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AN ENCYCLOPEDIC HISTORY OF THE RELIGIOUS QUEST

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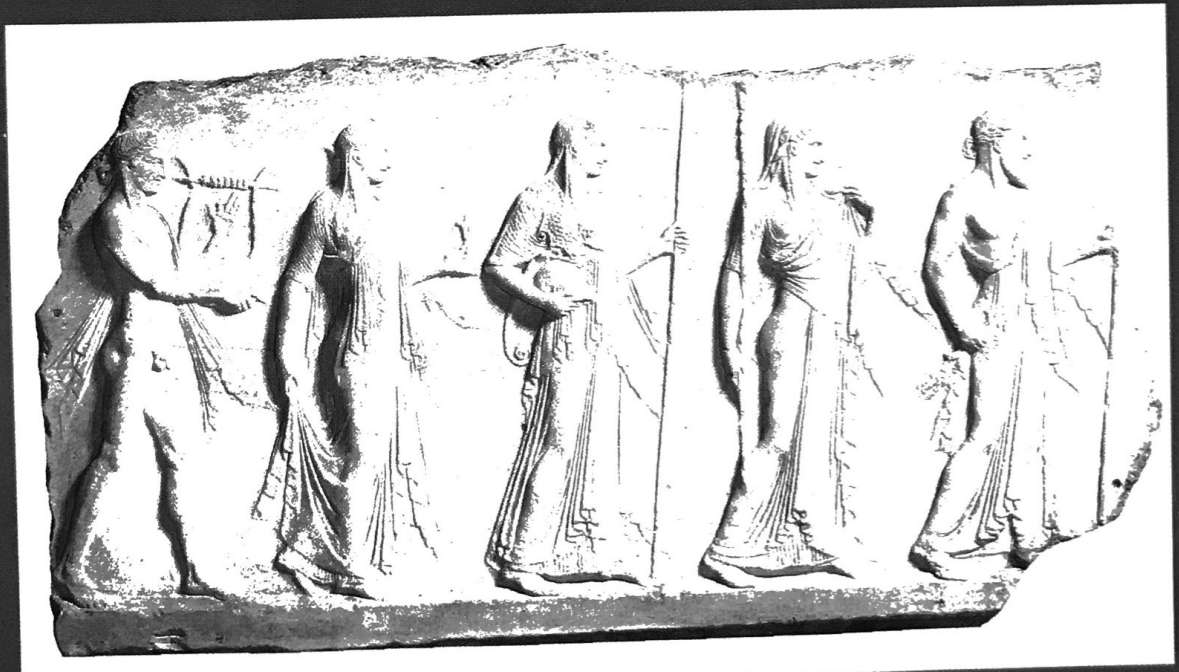

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The Religious Experience of Time and Eternity

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SOMETHING SIMPLE IS WORTH SAYING right away about our topic, the religious experience of time and eternity in the late classical Mediterranean world. Famous complications that have taxed the greatest philosophers cannot in the end be avoided, but a good quick insight is available from reflection on a very simple proposition: time and eternity make one topic, not two.

This was the position of the Platonic tradition both early and late, as I will show in some detail before we are done. But how they are bound together can be sketched in more general terms, and in a way that will help us bring into play from the start our own very different experience of temporal matters. Whenever it is made, I argue, the distinction between time and eternity is resolved out of a complex but tightly integrated experience. The two aspects of that experience must be considered together, each in relation to the other. As a name for this single embracing topic I use the term "temporality."

To be temporal is to have a future, a past, and a present. If we understand the "having" of such a thing as a future very broadly, then everything is temporal, but the concept of temporality belongs primarily to what exists historically. Within any living historical experience, the past and the present and the future are woven together in mutual interaction; yet one or the other of the three can be dominant. One of the great contributions of religious reflection is to make the temporal structure of historical experience explicit.

Where the past is dominant, temporality is experienced as fate or destiny, as that larger pattern in life that one does not see as it unfolds but which appears under an aspect of inevitability as the course of events finally brings

it into view. If the present begins to disengage itself from the past, temporality becomes "the present age," "this world" in a series of worlds, where "worlds" are ages or epochs—whole world orders including human political accomplishments, which come to an end and are succeeded by new ones in a great recurrent cycle of totality. When the past and the present come to be overshadowed by the future, temporality can be experienced directly as history, that larger human story in which many acts of freedom, both of individuals and of peoples, work together to transform the scope of human action. Fate, the present age, history: each of these is *temporal* because for each there is a characteristic way of encountering the past, entertaining the present, and taking orientation from the future.

