

Iamblichus' Touching Instant and the Flow of Becoming

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Sergey Trostyanskiy

Abstract

Iamblichus' theory of the instant had multiple objections, the most immediate being to solve the paradox of the instant stated in Aristotle's *Physics* 4.10. The paradox stated that the instant can neither be always the same, nor ever other and other.¹ Aristotle's solution to the paradox, according to which the instant is both same and other but not in the same sense (i.e., that it is the same in substratum² but other and other in account, like "Coriscus in the Lyceum" and then "Coriscus in the Market place")³ was not universally accepted and presented a challenge to Iamblichus. In addition, Iamblichus had to offer an explanatory account to Pseudo-Archytas' paradoxical affirmation about the instant, namely that it is both indivisible and non-existent. In this article I assume that Iamblichus' solution to the paradox of the instant was premised on his exegesis of Pseudo-Archytas' puzzling statement and proceeded via the distribution of the properties of the instant to different objects. The ingenuity of Iamblichus' response to the paradox of the instant, on the other hand, consisted precisely in the removal of difference and becoming (i.e., incomplete actuality) from the partless instant and reallocating it to the participating extended nows which are parts of becoming. Meantime, I also will argue that Iamblichus' model of vertical causation avoided the pitfalls associated with meeting the challenges of "horizontal" relation between the instants in a continuum. I will then review the issue of time's generation through the agency of "the touching instant" as it was reported by Simplicius in his *In Cat.* 352.14–2. I will trace its origins to Aristotle's *On Generation and Corruption* 323a-b and to Nicomachus' *Introduction to Arithmetic* 1.1.3.10-2. I will also use Proclus' reports to substantiate my conjectures. Finally, I will suggest that Iamblichus' assumption of Plato's system of being and science (and, arguably, Aristotle's idea of

¹ Aristotle, *Physica*, 218a.8-30.

² "τοῦτο δὲ ὁ μὲν ποτε ὄν τὸ αὐτό." *Physica*, 219b.18-19

³ Aristotle, *Physica*, 219b.19-21.

the unmoved mover) necessitated the transcendent now to be modified by number so as to be present in the realm of becoming. I will critically engage with Sambursky's explanation of Iamblichus' theory of the touching instant because it does not fully address the subtleties of Iamblichus' theory.

Properties of the Instant and their Distribution

Iamblichus starts his discourse about the instant by offering the reader a scrupulous analysis of Pseudo-Archytas' theory, according to which, the instant (i.e., the monad of time) and time as a whole are partless (τὸ ἀμερῆς) and non-existing / unreal (τὸ ἀνυπόστατον).⁴ Iamblichus here argues that, according to Pseudo-Archytas' rendering of the subject, that which is partless cannot be non-existing.⁵ Does the coexistence of these notions within one unified concept mean that Pseudo-Archytas was confused and that his thought is invalid? It will, indeed, be an exaggeration to say so, argues Iamblichus. He is not confused by any means. However, we must know how to read his treatise so as to extract the intended meaning. There is an immediate stumbling-block here which indicates that the properties listed above are incompatible.

The partless here indicated, according to Iamblichus, refers to a substantial being and actuality. Hence, it cannot not be, or lack existence, or be apprehended as such in one way or another. It does not have any privation of power, any potentiality indicating incompleteness and partiality, whereas non-existence is associated with things whose being is not fully actual. It refers to that which may or may not be, and those things whose being and activity (or essence and existence) are rendered apart. It thus first and foremost refers to becoming.

Hence, Iamblichus tells us that Pseudo-Archytas' theory does not imply a single subject for the partless and the non-existent:

the indivisible ... as Iamblichus says, will thus not be unreal nor will the real be unreal (which is a contradiction in terms), but the indivisible and the unreal are separate, <being attributes> of different natures, some of which are more noble while others defect from their higher nature and are therefore called unreal,

⁴ Simplicius, in *Aristotelis categorias commentarium*, 8.352.24-5.

⁵ Pseudo-Archytas understood the property of "partlessness" as the property of the primary existents. See Pseudo-Archytas, *Fragments*.38.9-10.

*not because they are not existent altogether, but because they do not preserve the first essence in purity and immaculateness.*⁶

The unreality or non-existence here, once again, is not absolute. The meaning of non-existence thus needs to be qualified. Non-existent in this context is used in the sense of that which combines being and non-being. Simplicius, while describing Iamblichus' theory, adds to this by saying that "this is the character of everything that has its being in becoming and cannot be properly called either being or non-being."⁷ The phrasing here is Simplicius' own; "τὰ ἐν τῷ γίνεσθαι τὸ εἶναι ἔχοντα" belongs to his own terminological jargon. He equally applies it to Aristotle. The notion of "being in becoming" conveys the idea of transition and incompleteness. A thing whose being is subject to change thus has its being in becoming. It is potentially something other than what it was before. Therefore, non-existence or unreality can be said of it, but not in the sense of sheer non-being. The instant which goes out and merges with motions comes to be unreal in this sense. It loses its sameness, having been numerically differentiated and arranged in a serial order.⁸ The partless thus becomes distributed in motion. We may then infer that it is no longer truly indivisible but is, rather, divided among the parts of motion. It comes to be "other and other."

The conclusion is that we should not allocate these two incompatible properties to the same subject. Simplicius' passage testifies this:

*Iamblichus does not agree with those who attribute the indivisible to the flowing and generated time and who call it <the indivisible> unreal because it never is but always becomes. Everything becoming, he says, or being in any way in motion cannot be indivisible. For every motion is always divisible because of its continuity.*⁹

Iamblichus here takes Aristotle's definition of continuity as that which is divisible into divisibles along with Aristotle's theory of change and argues that the partless and divisible are incommensurable. Hence, the partless cannot be part of the continuum and it is not subject to change.

