, one infers that Wagner uses that printed by Armstrong, which is the text edited by H.-R. Schwyzer and P. Henry. There is no problem in this, except for the fact that line numeration of prose texts in Loeb editions are imprecise and, as Wagner quotes line numbers precisely, one suspects he is not using (only) it.

Errors of typography and transliteration of Greek words are abundant: Dodds for Dobbs (138); Steele for Steel (110, 111); *to-ti-ein-einai* (which Wagner translates "*the-what-it-is-to-be*") for *to-ti-en-einai* (*the-what-it-was-to-be*) (149); *pantaxou* for *pantachou* or *pantakhou* (180, 362); *megista genera* for *megista gene* (285); *aeion* for *aion* (291); *ex hypothesis* (262); and many more.

There are many problems in the translation and quotation of Greek texts that do not seem to be typographic slips but are simply wrong. E.g.: 275 (quoting Plotinus, III.7.1.2): "what exists eternally (*ton aidion einai*)" – transliteration is wrong (it should be *ten*), and the English text does not correspond to it; the phrase is: [*legontes*] *peri ten aidion einai physin* ("saying [that eternity] is around the perpetual nature", *einai* being complement of the participle *legontes*). The same occurs in 287: *he ousia einai* as the equivalent for "substantial existence", when in fact *einai* is the complement of another verb and *he ousia* is the subject of the sentence. In 276: "*to noeton ousia*" (instead of the correct text of III.7.2.2: *ten noeten ousian*) and "*to aistheton ousia*" (which is not in Plotinus' text, but should be *he aisthete ousia*). In 322-3 (translating III.7.8.34ff.): we find *to polu* translated as "plenitude" (instead of "multiplicity"); *ennoia* as "impression" (instead of "idea" or "notion"); a causal dative as a concessive clause; and the causal "on account of" for a simple *en*. The latter imprecision is recurrent (cf. 354, 345, 323) and affects Wagner's investigations: he translates "in time" as "in virtue of time" or "on account of time", thus implying a causative relation where there is none (i.e. motion happens *in* time, not *in virtue of* time, since its cause may be, say, my hand).

Wagner translates (344) the crucial passage of *Enn.* III.7.11.30-31 as follows: "in asserting itself independently from eternity, it [soul] produced time..." (there are more problems in the sequence, but I will limit myself to these lines) – the first phrase does not exist in the Greek text, which reads: "having produced this [probably the sensible cosmos] instead of eternity, first it [soul] temporalized itself...". Wagner understands that "it [i.e. soul] produced time", simply ignoring Plotinus's intriguing neologism, the verb *khronoun*, and its complement, the reflexive pronoun *heauten*: "soul temporalized itself". But what does it mean for soul to have temporalized itself if it is eternal (as Plotinus states in IV.4.15)? Wagner does not even mention this.

He complains about Plotinus' "syntactically and semantically ambiguous" Greek (323) when he is to interpret III.7.8.49-52; after translating it, keeping the word *athroa* not translated,

he makes a philological incursion into the meanings of that word in order to show that the passage in question has not been correctly understood until now. The first sentence, in Wagner's translation: "motion which is not *athroa* is distinguishable from motion which is *athroa* by virtue of time". According to Wagner (324), *athroa* can mean both "all-at-once", "instantaneous", or "continuous", "ongoing" – and he is right. Though all translations and studies in the world have preferred the first meaning – so that the difference is one between a movement that happens instantaneously and one that requires time to occur–, Wagner chooses the second meaning: for him "it is more reasonable to understand Plotinus' contrast between motion which is not *athroa* and motion which is *athroa* to distinguish motion which is not ongoing or unceasing...from motion which is ongoing or unceasing" (325). Having in mind that, in the context, Plotinus is precisely refuting the hypothesis that time is, or is related to, physical movement, Wagner's "novel approach" is difficult to sustain: surely both motions are distinguished in time (one may take 10 seconds, the other may proceed infinitely and so last for an infinite amount of time). But this is not the case: both motions occur *in time*, be they short or endless. Plotinus is stating that time cannot be movement, because there are movements that can happen instantaneously, and these do not occur *in time*.

Throughout the book we read imprecise statements, as if Wagner did not expect his reader to be another scholar. For example, Wagner says that "it is patently absurd...to suppose  $\neg$  as contemporary commentaries on Plotinus' account of time typically do suppose (and assert) – that the regular or standard rhythm, for example, of Soul's activity as it 'rouses' a human heart to beat and the regular or standard rhythm of Soul's activity as it 'prods and pushes' the outermost Heavenly sphere in its repeating circular motion are somehow the same" (356). It is patently absurd, indeed! But which commentaries *typically* do it? Wagner does not say. I've read a good number of studies on Plotinus' theory of time, but I've never met anything slightly similar to it.

Wagner is not an ordinary scholar: he is a provocative thinker who always deserves to be read. But with caution, this time.

---

#### Notes:

1. See e.g. the excellent studies of Fernando Rey Puente (*Os Sentidos do Tempo em Aristóteles*, Loyola: São Paulo, 2001) and Alessandro Trotta (*Il Problema del Tempo in Plotino*, Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 1997), and their generous bibliography.

[Comment on this review](#) in the BMCR blog

[Read Latest](#)

[Index for 2012](#)

[Change Greek Display](#)

[Archives](#)

[Books Available for Review](#)

[BMCR Home](#)

[Bryn Mawr Classical Commentaries](#)