Time and eternity are horizons that come into play in a characteristic way within each of these possibilities for temporal experience. By 'horizons' I mean backgrounds for different directions in which the experience can be projected for interpretation. From the point of view of the history of religions, time and eternity are distinguished in the same way that the lives of mortals and the lives of gods are distinguished. Vast as this difference may be, it may fairly be claimed that all religious experience depends on the premise that mortal life and divine life are not altogether incompatible, that they impinge on each other and figure in the same stories together. Religious philosophy, grounded in the living immediacy of the mortal–divine encounter, appeals to the conceptual distinction of time and eternity in order to account for the union, not the separation, of humans and gods.

Because so little remains of a seminal religious experience in contemporary philosophical accounts of eternity and time, these are regularly understood to be not merely distinct but contrary notions. Eternity has dwindled to a construction of logic, mere abstract timelessness; time has been emptied into a dimension of the physical world, the measure of a kind of scattering of things. There is no road to recovery of the rich original intuitions through rehearsal of recent theories. For the more roundabout route that I will traverse, some orienting introduction will therefore be helpful.

The Road to Recovery

Perhaps the most familiar narrative track in mythology is the one that begins "on high" among primordial divine doings, but soon slips into a history of mortals that is more and more recognizable and continuous with our own. In such a way, perhaps, one could portray time and eternity making connection with each other, but this would be at an obvious cost

to their distinction. It does not seem that the primordial "when," the "time of the beginning" in the myths, is eternity at all, since within the narrative it stands in a sequential and therefore timelike relationship with mundane times. The theoretical problem here was much discussed in ancient and medieval philosophy in the form of the question how the act of an eternal creator could be the first moment of a history in time. In this form, the question is probably unanswerable, because it confuses different forms of temporal experience. The oldest, mythical way of distinguishing a time of divine actions from a time of human actions is in a way an eternity–time distinction, but the philosophers' question about the eternal creator draws from another temporal experience altogether. In the latter experience, though the conceptual separation is much more sharply drawn, the interplay of the horizons and therefore of the divine and the human is very much more intimate.

For the philosophical religions that flourished around the Mediterranean in the Hellenistic and early Roman periods, divine life was taken to be imaged, or even directly experienced, in a certain kind of presence of mind, of intellectual alertness and intuitive grasp, with which a person could become immediately familiar in reflection. Here humans and gods come together not just in story or dramatic representation but in intersecting consciousness. And here it becomes possible to describe a living experience of eternity, to explore and delineate directly its contrasts with ordinary experience of time.

The philosophers made the experienced timelessness of pure intellectual self-possession into a theme of its own, considering it apart from the contemplation, prayer, or related religious practice in which it first arose. Eventually, especially in late Platonic thought and its Christian adaptation by Aurelius Augustine, this interior reflection on the life of the mind came to approximate the modern, post-Cartesian fascination with individual personal consciousness or the "ego," But even in Augustine, where Christian premises allow for a highly personalized experience of encounter with the divine, contemplative ecstasy is never reduced entirely to the psychological state of an individual. It remains the mark of a more-than-individual, indeed more-than-human, Presence.

It is presence, suggested by metaphors from vision—light, radiance, glory—which shaped the emerging philosophical account of eternity. And it is presence again, the same dimension of experience, which yields the interpretation of time we still use in natural science today.

But presence of what?

The Greek answer was Nature in its *kosmos.* "Cosmos" is the Greek name

for the beauty of order. A literal translation is "world order," meaning world system, the arrangement of things and lives in intelligible and harmonious patterns. But cosmos means order in such a way as to mean beauty too, which explains how the adjective *kosmetikos*, "cosmetic," could wind up in English meaning pleasant, designed to please. If one removes the artifice and superficiality, merges "cosmetic" with "cosmic," something of the grandeur in the old sense of cosmos still can be heard. The orderliness of nature is not just lawlike but beautiful, not just beautiful but powerful, not just powerful but living. The great cosmetic array of things is not a fact but a Presence.

