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Literary Form and Philosophical Exegesis: Plotinus' Utilization of Plato's Cosmology

John Dillon begins his article "Plotinus at Work on Platonism" with a quotation from the *Enneads* V 1.8: "These teachings [the true doctrines] are, therefore, no novelties, no inventions of today, but long since stated, if not stressed; our doctrine here is the explanation of an earlier, and can show the antiquity of these opinions on the testimony of Plato himself." In the treatise "On Numbers" (*Enneads* VI.6), Plotinus refers to the *Timaeus* directly on two occasions: 1) in *On Numbers* 4.12, he mentions Plato's understanding of the origin of Number as an alternation between Day and Night (*Timaeus* 39B-C and 47A); 2) in *On Numbers* 4.20, he clarifies Plato's own understanding of "true number" by referring to Socrates' concept of truth as perceptible only to the thought (*Timaeus* 37-40). If we consider the paucity of Plotinus' direct references to his sources throughout the *Enneads*, these two occurrences bear considerable significance.

Plato's myth of the creation of the Universe in the *Timaeus* and Plotinus' explanation of the structure of the Universe in *On Numbers* characterize the seemingly incongruous relationship between the "dogmatic" Plato and the "aporetic" Plotinus. However, the two works provide a unique example of Dillon's definition of "Plotinus at work on Platonism." Written in a conversational form, the *Timaeus* represents Plato's understanding of the origin of the Universe. Plato eases the difficult nature of the philosophical account by interweaving the theme of the structure of the best city-state as a mortal prelude to the main topic--the divine origin of the Universe. In contrast, *On Numbers* is written in a dense, contemplative literary style of philosophical exegesis which unfolds Plotinus' concept of the origin of the Universe. While, in the *Timaeus*, Plato relates his cosmogony in a descending order (from the Demiurge to the Universal Living Being, to the heavenly bodies, to the gods, to the human soul and to the body), in *On Numbers*, Plotinus relates his cosmology in ascending order (from Infinity, to Multiplicity, to Number, to the Complete Living Being, and to the One). The thematical ascent, in *On Numbers*, from the sensible to the intelligible is built upon the philosophical descent from the divine to the material in the *Timaeus*. This subtle reconstruction of Plato's cosmology allows Plotinus to explicate his original understanding that the sensible and the intelligible "tend to their origin--the One." Thus Plato's cosmogony becomes Plotinus' cosmology and Plato's descent from the Demiurge becomes Plotinus' ascent to the One.