⁶ Simplicius, in *Cat.*8.354.2-7. English trans. by S. Sambursky.

⁷ Simplicius, in *Cat.*8.354.7-8.

⁸ Simplicius, in *Cat.*8.354.10-3.

⁹ Simplicius, in *Cat.*8.354.13-7.

Partless Instant and Incomplete Actuality

Iamblichus speaks of the partless as pure actuality (ἀεὶ ἐνεργεῖ). It is separate from its phenomenal manifestations.¹⁰ How does this now manifest itself?

*The activity of the partless is not of the same kind as the flame of a lamp, for it is not perceptible nor does it remain in a state of flux and progress, but it is always in being and always actual and never in the state of becoming; it stands out as being in the immobile, ungenerated in a numerically identical form, and incorruptible.*¹¹

This actuality makes its being manifest instantaneously. It is full, complete or perfected. It cannot be subject to motion (incomplete actuality or a flow of becoming). It is immutable. It is a substance of its own kind. This is a very strong affirmation which concerns the being of the now and declares the unity of being and activity. The partless thus always manifests itself all at once; it cannot progress part by part, being framed in a serial order.

Proclus would classify such a being as subject to eternity.¹² It is unmoved and cannot be measured by time with respect to its being or its activity.¹³ Iamblichus, on the other hand, breaks this convention and speaks of it as belonging to time. However, this time is not the same as the time of either mathematicians or of natural philosophers. Indeed, the partless instant in some ways owes its being to the higher kinds. How is it then generated? It is not, in fact, generated as it falls within the realm of the paradigms. The attribution of generation and actualization to such entities is a mere figure of speech used for educational purposes.¹⁴ However, if looked at from a different angle, the being of the instant is tied to the demiurgic activities.

Partless as such always preserves the static aspect, being ontologically stable, i.e., immune from the flow of becoming. Hence, to ask the

¹⁰ Simplicius, in *Aristotelis physicorum libros octo commentaria*, 9.793.30-2. English trans. by J.O. Urmson.

¹¹ Simplicius, in *Phys.* 9.792.23-7.

¹² “ἡ τῆς ἐνεργείας πρὸς τὴν οὐσίαν ταυτότης” Proclus, *The Elements of Theology*, Prop. 171.

¹³ Proclus, *El. Th.* Prop. 169.8-9.

¹⁴ Cf. Plotinus, *Enn.* III.5.9.25–29 where “generation of things ungenerated” is classed as a didactic technique.

question about “generation” in respect to such an entity amounts to asking how such an entity is present to other beings. Proclus tells us that, according to Iamblichus, the actuality of the monad of time accompanies the demiurgic activity of ordering time and the heavens. Proclus used the word ἀνέλιξις to express its actualization and the generation of time. This word has the meaning of unfolding, unrolling, evolving, explicating, etc. Iamblichus, on the other hand, used the word ἀπογένεσις to express the meaning of time’s “generation.” He tells us that time and heaven are “generated” from the intellectual ordering proceeding from the demiurge.¹⁵ The demiurge of Plato’s *Timaeus* is the foundation of this theory. Yet, its “generation” indicates a mere causal dependence on the demiurgic ordering and not an actual production.

How does the partless instant unfold itself? Perhaps by self-augmentation or motion, etc., of the now (through the demiurgic agency) or in some other ways? The Neoplatonic procession (πρόοδος) theory is here used to explain the dynamic aspect of the higher orders. The partless proceeds from the paradigm and is tied to the demiurgic activities (as the demiurge contemplates the paradigm and orders the infinite). It proceeds by unfolding. This metaphor of unfolding tells us that the partless is pure actuality and that it also has the potential (in the sense of power or capacity) to be present to other beings. It goes along the lines of the dual aspect of actuality in Neoplatonism along with the distinction between the “non-flowing activity” and the “flowing activity.”¹⁶ In this context we find a juxtaposition of primary actuality (πρωτουργὸν ἐνέργειαν) and active power (δύναμιν ἐνεργητικὴν).¹⁷ We can also think of Proclus’ distinction between perfect and imperfect potency in this context.¹⁸ The term “unfolding” is also linked, according to Proclus, with the notion of the infinite which denotes the infinite power or potential of the primary intellectual entities.¹⁹

How does the partless come into being? According to Iamblichus, this question translates into the following: how do the participants come to participate in them so as to become what they are? The notion of participation is Platonic. Aristotle understood it as lacking any meaning,

¹⁵ “ἀπὸ τῆς προϊούσης ἀπὸ τοῦ δημιουργοῦ νοερᾶς διακοσμῆσεως.” Simplicius, in *Phys.*9.794.14-5.

¹⁶ See A. C. Lloyd (1956), 146-160.

¹⁷ Simplicius, in *Aristotelis phys.*9.794.11 and Proclus, in *Platonis Timaeum commentaria*, 3.31.26. Trans. by J. Dillon.

¹⁸ Proclus, *El. Th.* Prop.78.

¹⁹ Proclus, *El. Th.* Prop.90-1.

being void of any content and not capable of explaining anything. However, the theory of participation offers an alternative account of the transmission of properties from the cause to the effect. It bypasses Aristotle's sophisticated theory of causation²⁰ and ascribes causal power to universal beings. It offers the model of "vertical" causation where more universal beings permeate all reality and are present to all things. The participants, in turn, participate in them and "receive" a certain property according to their own capacity. Iamblichus will combine this (Platonic) mode of causation associated with participation with Aristotle's efficient causation through touching and acting upon to create his own theory of the instant's causal efficacy.