In appreciating nature as cosmos, Greek experience was strongly shaped by astronomy; it stands in direct line with that most challenging dimension of modern astronomy which is speculative cosmology. For this reason the movements of the sky were given special importance in understanding how this world of arising and perishing interacted with the divine ordering power present within it. The *ouranos* or sky is also the heaven; its dramatically final, universal, and all-encompassing presence represents at once the farthest and highest reach of human vision and at the same time the mode of presence of divine life itself. At first, among the Ionian naturalists of the sixth century B.C., study of the sky was "meteorology," where *ta meteōra*, "aerial things," included phenomena of the weather, planets, and stars all on one level. Later, especially in Pythagorean studies, the phenomena of the high sky, the stars and planets, became a domain of their own, on account of the regularity of their movements. The perfect completedness of the sphere came therefore to be the figure of eternity; and its movements, themselves seen as circular, became the definitive signs of the nature of time, an "image of eternity moving according to number," as Plato had his old Pythagorean Timaeus put it (*Timaeus* 37D).

If our goal is the religious experience of eternity and time in the late classical Mediterranean world, we will have to recover some feeling for this strange complicity of Heaven with Mind, of macrocosm with microcosm, of the cosmological sky with the human self. Against the grain of an older portrayal of the emergence of a science of nature in Greek philosophy, this new experience was not in its inception a rejection of the older world of myth and ritual, but a radical appropriation of the old experience of temporal transcendence. It belongs to the unity of temporality that the present never dawns except where there is also a past. Since, according to our leading premise, this is true not just of time but of eternity as well, the proper first step in our exploration should be an account of the "eternal Past" as it survived into even postclassical times.

The Preparation of the Eternal

How should a narrative of the whole of time begin? "In the beginning" is the obvious answer. But when was that? In the past, for sure. But here there is a problem; how does one imagine the past? What knowledge of it or contact with it makes it real to us?

The answer, even for educated modern people, is never "information about past events." However ready we may be to trust our sources and to submit our imagination to the perspective on the course of time that they embody, the times in question are not our own experience. Pastness itself, on the other hand, *is* part of immediate experience. It is with us in the present in the way that memory is always with us. I refer not to memories in their latency, experiences "stored up" somehow outside of attention, but to living, active memory, which is constantly a factor within the patterns of ongoing experience. It may well be the character of this constant factor to be inconstant, to come and go, dilate and foreshorten, now to seize our attention and now to slide away unobtrusively, but in every experience it brings up close to us, places behind us as we say, a kind of space in which things *appear,* though with the particular quality of having been, of pastness.

In what way does this immediate pastness have a beginning? One answer is that Now is the beginning of the past; it is always "just now" that things begin to have been, and it makes perfectly good sense to say that experiences are "first" present "and then" past, so that the past follows upon the present. But this is plainly not the beginning one has in mind in asking about the beginning of past time itself. We want the other beginning, the other side of the past, so to speak.

Still confining the question to the past as it is immediately a part of living experience, this is to ask for the beginning of memory. But here there is something remarkable to observe. Sigmund Freud called it "infantile amnesia," stressing the absence in adult memory of any of the events of very early childhood. This is indeed an interesting psychological problem, since two- and three-year olds do have memories at the time, but it is only an external observation of the specific kind of vacancy that one experiences oneself in the effort to remember the beginnings of memory. Searching within memory, one confronts a curiously vague sort of horizon, a darkness or abyss whose depth cannot directly be discerned. From the threshold of that abyss, individual childhood memories may survive that are vivid and distinct, but they come back to us all self-contained, suffused with an inner light that does not seem continuous with the chronology made available by our later memories. The evasiveness in the time we experience as farthest

past is not a matter of declining intensity but of broken continuity, disconnection, loss of context. The beginning of memory is nothing like a first moment of time, even a forgotten one. It is instead like an ocean, a surface with unseen depth on which initially only islands are seen to float.

The historical past out along which we arrange the events about which we are informed by chronicles is no simple extension of the personal past that memory holds open. The alignment of the personal past with the historical past is a complex achievement of imagination, no less remarkable for the fact that in modern consciousness it has become habitual. In his famous discourse on memory in the *Confessions,* Augustine recognized that it is in many ways more natural to align the past of our own beginning with the absolute past of Genesis, the divine past of the creation of the world (book 10).[1] Fully convinced that a long history extended from one to the other, his sense of this strange coincidence between lifetime and the transcendent time of the divine was nevertheless so strong that it was only with difficulty that he finally abandoned the theory of a literal preexistence of the soul that seemed to bridge the gap.

