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# Severus on *Tim.* 30a: New Approaches and Perspectives. Porphyry, *PM* 87–95; Eusebius, *PE* 13.17

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## Abstract

This paper aims at re-evaluating the significance of Peripatetic features in Severus' exegesis of the *Timaeus* through a comparison between Severus' doxography in the *PM* and the fragment of his treatise on the soul quoted by Eusebius. Indeed, until now, the scholarly literature has been inclined to consider Severus as a plain anti-Aristotelian and pro-Stoic Platonist. However the recent edition of the Porphyrian lost treatise *On Principles and Matter* allows us to grasp more clearly to what extent Severus' view on the nature of the soul and on the bodily motion is grounded on an in-depth knowledge of the Peripatetic debates of his time.

Keywords: [Severus](#); [soul](#); [motion](#); [dynamis](#); [pre-cosmic disorder](#)

The recent edition by Yury Arzhanov of a long portion of Porphyry's lost treatise *On Principles and Matter* (*PM*), translated into Syriac, constitutes a seminal event in the study of ancient Platonism and its reception. The last part of the text, especially §§73–97, provides an extensive doxography of new Middle Platonist fragments. Among them we find an account of the teaching of both Longinus and Plotinus, who are presented as the last members of two distinct Platonic exegetical chains, each of which contributed to Porphyry's education. One chain, to which Boethus the lexicographer and Longinus belong, is philological, while the other, embodied by Severus and Plotinus, is philosophical.<sup>[1]</sup> The doxography also includes testimonies of authors of whose works no fragments have yet been found, such as Boethus,<sup>[2]</sup> who is said to have influenced Longinus' interpretation of *Tim.* 30a, which claims that Plato is dealing in this passage with a disorderly pre-cosmic matter.<sup>[3]</sup> This reading, which is akin to that of Atticus, is opposed to Severus' interpretation, according to which, in *Tim.* 30a, Plato is not discussing matter, but rather the un-ordered motion of the primary bodies. In order to define the specific nature of this motion, Severus draws on Aristotle's analyses of the status of privation in *Metaphysics*, Book five.

This paper will thus focus on the Syriac testimony on Severus, which is set in parallel with an extract quoted in Eusebius' *Praeparatio Evangelica* (*PE*) 13.17. Its aim is to re-evaluate the importance of Peripatetic features in Severus' exegesis of the *Timaeus*. Indeed, until now, scholars have been eager to consider Severus to be a plainly anti-Aristotelian and pro-Stoic Platonist.<sup>[4]</sup> This appraisal was partly rooted in his interpretation of the world cycles in the myth of the *Statesman*,<sup>[5]</sup> but also in the fact that he uses Stoic categories in his exegesis of *Tim.* 27d. Thus, at the beginning of *Enn.* VI 2 (43),<sup>[6]</sup> Plotinus addresses his interpretation of *Tim.* 27d, according to which, in the sentence τί τὸ ὄν ἀεί, γένεσιν δὲ οὐκ ἔχον, καὶ τί τὸ γιγνόμενον μὲν ἀεί,<sup>[7]</sup> ὄν δὲ οὐδέποτε, τι is a genus that is common to both intelligible being and becoming.<sup>[8]</sup>

However, the discovery of the doxography of the *PM* sheds new light on Severus' attitude towards the Aristotelian tradition. My aim here is twofold: First, I would like to show that the doxography provides support for Gioè's hypothesis,<sup>[9]</sup> according to which Severus – in interpreting the physics of the *Timaeus* – relies on in-depth knowledge of the Peripatetic debates. Second, I will examine to what extent these fragments contribute to tracing back the genesis of the Porphyrian interpretation of *Tim.* 30a and to grasp the doctrinal background of the discussions within the school of Plotinus.

## 1 Soul and Body in *PE* 13.17

Previously, the only testimony relating to Severus' doctrine concerning the motion of primary bodies was an extract quoted by Eusebius in Book 13 of the *PE*. At the end of *PE* 13.16, after having indicated how Plato is in agreement with Hebrew wisdom, Eusebius turns to a new aspect of the survey of Platonic philosophy, concerning those points where Plato departed from the doctrines of Moses and fell into error. The first issue is related to his doctrine of transmigration, and the second one to his interpretation of the nature of the soul as a composite reality. The opposition in *Tim.* 41d between the divine and mortal parts of the soul is described, in *PE* 13.16.18, as an opposition between a “divine and rational part” and an “irrational and passive part.” Next, Eusebius introduces the critique that “Severus the Platonist” addresses to the doctrine of the soul's composition.<sup>[10]</sup> Severus does indeed point out that the claim that a “mortal” substance has been “interwoven into” the impassive nature of the soul is deeply flawed.