At the same time, the participants participate in the partless instant and become temporal, receiving the property of being ordered in respect of before and after in time. They become enclosed by time. How does the sensible participate in time so as to be surrounded or enclosed by time? How does time mingle with the sensible? The partless instant is an actuality. It has a special efficacy to be present to the sensible. It always exists and does not come to be (καὶ ὅτι τὸ νῦν ἔστι καὶ οὐ γίνεται).²¹ The meaning of γίνομαι is "to be involved in the flow of becoming." It proceeds and comes-to-be motionlessly. It does not come-to-be or move gradually or by jerks. It rather permeates the whole participated reality instantaneously. Iamblichus speaks of a motionless motion. For instance, the motion of the intellect is motionless.²² So it is with the motion of the instant. It moves motionlessly. He also speaks of the motion to the intellect saying that it moves fast.²³ However, its rapidity is not premised upon the notions of velocity and gradual transition. I assume this term (i.e., rapid) metaphorically depicts the instants' instantaneous mode of self-manifestation. Pseudo-Archytas' fleeing now is of such a character.²⁴ We see this same thread in a more developed form in Proclus.²⁵

²⁰ The theory here mentioned is fully developed by Aristotle in his *Physics*, book 8.

²¹ Simplicius, in *Phys.*9.792.28-9.

²² "ἀλλ' ὁ μὲν νοῦς κίνησις ἐστὶν ἀκίνητος." Proclus, in *Tim.*2.251.4-5.

²³ "οἰκεῖον γὰρ νοήσει μὲν ἢ ἄκμητος καὶ ὄξυκίνητος δύναμις." Proclus, in *Tim.*2.309.14-5.

²⁴ Pseudo-Archytas, *Fragments*,29.12-3.

²⁵ See S. Gersh's (1973) excellent survey supplemented by a thorough analysis of the notion of κίνησις ἀκίνητος.

Iamblichus asserts that the partless now, itself by itself, is motionless and cannot unfold or unravel itself by being set in motion (locally or quantitatively through augmentation). Hence, the prior and posterior are not introduced through motion: “by its order and the continuity of its procession the earlier and later connected with it is far from being like that <i.e., moving>.”²⁶ Again, procession and motion are juxtaposed here. A kind of motionless procession is at stake, one that introduces order and arranges things into a successive series. He aims to explain this theory in the following way:

*one has to define them <the earlier and later> neither according to the changes <of position> of motions—as in the celestial movements—nor according to the unfoldings of life—as in the soul—nor according to the processions of corporeal generations—as in nature—nor according to any similar criterion (for these are peculiar to the orders belonging to time), but according to the sequence of causes and the continuous concatenation of creations and the primary activity and active power of the various and manifold motions.*²⁷

This mysterious passage tells us that the partless (the temporal monad) presides over the ordering process, being its leader and steward, leading (προήγησις) the motion of all creation according to a pre-arranged (we may assume) sequence of before and after (or prior and posterior or earlier and later) in motion. A continuous (in the sense of uninterrupted) intertwining of generations in respect of the before and after is due to the primary activity and power of the instant. Thus, the temporal order of creation does not follow the order of magnitude and that of motion; it does not supervene upon the already existing order of beings. Rather, it orders motions, etc. It is not something that comes after but, rather, that which precedes. Being such, it orders and measures motion (“καὶ μετροῦσαν καὶ ὀρίζουσιν τὰς κινήσεις”).²⁸ This account reverses Aristotle’s theory.²⁹ The instant and (time along with it) is not that which comes about as an accident of motion. The ordered progression of things in time is not premised upon the prior and posterior in magnitude and in motion. Hence, the partless instant of time (and time along with it) is not

²⁶ Proclus, in *Tim.*3.31.17-9.

²⁷ Proclus, in *Tim.*3.31.19-27.

²⁸ Proclus, in *Tim.*3.31.29-30.

²⁹ Aristotle, *Physica*,219a10ff.

something which follows the order of motion, but that which orders motion.

To this Iamblichus adds another qualification by introducing the taxonomy of motion *per se* (καθ' αὐτόν) and of the participatory motion (κατὰ μέθεξιν). Sensibles that exist in the flow of becoming move *per se*, whereas the instant's motion is participatory. In what sense? Iamblichus give us the following explanatory note: "in this way time moves as possessing the cause of the activity proceeding outside from it and perceived as divisible in the movements and being extended together with them."³⁰ Iamblichus then makes a subtle reference to Aristotle by talking about the physicists who first confused and then reversed the relationship between time and motion, thinking of time as that which is counted in motion.³¹

Time is in the instant (whereas the instant is in eternity) and things are in time. Iamblichus also speaks of the now as encompassing time and tells us that "that which encompasses time is made to resemble eternity, which encompasses simultaneously and everlastingly <the things that are>."³² The language of περιεκτικός and περιεχής here helps Iamblichus explain how things are in their principles. By extension, "the numerical measure of becoming is modelled upon the oneness of the essences <that really are>."³³ Thus, as the now is to time, so the monad (or oneness) is to number, and so the one is to the many.

Proclus describes Iamblichus' theory and tells us that "the motion of time," progresses "according to the measures in the temporal monad" which joins together the end and the beginning of time infinitely.³⁴ It is interesting to note that here indeed he speaks of the motion of time, meaning that in some sense time moves, perhaps following the motion of the monad. Perhaps, this motion is in the participants. Otherwise, it would appear ordered and arranged according to some other principle. However, time "has a divine order, not an ordered one but an ordering, as the philosopher Iamblichus also says, not one that follows upon things that precede, but a leader of things being accomplished."³⁵

³⁰ Proclus, in *Tim.*3.31.32-3.32.2.