In the oldest cultures, for whom the time of chronicles has not yet been discovered, the past in which divine action takes place is not projected outside the lifetime at all. To the contrary, it is necessary and possible through the possession of myths and their attendant rituals and festivals, repeatedly to bring lifetime back into contact with primordial time. As the historian of religion Mircea Eliade has shown, where myth is still a living religious presence, the sacred time of the narrative, *illud tempus* as expressed in the "in the beginning" or "when on high," is not a far past, farthest of all and getting farther, but a primordial Past that is in many ways nearer than the remembered past and in preliterate cultures may even displace it.[2] Before there were cities and writing and dynasties of kings, all of which come together in the origin of chronicles, events as near as the grandparents' generation were sometimes given little mind, so that the remembered past trailed off very quickly. The past to which the shaman or the priest gave mind was instead the mythical Past, cherished not as lore about the distant but as the most relevant and illuminating horizon of immediate experience.

What commands attention and seems meaningful to the imagination that builds up chronicled time is the novel, what happens once and is unique: this king, that battle. What commands the attention of the mythical imagination is what happens cyclically, again and again, typically and in recurrent patterns: the seasons of the year, the movements in the heavens, the phases of life (childhood, youth, majority, age). For each of these transitions there is a myth that explains how it emerged "in the beginning," and

to each myth there belongs a rite or festival in which this life is made contemporary with that beginning or, better, in which the Time of Beginnings is brought back again, reconveying the creative power displayed by the gods in the story. In the temporal experience that Eliade describes as Eternal Return, the cyclic time of aboriginal religious experience, what *is* is what *has been*—either repeatedly, as marked in the yearly passage of rituals and festivals, or singly and paradigmatically, in the great Past of the deeds of the gods.

To the degree that festival calendars and the living tradition of ritual observances remain important, this sense of having-been-ness or pastness as the eternal aspect of human affairs outlives the emergence of high urban culture, with its chronicles and its emerging sense of history as the drama of the present. To the new consciousness the old eternity seems more and more like living in the past, in the sense of nostalgia or old-fashioned ways, but that is a mistaken view, because the meaning of the past itself is transformed in historical consciousness. A bridge to the archaic can be attempted, through the creation of a hybrid mythical history of the kind we see among the Greeks in Hesiod and among the Jews in Genesis, where a succession of Ages of the World or patriarchal generations interposes between the time of the beginning and nowadays, but this is finally literary artifice and unsatisfactory, as the Greeks were the first to see.

Beginning with the Homeric critique of the mythical world view, Greek enlightenment distanced itself from the Eternal past not by abandoning myth but by recovering it as poetry, which relativized its political force.[3] The gods and goddesses of the old myths were never, as a now-outdated scholarship used to argue, personified forces of nature; they and their deeds provided the paradigms for familial, civic, and political life. This was the basis of the great inertia of the old piety in the face of citified enlightenment. It was really the new civics of the Greeks—the notion that became constitutional in Athens of *nomos* or law as an accomplishment of human art and reason—that turned the stories of the gods into entertainment or poetic figure. In town and country, in piety and practice unimpressed by the new cultivation, mythic experience and ritual time had a long afterlife, certainly all the way into Greco-Roman times and perhaps, transposed into Christian liturgy, into the modern world.

It was a peculiarity of this survival among the Greeks that the rituals quite regularly outlasted their original mythical contexts. Perhaps because of the dislocations that set in with the Doric invasions of the late second millennium B.C., it was common for rituals and festivals to be preserved whose original meaning had been forgotten. New myths would be supplied, but they were derived, somewhat speculatively, from the rituals; and

it was the latter, the rituals themselves, that carried increasingly the weight of an experienced interaction with the divine. Together with the great fascination of the Greeks with things oriental (Egyptian, Chaldaean, Persian), this laid the groundwork for a particular development within ritual religion in which the experience of transcendence preserved from the archaic spirit made a kind of last stand—still authentic, yet ready for a transformation. I refer to the increasing popularity of what we call the mysteries, especially in Hellenistic times among cosmopolitan seekers who had detached themselves from traditional civic pieties.

Through these initiatory rites, the archaic religious concern for maintaining solidarity between the living and the dead gave rise to a new search for security concerning one's own personal immortality. Taken up as a central theme by the most widespread and long-lasting of the mystery religions, Christianity, personal immortality has remained so important to popular religion in the West that in many minds it is the defining concern of religion itself. It can therefore be disorienting to discover that in archaic religion the notion of human immortality is either absent or, when present, involves either a kind of collective absorption into the life of the gods, in which individuality does not continue, or at best a kind of shadowy, semi-physical persistence which the living must take into account (the cult of ancestors) but which is nothing like a continuation of life past death for the personal self.