In this passage, Severus argues against the view that the soul is constructed by God out of two opposing elements, as is the case with intermediate colours, e.g. grey, which is the result of mixing white and black. In doing so, he takes a position in Middle Platonist debates relating to the unity-in-multiplicity of the soul.

This is what we have to say about the soul which Plato says is constructed by God out of impassive and passive substance, like one of the intermediate colours made from white and black: it must happen that when, in time, they separate out, the soul is destroyed, as is the compound intermediate colour when in time each of the component colours reverts to its own natural state (ἐπὶ τὴν οἰκείαν φύσιν). But if this is right, we have shown the soul to be destructible, not immortal.<sup>[11]</sup>

Severus shows, on the one hand, that the soul is not a composite, and, on the other, that, properly speaking, there is no passive part of the soul. Indeed, if it is agreed that the soul arises from a mixture, then, in time, it must disappear as the opposites revert to their proper state. In support of this assumption, he draws on the doctrine of the unity of the soul as presented in the *Phaedo*, according to which “what is uncompounded alone is not liable to dissolution.”<sup>[12]</sup> The question of the unity-in-multiplicity of the soul is indeed a central issue in Middle Platonist exegeses: when Plato declares the soul to be immortal, does this mean it is entirely immortal or does only its rational part survive the dissolution of the body? This question is linked to the question of whether the irrational parts belong to the soul itself.<sup>[13]</sup> While this issue falls outside the scope of this paper, I would like to recall that during the imperial era, many solutions, such as the use of the Aristotelian model of the *dynameis*, were advanced to address the Platonic problem of the unity of soul across its many functions.<sup>[14]</sup>

Alcinous, for example, claims that the human soul is divided into three parts: the rational part, stemming from the Demiurge, and two mortal parts (the spirited and the appetitive), added by

the young gods.<sup>[15]</sup> Alcinoüs, who does not state precisely whether the human soul results from the collation of two different kinds of soul or not,<sup>[16]</sup> merely indicates that these three parts, corresponding to three potencies (τριμερής ἐστὶν ἡ ψυχὴ κατὰ τὰς δυνάμεις, καὶ κατὰ λόγον τὰ μέρη αὐτῆς τόποις ἰδίαις διανενέμηται), are located in different places in the body.<sup>[17]</sup> Severus, by contrast, unambiguously indicates that the *dynamics* of the soul are of a single substance. He emphasises, more strongly than any other Middle Platonist, the unitary nature of the soul which is totally incorporeal and impassive (ἀπλοῦν δὲ καὶ τῇ αὐτῇ φύσει ἀπαθὲς καὶ ἀσώματον), and hence immortal.<sup>[18]</sup>

But neither [the position] of Plato is right nor that of the rest – as we shall try to establish by reason, setting out the powers that are active in us (τὰς ἐν ἡμῖν ἐνεργούσας δυνάμεις).

If Severus' position is part of an internal debate within Middle Platonist circles, it is possible that his interpretation of the non-composition of the soul also echoes the polemics which opposed Alexander of Aphrodisias to Galen, who articulates the Platonic model of the tripartition to the Aristotelian doctrine of the potencies of the soul in a quasi-corporealist way. Indeed, Galen endorses the Aristotelian definition of the soul as a form related to the organic body, but he equates the hylomorphic form to the mixture of the elementary qualities. On his view, the soul arises from the composition of the four elements.<sup>[19]</sup> Alexander opposes this position, holding that the soul is not a mixture, but rather a power which “supervenes” (ἐπιγινόμενον) on a particular kind of blend.<sup>[20]</sup> This is precisely why the soul, whose unity precedes that of the body, cannot be defined as a harmony, as Alexander points out, following Aristotle.<sup>[21]</sup> According to both Aristotle and Alexander, any theory of the soul as a harmony of opposites turns out to be a kind of corporealism.<sup>[22]</sup>