³¹ Proclus, in *Tim.*3.32.4-6.

³² Simplicius, in *Cat.*8.356.4-5.

³³ Simplicius, in *Cat.*8.356.5-7.

³⁴ Proclus, in *Tim.*3.30.30-3.

³⁵ Proclus, in *Tim.*3.30.31-4.

Iamblichus accepts Aristotle's premise that the indivisible or partless is not subject to motion. Thus:

*everything becoming, he says, or being in any way in motion cannot be indivisible. For every motion is always divisible because of its continuity. The indivisible, however, is naturally static with respect to its own being, and if it were always becoming it could not preserve its form. But if it is explicitly said to preserve its form, it cannot always become.*³⁶

This affirmation tells us that motion and time are continuous and divisible. However, we can also see here that the indivisible is static. Aristotle would, indeed, object to such a conjecture by arguing that the partless partakes neither of motion nor of rest (as the privation of motion). However, this perhaps is a minor nuance. More important is the fact that the flowing things which belong to the realm of generation do not preserve their formal identity. The partless instant, on the contrary, is always the same in that it can preserve its form. Here the formal sameness is contrasted with the numerical difference.

Formal Sameness and Numerical Otherness

It should be noted in this context that Iamblichus at the very outset of his discourse clearly endorses Pseudo-Archytas' theory of the primacy of formal sameness. He tells us that the now's "oneness remains the same according to form, and this ranks higher than the numerical otherness."³⁷ Iamblichus then tells us that "the form remains the same and indicates the identity of the indivisible now."³⁸ The now itself, being pure actuality, is always self-same. It becomes different (or self-differentiated) only in the participants when individuated in the soul, nature and natural things (i.e., when it becomes subject to the flow of becoming). He then infers that "the always changing numerical otherness is evidence of the mutability of the participating things."³⁹

Iamblichus consistently juxtaposes the formal sameness with the numerical difference. Indeed, sometimes the language used may sound confusing, for instance, when Iamblichus speaks of the instant and ascribes to it a numerically identical form (ἐν τῷ αὐτῷ κατ' ἀριθμὸν

³⁶ Simplicius, in *Cat.* 8.354.15-8.

³⁷ Simplicius, in *Cat.* 8.355.21-2.

³⁸ Simplicius, in *Cat.* 8.354.25-6 and in *Phys.* 9.787.25-6.

³⁹ Simplicius, in *Cat.* 8.354.24-5 and in *Phys.* 9.787.24-5.

εἶδει), as we could see above. There appears to be a certain confusion of numerical and formal sameness (at times, he seems to uphold Aristotle's understanding of numerical oneness and, at times, follows the Neopythagorean contention). However, for the most part he maintains a clear distinction between the two. The now is the same form-wise. The relation of otherness is acquired through participation. At stake here then is not the formal sameness (which is always preserved), but the numerical otherness. This otherness according to number is participatory and accidental to the now which itself is not affected by participation.

In this context we may ask how the instant, while preserving its formal existence, becomes other and other, the prior now being different from the posterior? What is their principle of individuation? What does the distinction between κατὰ τὸ εἶδος and κατ' ἀριθμὸν entail? The meaning of numerical oneness is at stake. In some fragments Pseudo-Archytas tells us that we divide the forms (species) into individuals and that individual beings are worthless.⁴⁰ He adds to this by saying that by the time we reach the indivisible individuals (τῶν ἀτόμων...καὶ καθ' ἕκαστα προϊούσας) we again find no value.⁴¹ This radical postulate of the worthless character of an individual clearly prioritizes the value of the form. This is to be noted. In the light of this juxtaposition, we may assume that Pseudo-Archytas' partless instant is a universal being of some kind. Indeed, the universal and formal (i.e., indivisible with qualifications) here appears to be contrasted with the individual and material (i.e., divisible or partible). It then must be a particular or particularized (i.e., instantiated) now that renders time worthless and non-existent. The meaning of non-existent, under this scenario, indicates that which is not primary but derivative and secondary. Iamblichus seems to be endorsing this conjecture and, perhaps, aiming to promote the Platonic cause over against Aristotle's by insisting on the substantiality and causal efficacy of the universal.

The instant becomes numerically different in the participants. However, itself by itself it is not numerically differentiated (in the sense of being self-augmented). How does it then become other and other? Iamblichus' response appears to be that, in order for it to be other and other, it must have a position and be ordered in the sense of being framed within the order of things that are subject to the flow of becoming. Thus,

⁴⁰ Pseudo-Archytas, *Fr.5.36-7*.

⁴¹ Pseudo-Archytas, *Fr.6.2*.

“in another context the now is seen as something which becomes different numerically, something which moreover has acquired a position and possesses an order with regard to becoming.”⁴²

A few questions immediately come to mind. Even if the now is to have a position (which is an extraordinary innovation since, according to both Aristotle and Pseudo-Archytas, things whose being is transient do not have position but a mere relative order), to be ordered, and to have an arrangement (σύνταξις) in respect to becoming, how can it become ever different? In other words, how can it move or change so as to become other and other? What moves here is the participant which is timed and has the limits of its temporal parts delineated in respect of the prior and posterior in time. Thus, the instant is always different in the participant which is immersed in the flow of becoming.