From about the eighth century B.C. on, in the Greek world as in India, the persistence after death of this shade or ghostly extract of the life-force came to be more graphically and personally imagined. In one tendency, the world beyond death was seen as offering different sorts of afterlife depending on the virtue or defect of one's earthly life. In another, associated with the legendary Pythagoras, representations of an Indic kind began to creep in: reincarnation into this world after death, within a great cycle of lives through which one might pass, now rising to the divine life of the stars, now sinking to that of a beast or a slug.

At first, these more personalized views of the afterlife made no assault on the gulf that lies between the human and the divine in archaic religion, uncrossable except by mythical heroes whose exceptional stature only emphasizes the lot of ordinary mortals. The kingdom of Hades, though an underworld, is again a world, like this world, however shadowy. The immortality that passes through cycles of reincarnation is expressly this-worldly. But already in the oldest and most indigenous of the Greek mysteries, those of Demeter at Eleusis, and even more clearly in the new Orphic cult of Dionysus Zagreus, the emerging urgency about one's status in afterlife, one's weal or woe in Hades or one's rank in reincarnation, began

to take on a different dimension. The question shifted from that of one's status among the dead, in an afterlife that was real in the same way as successive cycles of Eternal Return, to that of whether one had awakened, in *this* life, to a transcending spiritual and interior life that knows its own eternity *already* and in death is released from the cycle of birth and death and from worldly existence altogether.

The rites called mysteries made something of this experience available to large numbers of people all the way into Roman times. The term "mysteries" seems to have attached first to an ancient celebration at Eleusis, near Athens, and was associated with the goddess Demeter. Like all mysteries, the Eleusinian Mysteries were reserved to initiates (the word *mystērion*, "mystery," derives from *mystēs*, "one who is initiated"), but at Eleusis all who knew Greek and were willing to be purified were welcomed. The cult of Demeter at Eleusis is attested already in Homer, so that one of the compelling features of her mysteries was their authenticity, expressed in the legend that they had been taught by the goddess herself in immemorial antiquity. In this sense they were a survival of the archaic experience of ritual time. More characteristic and compelling still was the sense of security they induced concerning one's personal good fortune in the world to come. For many, this would be merely a magical security, as external a transaction as the gaining of indulgences in early modern Europe. But, for others, conviction seems to have come through an immediate experience and insight concerning the reality of their own interior life or soul, an enlightenment not unlike that of Buddhism.[4] Later, other mysteries from the East joined the Eleusinian in providing this experience. Those of Egyptian Isis or Persian Mithras or the Syrian Great Mother were popular in Roman times. The mysteries of Jesus Christ, baptism and eucharist, were not untouched by this sensibility as they spread through the Greco-Roman world.

In a drastic statement to which some of the philosophers would subscribe, the mysteries accomplished an awakening and showing of *the divine within the self.* These were the terms of the Orphic mysteries, rooted in the myth of the god Zagreus (assimilated to Dionysus), who was torn apart and consumed alive by Titans from whose ashes human beings have been made. In this image, human life is composed of Titanic ashes and is therefore earthly and bodily, but within it a life that is divine has been instilled. The soul, according to the "ancient discourse" of the Orphics, is a god. Hence, the work of the purifications and initiations must be to release this god not just from its imprisonment in the body but from the entire cycle of birth and death to which embodiment subjects it.

The Orphic cult was far more private and restrictive than the popular

mysteries, but it was also geographically more diffused. The problem of its origin and that of its half-mythical, half-legendary poet-singer Orpheus is probably unsolvable. But its outcome is clear and profound. It was with Orphic instigation that Pythagoreans and Platonists would pursue the experience of a divine and interior presence that we have been describing. Rooted in ritual time and the eternity of beginnings, it broke out of time in a new direction entirely: no longer recovering a transcendent Past but aspiring to a transcending Presence. It was to name this new phenomenon that the word "eternity" itself, in Greek *aiōn,* came into use.

The Eternal and Its Image

Eternity is to time, I have said, as the lives of gods are to those of mortals. Religious experience is possible because these overlap, because they can be con-temporal. In the temporality of the divine–human encounter, something is manifested about each.