In this context, I would like to advance the hypothesis that Severus' interpretation provides a Platonic alternative to the doctrine of entelechy, taking into account the Peripatetic claim<sup>[23]</sup> that every attempt to think the soul along the lines of the tripartite model ends up fragmenting it and destroying its unity. Thus, Severus turns back to the doctrine of the *Phaedo*, claiming that only a genuinely separate substance can truly be simple and immortal. In a sense, this interpretation paves the way for Plotinus' account. Indeed, *Enn.* IV 7 (2) deploys a wide range of arguments in support of the incorporeality and immortality of the soul. If we have a look at the general structure of *Enn.* IV 7 (2),<sup>[24]</sup> we can see that Plotinus initially takes advantage of the weapons deployed by the Aristotelians against the champions of corporealism, claiming that forms are incorporeal powers (δυνάμεις),<sup>[25]</sup> then criticises the *harmonia* model of the Pythagoreans, before finally turning the accusation of corporealism against the Peripatetics themselves. In order to show that the entelechy doctrine, which makes the soul “something belonging to the body”<sup>[26]</sup> is not able to ground its substantiality (and thus its immortality), Plotinus polemically describes Aristotelian entelechy as a mere configuration of the body.<sup>[27]</sup> This allows him to claim, by contrast, that only the Platonic definition of the soul is capable of making the soul into a genuine substance (*ousia*), that is as a simple and impassive reality, possessing its own life and existence, independently of the body.<sup>[28]</sup> Thus, he can conclude that

everything which is dissoluble has come into existence by being put together, and is naturally liable to be disintegrated in the same way in which it was put together. But the soul is a single and simple nature which has actual existence in its living; it cannot then be destroyed in this way.<sup>[29]</sup>

In *PE* 13.17, Severus opposes to the non-composite nature of the soul the nature of bodies which are liable to dissolution. The text indicates then that when, in time, a separation of the parts takes place, each element regains its *oikeia physis*.<sup>[30]</sup> This formula echoes the Aristotelian doctrine of natural place,<sup>[31]</sup> but Severus rewrites and adapts it in a Platonic context. The elements do not return to their natural “place”, but rather regain their own natural state. Severus goes on to indicate that “all things in the world have been arranged by God out of the nature of these opposites”, the Demiurge having “impressed upon them friendship and concord (φιλίαν αὐτοῖς καὶ κοινωνίαν ἐμπουήσαντος αὐτοῦ).”<sup>[32]</sup> By linking together the opposing elements, the Demiurge expresses his good will, in virtue of which the world – which is dissoluble in itself – remains indissoluble (and perpetually safe).<sup>[33]</sup> The question of the motion the elements, which is to be found at *PE* 13.17.2, is at the heart of Severus’ commentary on *Tim.* 30a, which contains an in-depth analysis of the disorderly motion of the primary bodies that is deeply indebted to Aristotle’s discussions on the status of privation.

## 2 The Use of Aristotelian Concepts in the Exegesis of *Tim.* 30a

In §§87–95 of the *PM*, Severus is presented as having developed an interpretation of *Tim.* 30a that paved the way for Plotinus and Porphyry. It consists in distinguishing two logical phases in the demiurgic productive activity: one in which matter is informed, the other in which the primary bodies are brought into order.<sup>[34]</sup> What is at issue in this doxography, for Porphyry, is to stress the difference between the informing of matter, by means of which the bodies are produced, and the ordering of bodies, by means of which the universe is generated. Porphyry contrasts Severus’ interpretation to that of Atticus, who claims that in this section Plato explains how the Demiurge, who contemplates the Forms, takes over the pre-cosmic matter moved by an irrational soul and brings it into order.<sup>[35]</sup> This opposition between two readings of *Tim.* 30a is seen by Porphyry as representative of two very different methods of interpreting Plato’s texts.<sup>[36]</sup>

Atticus is a deeply anti-Aristotelian author, who opposes the tendency to harmonise the doctrines of Plato and Aristotle that emerged in the 2nd century AD. On his account, Plato “sets out with complete clarity of expression”<sup>[37]</sup> in *Tim.* 30a that the world was generated when the Demiurge took hold of the disorderly matter. He rejects Aristotle’s claim that the world is ungenerated, a claim that went hand in hand with the rejection of divine providence understood as benevolent intervention.<sup>[38]</sup> Thus, in Atticus’ eyes, Aristotle’s doctrine was fundamentally incompatible with Plato’s position, as is obvious to every exegete who is able to grasp the high clarity of the *Timaeus* passage relating to the *kosmopoiesis*. Another distinctive feature of his exegesis consists of “clinging tenaciously”<sup>[39]</sup> to the wording (*lexis*) of the Platonic texts: Proclus thus reports that Atticus played on the Platonic use of the past tense to indicate that what the Demiurge takes over is matter and not bodies. Indeed, claiming that Plato, in *Tim.* 28b, identifies what *is* visible with the generated bodily nature, Atticus points out that in *Tim.* 30a3–5, Plato speaks about “all that *was* visible, moving in a discordant and disorderly fashion” – and not about all that *is* visible.<sup>[40]</sup> Hence, according to Atticus, what this section is discussing is an ungenerated reality, namely pre-cosmic matter, whose motion is caused by the soul.