When the flow of becoming is spoken of, the meaning it conveys clearly points to the continuous. Thus:

*the now which is participated in nature and is not separate from the things which are in a state of becoming is different from the now which is separate and subsists in itself, the latter being at rest with regard to its form while the former is seen to be in continuous motion.*⁴³

It is interesting to note that the partless is, once again, a substance of its own kind. It can subsist separately. Hence, *qua* substance it can potentially be receptive of opposites (and, by implication, subject to change, being a particular thing of its own kind (a “this”), etc. However, *qua* indivisible, it is not receptive of opposites and cannot flow. How does it come to be “other and other” then? Iamblichus’ answer is that the now in the participants is not always the same as the partless substantial instant. Moreover, it is not the same in number (indeed, it can be the same only for things that are in the same now, come to be or change simultaneously), but other and other. There are many nows.

The Now as Principle and Part & Iamblichus’ Solution of the Paradox of the Same / Other Instant

Iamblichus then aims to explain how the participated now can flow. From this point on, Iamblichus draws some ramifications from the statement made above. He tells us that the now of becoming which is

⁴² Simplicius in *Cat.* 8.355.27-8.

⁴³ Simplicius, in *Cat.* 8.355.11-4.

always other and other is part of time. It must move, be next to other nows, etc. It must be synonymous with time. Being a part of time, it must subsume characteristics of the whole of time. Thus:

*if one takes the now as part of time, one understands it as something naturally united with motion. But if one does not regard it as time, as some people have said about it, it is a separate principle of time and remains the same in its form.*⁴⁴

In this context he juxtaposes the now as a part (τὸ νῦν ... ὡς μέρος χρόνου) with the now as a separate principle of time (ἀρχὴ ... τοῦ χρόνου χωριστῆ), saying that an individuated and instantiated instant is inseparable from the participants. It is part of time and flows along with it (with the shifting and flowing time of the participants), whereas the separate partless instant is the principle of time which is fully immune from the flow of becoming as it always preserves its formal sameness.

Moreover, he denies the possibility for the instant to move (as it is partless, etc.). And yet, he speaks of “the nows that proceed outwards and are carried on together with the motion and alter together in this motion.”⁴⁵ Those, he says, are not preserved. They constitute that which is “non-existent” in time. They are inseparable from motion. They then must be having a “concurrent modification” through the “intercourse” with motion and the moving things. Iamblichus’ point here is that the now (in the participants) is no longer the principle, but, rather, a part of time. It transforms into something other than what it was before and acquires characters of the moving things.

We may assume that having been participated in by sensible particulars and having been apprehended as being united (or mixed) with motion, the now turns into the present time. He speaks of the present which is the mark of the now in the sensible. Simplicius sheds light on the issue at hand and tells us that Iamblichus “wants not only the now to have been present, but also the time between two limits.”⁴⁶ This more general and imprecise understanding of the now includes some parts of the past and of the future which are bounded by the two limits. This allows us to understand the extended present in a more definite way (comparing it with that of Aristotle’s present, which is a mere figure of speech).⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Simplicius, in *Cat.* 8.355.29-32.

⁴⁵ Simplicius, in *Cat.* 8.355.34-5.

⁴⁶ Simplicius, in *Phys.* 9.793.22-3.

⁴⁷ Aristotle, *Physica*, 222a20ff.

Then Iamblichus compares the now as the monad of time and the nows in the participants with the primary time and the participated time which is a whole of parts and is subject to the flow of becoming:

*As in the case of the nows, so there is a single time which precedes the temporal things but many times that come to be among participating things, among them the past time, the present time and the future time.*⁴⁸

Here the instant which is in the participants, we may infer, differs from the participated instant. It then becomes “the many.”

Yet, in another sense the now also functions as the limit and division of time. And that which it bounds are the parts of time. We can also note that the order of prior and posterior compressed in the partless now is instantiated in a continuous series of the nows. He immediately engages with the prior Neopythagorean tradition and argues that “time is continuous, but it is not held together by a permanent becoming and perishing of the limit. The limit is at rest in its own form in order for time to be continuous and always to remain so.”⁴⁹ It is not subject to motion. As such, it assures the continuity of a moving thing (chopped off by the now into temporal bits and arranged in a series). Yet, the limit also seems to be linked with activities of the soul which delimits the continuum and counts the countable.

At times he is as radical as to declare that the partless instant is completely immune from being other and other. It is always the same. He then continues by saying that:

*if one says that the now becomes and disappears, one has to understand this not with regard to the now [i.e., partless instant] itself but with regard to the things which participate in it or do not participate in it. For to hold together and to make continuous is a property of the indivisible only, whereas to become one thing after another and to perish and always to flow is most characteristic of the participation of the now in becoming.*⁵⁰

Iamblichus also accepts Aristotle's premise that nothing moves in a partless instant. He argues that, “whatever becomes, having its motion

⁴⁸ Simplicius, in *Phys.*9.793.4-7.

⁴⁹ Simplicius, in *Cat.*8.355.25-7.

⁵⁰ Simplicius, in *Cat.*8.355.4-8.

in duration, does not become in the now.”⁵¹ Hence, whatever moves needs the *παράτασις* of time. Therefore, the partless now is immune from generation in that it does not move and that nothing moves in it. However, things move in the extended present. Iamblichus gives us more details on the instant which is participated in and on the now which is in the participants. Simplicius in this context tells us about “the assumption of one ungenerated now [i.e., partless instant] of a higher order than the participating things, and on this [he continues] are dependent the nows which are accorded to the participating things.”⁵²

The now of the lower order is thus fully instantiated and self-differentiated in the participants. It becomes “the many.” It becomes the present time. Thus, the now of a higher order orders the flowing realm (of moving things) in respect of before and after (according to the demiurgic providential plan). It turns an unordered multitude and magnitude into something determinate. The “many” and the “much” thus organized receive their proper temporal boundaries. One important qualification to be made is that the extended now (i.e., the present) must be presented as having its being and actuality split asunder, as having some potentiality in the sense of being incomplete, and being able to come to be and to cease to exist, to move in some ways (by increasing through self-augmentation, or experiencing alteration or moving locally, or in some other ways).

Thus, Iamblichus understands the now as (1) the principle of time, (2) as a part of time, i.e., the present which is an extended now mingled with the flow of becoming. Yet, (3) in another sense, the now is also the limit or boundary which separates the parts of time.

The ingenuity of Iamblichus’ solution to the paradox of the instant is that he accepts Aristotle’s premise that nothing partless is ever different and subject to incomplete actuality and that nothing moves in the partless instant; and that he consequently denies difference and motion to it, thus transferring the issue of the ever different and moving instant to the participants. Aristotle thought of the instant as same and different, but not in the same sense. According to Aristotle, the instant moves (or, rather, has moved) accidentally without ever being in motion. Hence, whereas a thing (e.g., body, time, etc.) moves by making a gradual transition (i.e., part by part), the instant has moved without ever being in transition. Or that it has ceased without ever being in the process of

⁵¹ Simplicius, in *Phys.* 9.792.29-30.

⁵² Simplicius, in *Phys.* 9.793.3-4.

ceasing. This is quite paradoxical.⁵³ At best, we may think of it as not moving *per se* but rather *per accidens*. Aristotle aimed to solve this issue, as it concerns time and the now, by arguing that the instant is the same in substrate (in the Greek, *ho pote on*), though “other and other” in account, that is, a kind of accidental unity similar to that of Coriscus in the marketplace.⁵⁴

Iamblichus, on the other hand, makes the now immune from any difference and change, even accidental. Indeed, he also turns the instant (i.e., the higher now) into a substance and actuality of its own kind. It becomes individuated (and multiplied) in the moving things. As such, it is then apprehended by the thinking mind which learns the numerical order of becoming while studying the order of nature. The moral here is that the indivisible now is immutable; it is not affected by participation. However, something of it enters the realm of generation:

*and where, he says, has one to conceive the flow and ecstatic displacement [shift] of time (καὶ ποῦ, φησί, δεῖ νοεῖν τὴν τοῦ χρόνου ῥοήν τε καὶ ἔκστασιν)? The answer is: in the things participating in time.*⁵⁵

Hence, the partless instant is ever the same; yet, it is always other and other in the participants.

The Touching Instant and its Causal Efficacy

Above we saw Iamblichus' attribution of the flow and generation to the participants. He then gives us some further specifications of this theory. The issue he aims to address is the efficacy of the intelligible. It orders, i.e., arranges motions into the schema of prior and posterior in time. It also measures. Measure here is presented as an active element which belongs to both the intelligible and the sensible (and the intermediate). To measure is to shape up so as to prevent a thing from falling into indeterminacy. Simplicius' appealing exposition of this notion helps us understand the meaning of measure.⁵⁶ To order and to ascribe measure are conceptually adjacent notions. They imply one another. In this case, to measure means to ascribe temporal boundaries so as to make a thing limited and knowable. However, Iamblichus also accentuates an active

⁵³ See R. Sorabji (1983), 10-13.

⁵⁴ Aristotle, *Physica*.219b.12-22.

⁵⁵ Simplicius, in *Phys*.9.987.17-8.

⁵⁶ Simplicius, in *Phys*.9.641ff.

aspect of measure in its capacity to “shape up” unlimited magnitudes and multitudes so as to make them determinate.

Let us assume that the instant has power to act upon things in the realm of generation. It orders and measures them. But what are the mechanics of such an ordering? How can the instant order anything? The question is about its capacity to exercise power, to be the efficient cause of ordering and measuring. According to Aristotle, one thing can act upon the other if two things are together, next to one another, touch, and act upon each other. The core question is how the now comes into contact with the flow of generation? We can always conceive of it as done through participation. Yet, Iamblichus perhaps felt that the theory of participation must be synthesized with Aristotle’s theory of causation. How does the instant then exercise its efficient causality over generation?

Here we can apply Aristotle’s rationale of causation. Let us assume that the instant causes things to come-to-be-ordered. How does it come into contact with the participants? It cannot do it by the progression of its parts. It must touch them as a whole. The whole which touches parts is a queer notion.⁵⁷ Iamblichus’ instant of a higher kind is an indivisible entity. It is in some ways similar to Aristotle’s limit. Yet, it is substantial, just as the Pythagorean monad of number. It appears that Iamblichus took Aristotle’s theory of an immaterial causal agent which touches and acts upon things, entering into direct contact with things without being affected by them. Iamblichus gives us the following description of this relation:

These <the participating things>, he says, are always becoming and cannot receive the static essence without being in motion,⁵⁸ but they touch the essence of time at any different moment with different parts.⁵⁹

The participants’ being is set in motion. They gradually progress, participate in and come to be what they are (i.e., ordered in respect of before and after in this case), and become receptive of certain characters part by part. They are not receptive of them all at once at an instant. The essence of time (i.e., order) comprised in this partless instant is here presented as touching the participant. However, having touched the

⁵⁷ Aristotle, *Physica*, 231bff.

⁵⁸ Cf. Simplicius, in *Cat.* 8.354.21-2.

⁵⁹ Simplicius, in *Phys.* 9.792.33-5.

participant, the instant remains unaffected by the participant. This is not surprising as he tells us that:

*everything that is divine should both be able to act and not be subject to passions, in order that by being able to act it may not have the impotence associated with matter; and that by not being subject to passions it may not possess the sort of activeness associated with material things, whose action involves passion; the shields must be powers through which the divine remains impassible and undefiled.*⁶⁰

Then, in the Nicomachean fashion, he argues that the passions of the participants are falsely attributed to the instant in a sense that it appears to be constantly splitting and multiplying in the participants.⁶¹ However, in itself it always remains self-same and one in form.