Porphyry, by contrast, denies that matter, which is indeterminate and inanimate, could be in motion. In claiming that, in *Tim.* 30a, Plato deals with the pre-cosmic motion of matter,

Atticus fails to differentiate between the level of bodies and that of matter.<sup>[41]</sup> More generally, the question of the soul as cause of the chaotic movement of pre-cosmic matter is at the heart of Porphyry's polemic against Atticus: on the one hand, Porphyry stresses that the soul, as a divine entity, can never be irrational and, on the other hand, points out that matter, which is absolutely indeterminate, can never be set in motion. Thus, in the *PM*, Atticus' interpretation of *Tim.* 30a is opposed, from §87 onwards, to that of Severus, who distinguishes the informing of matter, through which bodies are constituted, from the ordering of natural bodies, through which the universe is produced.

By assigning motion to the primary bodies rather than to matter, Severus attributes it to an entity that has already received a determination. In the pre-cosmic state of the world, there is no chaos, but rather a mere absence of order. To provide support to the distinction between chaos and privation of order, Severus relies on Aristotelian developments concerning the contraries that have intermediaries,<sup>[42]</sup> which he adapts in an original way to the interpretation of *Tim.* 30a. *PM* 92 thus provides a discussion of the privative aspect of the prefix  $\alpha$ -in the term ἀτάκτως (*Tim.* 30a3), which is indebted to the analyses conducted by Aristotle in *Metaphysics*, Book five,<sup>[43]</sup> according to which privation designates, among other, an intermediary state between the perfect possession of a quality and its complete absence. It is in this sense that “not everyone is good or bad, or just or unjust, but there is also the middle state.” But Severus inserts the topic of the intermediate character of privation into a broader cosmological framework, in order to develop an interpretation of the un-ordered state of the pre-cosmic elements.

The disorder in them should be understood as privation of order, as if they have yet partaken neither in the order which was due to them and to the world nor in the disturbance and confusion which are contrary to order in potentiality and in kind and which are the beginning of evil.<sup>[44]</sup>

Recalling the case of contrary qualities that can have intermediaries, Severus takes the examples of beauty or order, which do not merely have opposites, i.e. ugliness and disorder, but also intermediate states that lie between the two extremes. Pointing out that a “non-beautiful” thing is not necessarily ugly, but can simply be bereft of beauty, Severus indicates that also in the case of what is “un-ordered,” there are intermediate states between order and chaos.

Now, we must understand that all those things that are said by the way of privation and negation – e.g., ‘unattractive’, ‘unseen’, ‘unordered’, and all the like – either signify to a greater extent something contrary or that which is intermediate to the extremes. Thus, when we say ‘unattractive’, sometimes we denote the ugly, and sometimes the intermediate to the ugly and the beautiful. [92] Similarly with the terms ‘unseen’ and ‘unordered’, we do not always designate the contrary or the opposite, but sometimes the intermediate to them. For when a bunch of plants is intended to be planted in some order, we also call them unordered, not because they possess disturbance and confusion, but because they do not yet possess the order which they acquire when being planted.<sup>[45]</sup>

This series of examples aims to show several things: first of all, that the privation of order characteristic of the pre-cosmic motion is not a state contrary to order, but rather an intermediate state between chaos and order. Next, it shows that if the motion of these bodies is said to be “deprived of order”, this is with reference to the ordering project of God. This interpretation of the nature of the disorder of the primary bodies exhibits certain similarities

with that of Porphyry,<sup>[46]</sup> even if Severus understands the anteriority of disorder with respect to order in a temporal sense.<sup>[47]</sup>

Moreover, the discovery of this new testimony relating to Severus allows us to confirm the hypothesis of M. Baltes, J. Dillon and A. Gioè,<sup>[48]</sup> according to which the formula “the world in absolute terms (κόσμος ἀπλῶς)” – which is at issue in Severus’ interpretation of *Tim.* 28b as reported by Proclus<sup>[49]</sup> – designates all of the elements in the pre-cosmic state, in opposition to the generated world (γενητὸς οὖν ὁ κόσμος). The adverb ἀπλῶς would thus be taken to refer to the original state of the elements, namely a state in which they move in an un-ordered way, before the Demiurge gave them order and proportion.

### 3 Severus and its Legacy

The analysis of this testimony enables us to discern more clearly the place that Porphyry attributes to Severus in the landscape of imperial Platonism.<sup>[50]</sup> As *PM* 95 indicates, the analysis of the nature of the disorder of the primary bodies in *Tim.* 30a serves as a dividing line in the Middle Platonic tradition between those who adhere to a literal reading of Plato, adopting, like Atticus’ disciples, the methods of grammarians and lexicographers, and those who, like Severus, pave the way for Plotinus’ interpretation. This indication is all the more valuable given that the *Enneads* provide little information about how Plotinus himself might have interpreted *Tim.* 30a.

In referring to Plotinus as the intermediary link between Severus and himself, Porphyry reveals not only what his doctrine concerning the motion of bodies owes to his predecessors, but also indicates that critical discussion of the *Timaeus* was a fundamental component in Plotinus’ oral teaching. This aspect is, however, scarcely visible in the *Enneads*. Only a handful of allusions – notably at the beginning of *Enn.* I 8 (51) 4 – make reference to this section of the *Timaeus*. The context of chapter 4 is that of a demonstration that aims to show that neither the evil that exists in bodies nor that which exists in the soul is the primal evil.

The nature of bodies, in so far as it participates in matter, will be an evil, not the primal evil. For bodies have a sort of form which is not true form, and they are deprived of life, and in their disorderly motion, they destroy each other.<sup>[51]</sup>

Only the mention of a motion deprived of order, proper to the primary bodies, contains an allusion to *Tim.* 30a. Plotinus makes clear that the nature of bodies does not possess a “true form” and that it is “deprived of life”: in other words, the nature of bodies, in itself, is neither ordered, nor living, nor really determined. Life, order and determination come from the soul, and bodies only participate in them to the extent to which they depend on the soul. The sentence indicates that disorder is a characteristic inherent in the nature of bodies.<sup>[52]</sup> J. Phillips, taking the expression “not true form” as a reference to the “traces” in *Tim.* 53b, attributes to Plotinus the doctrine that there is a first participation of matter in the images of the Forms, which is responsible for the disordered motion – a doctrine which is comparable to the one subsequently developed by Proclus.<sup>[53]</sup> However Plotinus speaks of the “nature of bodies” as it is in itself, before passing on, in the following sentence, to examine the nature of the soul. This suggests that Plotinus is thinking here not of a proto-constitution of bodies,<sup>[54]</sup> but, more generally, of the state of bodies when considered separately from the soul.

This question calls for a more extensive discussion, which I intend to undertake in a further study. For the moment, I would simply like to suggest the following. Porphyry considers *Tim.*

30a to be a passage whose interpretation separates out two streams of Platonists: those who, like Atticus or Longinus, incorrectly hold that what is at issue is a disorderly pre-cosmic matter, and those who have understood that the passage concerns the un-ordered motion of bodies. *PM* 95 indicates that Severus and Plotinus anticipate Porphyry's interpretation of *Tim.* 30a. That said, if Plotinus discussed the Middle Platonic exegeses of *Tim.* 30a in his seminars and had confronted the theses of Severus and Atticus by opposing them to each other – as can be deduced from a parallel reading of the *Vita Plotini* (*VP*)<sup>[55]</sup> and *PM* 95 – he makes almost no mention of it in his treatises. This silence can be explained by a deliberate reluctance on the part of Plotinus to take a position on these debates, which are linked to the artificialist model of divine causality.

In light of the foregoing analyses, we may conclude that the recent edition of Porphyry's doxography enables us to substantially refine and correct the prevailing interpretation, according to which Severus was a Platonist who was essentially influenced by Stoicism. As an exegete commenting on those sections he deems philosophically important, Severus relies on a critical appropriation of both Stoic and Peripatetic doctrines to carry out his analyses. This method is at work in passage quoted in *PE* 13.17, where Severus alludes both to Middle Platonic and Peripatetic discussions about the composition of the soul, in order to defend the unity of the soul and its complete impassivity – adopting a perspective that was subsequently taken up by Plotinus. That said, the reappropriation of Aristotelian elements is also at the heart of Severus' doctrine of the motion of bodies. Thus, on the path leading to a fully correct exegesis of *Tim.* 30a, Severus<sup>[56]</sup> represents, in Porphyry's eyes, an important step: to be sure, he does not yet perfectly attain the exegetical level of Plotinus, insofar as he considers the present world “which moves in the way it does”<sup>[57]</sup> to have really been generated. At the same time, he is right to use the Aristotelian distinction between opposite and privation to say that, in *Tim.* 30a, what is at issue is the privation of order in the primary bodies. He thus opens the way to an interpretation of the *Timaeus* that opposes exegetes such as Atticus or Longinus who, in refusing to endorse an alliance between the Peripatetics and Platonism, remain at a more literary than philosophical level in their reading of Plato.

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