We may ask in this context about the meaning of touch in Iamblichus. He does not explain the mechanics of touching. What immediately comes to mind is Aristotle's affirmations in respect to causation. For instance, he tells us that "if anything causes motion without being itself moved, it might touch that which is moved, though not itself touched by anything."⁶² How is that possible? Aristotle gives us an example of a man's grief which "touches" us whereas we do not touch it. The meaning of touch here is a kind of psychological affection which is not reciprocal.

Aristotle explains this theory and gives us some examples of how this may work. He tells us that "those things which have not the same matter act without being themselves affected."⁶³ He then gives us an example of the art of a physician. It causes health without being touched and acted upon. The art itself is thus not healed. It remains unaffected by the action which imputes health to a sick body. What kind of matter does this entail? It seems to be unclear. However, he then rephrases his account and gives us a better explanatory note. He tells us that "of the things, then, which are capable of acting, those of which the form is not embodied in matter are not affected, but those of which the form is in matter are liable to be affected."⁶⁴ What kind of form is at stake? It

⁶⁰ Proclus, in *Tim. Fr.17* in John M. Dillon (2009), *Iamblichi Chalcidensis in Platonis dialogos*.

⁶¹ Simplicius, in *Phys.*9.792.35-793.1; cf. Nicomachus of Gerasa, *introductionis arithmeticae* 1.1.3.10-2.

⁶² Aristotle, *De la génération et de la corruption* 323a.31-2.

⁶³ Aristotle, *GC* 324a.34-5.

⁶⁴ Aristotle, *GC* 324b.4-6.

appears to be a form that has causal efficacy, can act upon things, etc. Perhaps, in this passage Aristotle was not yet fully freed from his Platonic background as it really allows us to think of the form as capable of acting upon other things.

Yet, such a form must be capable of acting and being immune from being acted upon (i.e., being enmattered). Then it must be a substance of some kind. What is it then? Is not the art of the physician embodied in the physician? Perhaps the physician is an instrumental (intermediate) cause, whereas the art is the principle and the primary cause of health. We can think of the art as the formal cause and of the physician as the efficient cause and active agent in this context. Here in *On Generation and Corruption* Aristotle explained this away by offering an account of the unmoved mover which is also one of the key notions of his *Physics* 8.

Can we apply the same model to the instant? Can Iamblichus' theory be making an allusion to Aristotle's theory of the prime (unmoved) mover? We learn from Aristotle that the notion of touch has various meanings. Some of them point to the possibility of the intelligible (or intellectual) being in touch with the sensible. According to Iamblichus' theory the touch is a kind of imprint left in the participant. The instant is a substance of some kind. Consequently, it can exercise its causal power both by being participated in and by acting upon the object.

Hence, the notion of touch, according to Iamblichus, does not require the instant and the instants to be horizontally arranged. This model of vertical causation avoids the pitfalls associated with meeting the challenges of "horizontal" causation, namely, that in order for the instant to be other and other, it must come to be and cease to exist either in itself or in another now. If in another now, then it must be together with it, situated next to it, touch, be contiguous or, having established common limits, be continuous. However, this appears impossible. Aristotle's instant cannot accomplish this much. It is not a substance. It does not have its own substratum and a potential to be or to become something else, to move, to be next to another now, etc. Iamblichus' vertical model of causation, on the other hand, entails the presence of two substances, i.e., the intellectual (the now) and the material (the participant) and their capacity to interact through touch. In addition, such an instant is immune from reciprocating and being acted upon. Hence, the cause does not need any intermittent causes (which can both act and be acted upon) to be immune from being reciprocally acted upon by its effect.

We thus have the partless and indivisible instant and the now fully divided among the participants. What is missing here is the mean term which can be both divisibly-undivided and self-moved. Even though the instant of a higher kind does not need an intermittent cause in one respect (i.e., to be immune from being acted upon), it still needs it in another respect, namely, in that the cause cannot permeate the whole schema of beings, but reaches out to the ultimate and lowest level through the intermediary levels of reality.

Immediate Contact and Modification by Number

We know that Iamblichus distinguished between various kinds of time or, perhaps, facets of time, along with their proper instants. He spoke about: 1. the transcendent, separate, first and imparticipable time (ὁ ἐξήρημένος, χωριστός, πρώτος καὶ ἀμεθέκτος χρόνος),⁶⁵ 2. the generative time (ὁ γενεσιουργός χρόνος)⁶⁶ and 3. the generated time (ὁ γενητός χρόνος). The issue here is the following: what kind of instant is spoken of as partless and as touching the participating things? Iamblichus thus clearly differentiated between that which is above and beyond from that which is in the participants, being inseparable from the flow of becoming. Yet, the transcendent and imparticipable instant (which is above and beyond) cannot “touch” sensible motions. There must then be an intermediary to assure the transition of the property of order to sensible participants. According to Iamblichus, the transcendent must first be modified by number so that it can then be properly distributed among actions and motions. Again, itself by itself it is imparticipable and cannot touch the flowing things.

We could see above that the partless has been classified as belonging to the primary intellectual entities. Yet, we also learn from Simplicius that Iamblichus “defines the indivisible with regard to the intrinsically stationary forms of logoi.”⁶⁷ Thus, whereas in the former case the reference is made to the partless which is imparticipable, in the latter case, the reference is to the forms of logoi, i.e., things that belong to the soul and the mathematical, things modified by number. What can we make of this? In general, there has been some confusion among scholars about the kinds or facets of time in Iamblichus and the way they correspond. Some scholars identified the transcendent and the

⁶⁵ Simplicius, in *Phys.* 9.792.21–22 and 793.26–8.

⁶⁶ Simplicius, in *Cat.* 8.352.13–8.

⁶⁷ Simplicius, in *Cat.* 8.353.21–2.

generative facets of time and their corresponding instants, some kept them separate.⁶⁸

Iamblichus, however, gives us quite a detailed description of various facets of time. In particular, we are interested in the generative time which is the link between the transcendent and the generated times. He tells us that:

*the generative time, being a number of self-moving movement <regarded> as a time-like monad, is the extension of [or an interval associated with] physical logoi, neither with regard to mass nor with regard to outward movement simply, but it is the extension with regard to the pre-existing order of movement, in which the earlier and later are arranged beforehand and provide the actions and movements with order.*⁶⁹

Here we read about a self-moving number, a phrase which designates the soul.⁷⁰ In his *De anima* Iamblichus attributes such a view to the third head of the Academy, Xenocrates. Here we read that “number, again, constitutes a second kind [of mathematical essence], and indeed some of the Pythagoreans apply it to the soul simply as such; Xenocrates [applies it] as self-moved.”⁷¹ Thus, Iamblichus links generative time to the soul by defining it as a self-moving number. This time then will be a number of self-moving movement. Then the generative time must be individuated in the motions of the soul. The question here to be asked is whether the partless instant orders the soul and the sensibles altogether and all at once or whether it first orders the soul first, and then the soul orders the sensible things. The instant in the soul then becomes self-moving and generative, i.e., one that assures that order is transmitted to the sensible.

The rationale for this is that the intellectual is indivisible. The soul is indivisibly-divisible and the bodies are divisible. The soul should then contain the principle of order as differentiated but unified. It will then synthesize divisible and indivisible in itself so as to pass order to the bodies. It will be that missing intermittent cause which links the unmoved and partless with that which is subject to the flow of becoming. It will be like a physician who imputes the form of health to the body.

⁶⁸ On the facets of time see F. Hoffmann (1980) and J. Dillon (2010).

⁶⁹ Simplicius, in *Cat.* 8.352.13-8.

⁷⁰ See J. Opsomer (2012).

⁷¹ Iamblichus, *De Anima.*, 4.6-9.

The issue here is whether the causation of the instant needs any intermediary causes, like that of the soul / number, or whether it does it directly. The soul presented as a self-moving number can assume such an intermediary role. Then, the imparticipable and the participant should be linked together by the participated and the tri-fold division is here introduced.

This new (i.e., tri-partite) type of division also affects our understanding of the types of instants and of the types of time. The generated time is that which is inseparable from the flow of becoming. To what kind of time does the touching instant belong? Is the connection between the touching instant and the participants (and their correlative nows or present times) direct and immediate? The analogy of touch implies directness. Yet, Iamblichus clearly affirms Plato's system of being and knowledge.⁷² Thus, even if we assume that he no longer needs to address Aristotle's theory of the unmoved mover, the theory still necessitates the presence of intermittent causes. This is not to assure that the prime cause is unmoved in that it is not acted upon when it acts, but to address the issue of how the higher principles manifest themselves to all the strata of beings.⁷³ We will see this thread fully developed in Proclus' *Elements of Theology*.⁷⁴ The focal concern in this case, however, is to demonstrate that the transcendent and imparticipable instant seems to be first modified by number so that it can then have efficacy in the flowing realm.

In the light of this, how should we understand Sambursky's explanatory notes about the touching time / instant? Sambursky here argues that:

*the time of the sensible world flows along the sides of the angle like a conveyor belt, touching the static time of the intellectual world only at the vertex, at the point of its flowing now. But the vertex also glides and passes along this static time from the earlier to the later in such a way that, consecutively, a different now coincides with a different point of static time. Thus, we experience in succession the co-existing points of intellectual time.*⁷⁵

⁷² Plato, *Respublica*, 509b-511e. Cf. Iamblichus, *De communi math.*11.14

⁷³ Iamblichus, *In Tim*, Fr. 60.

⁷⁴ Proclus, *El. Th.* Prop.56-65.

⁷⁵ S. Sambursky (1971), *The Concept of Time in Late Neoplatonism*, 15.

What kind of instant will touch the flowing things? Indeed, Sambursky, at one place, argued that the juxtaposition of the two kinds or, perhaps, phases of time, concerns the generative and the flowing time. He argues that “according to the conception of Iamblichus and his school, one has to see the generative time as the only real time (namely, χρόνος καθ’ ἑαυτὸν ‘time *per se*’), and physical time as its derivative.”⁷⁶ This affirmation either leaves the transcendent time out of the picture or identifies the transcendent time with the generative time. Yet, in other passages, including the one just quoted, he speaks of the transcendent time as a distinct facet of time. We should not spend time here discussing the issue of the facets of time.

What is more important is that Sambursky’s explanatory note apparently does not fully address the subtleties of Iamblichus’ theory of the touching instant. If we assume that the instant at stake belongs to the generative time, this assumption would grant us the possibility of immediate and direct contact through (some kind of participatory) touch. It would also allow us to apprehend how the instant is immune from having been reciprocally acted upon. On the other hand, if we assume that at stake is the transcendent instant (or intellectual time), we would not be able to conceptualize how the imparticipable (by the sensible) can be in direct contact with the sensible. That would, indeed, require the presence of the intermittent cause. Its absence leaves a cognitive gap in the theory, and thus, instead of clarifying Iamblichus’ theory, will leave it blurred.

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⁷⁶ S. Sambursky (1971), *The Concept of Time*, 105. Footnote 6.

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