For the temporality oriented by the past, we have seen, the lives of the gods took place in an elevated and primordial "time of beginnings," a time which was none of the times of profane experience but which held all of them within its power and so was a kind of species or prototype of eternity. Mortal times were cyclic, called back in Eternal Return to past paradigms. The characteristic religious problem in this temporal experience was to find the human place in the unifying thread of life that ran through birth and death, manifestation and occultation, the Land of the Living and the Land of the Dead.

Though this archaic experience survived, the religious experience of eternity and time that is distinctive of Mediterranean spirituality in our period is an orientation to temporal presence. With this we arrive at the notion of eternity proper, the Greek *aiōn.*[5] As I said above, it is an experience of a divine Presence in the human present, a presence reflected both in the cosmos of nature and in the life of the mind. Here the characteristic religious problem is the competence of speculative mysticism to encounter divine creative power. This formulation is deliberately general, because it spans ambitions as disparate as the mathematician's desire to touch in his own reasonings the ordering power displayed in natural law, the theurgist's search for the hidden names and maneuvers that put divine actions within the scope of his will, and the contemplative's discipline of emptying the soul of all sensible activity in order to awaken the perfect intellectual composure in which the goodness, truth, and beauty of things shine forth.

Each of these pathways to the experience of the Eternal Present comes to a crossroads in the thought of the philosopher Plotinus in the third

century A.D. Not himself a mathematician or astronomer, he nevertheless drew out with new clarity the implications of the Pythagorean and Stoic traditions in these fields. He was even less a participant in ritual religion or theurgical practice than he was a scientist, but his principled reverence for the divine presence in nature still had much to teach the later sacramental sensibility, both non-Christian and Christian, in religion and art. What gave him such creative influence outside the domain of his own activity was his power as a learned and contemplative master of Platonic philosophy. The concept of eternity is usually traced back to Plato, yet it was Plotinus who first enforced the understanding of the concept that we now find there—not just in Plato but in his predecessors. The most natural way to prepare for an account of the classical experience is therefore to imbibe its distillation by Plotinus. This receives a sustained exposition in the treatise *On Eternity and Time* (III 7 [45]).

In that treatise Plotinus asks us first to contemplate eternity and then to "come down" in our reflections, from eternity into time, in a fashion that replicates the origin of time itself. This procedure is doubly remarkable.

First of all, it presupposes that eternity and time stand in a relation of such intimacy to each other that a passage between them of any kind is plausible. Thus far, at least formally, he has the highest of authorities on his side. The most famous of all statements about eternity and time is the one to which reference was made above, the metaphor introduced by the Pythagorean cosmologist Timaeus in the great monologue that makes up the bulk of Plato's *Timaeus.* The context is an elaborate myth that Timaeus relates about the making of the cosmos. Fairly late in his story, after both the body and the soul of the world have been constructed by a father or maker who seeks to realize intelligibility and beauty in his handiwork, Timaeus says:

> When the father and creator saw the creature which he had made moving and living, the created image of the eternal gods, he rejoiced, and in his joy determined to make the copy still more like the original, and as this was an eternal living being, he sought to make the universe eternal, so far as might be. Now the nature of the ideal being was everlasting, but to bestow this attribute in its fullness upon a creature was impossible. Wherefore he resolved to have a moving image of eternity, and when he set in order the heaven, he made this image eternal but moving according to number, while eternity itself rests in unity, and this image we call time. (*Timaeus* 37D; trans. B. Jowett)

This famous proposition, that time is an image of eternity moving according to number, is the source of my own initial assertion that eternity and time are together one topic. In saying this I was merely repeating what

Plotinus finds in the doctrine: eternity and time are two manifestations of one life, bound to each other like a presence and its image in a mirror. He claims therefore an unassailable precedent not just for conjoining eternity and time within one treatise but for moving from one to the other on the basis of interior relatedness between them.

Less easily explained, however, is the *directionality* of his procedure, the movement *from* eternity *to* time. This is a move from the unfamiliar to the familiar, from the divine to the natural, and would seem quite backward as a logic of discovery, excluding anyone who has not already advanced to the deepest insights. Plotinus himself facilitates this objection. At the end of the first chapter of his treatise, he allows:

> If someone, before contemplating eternity, should form a picture in his mind of what time is, it would be possible for him, too, to go from this world to the other by recollection and contemplate that of which time is a likeness, if time really has a likeness to eternity. (III 7, 1)

It is Plotinus's constant refrain that the study of eternity and time is a reflection on living experience, not the acquisition of venerable lore. Since a genuine seeing of time would make possible an insight into eternity, why not begin where we find ourselves, which is, after all, in time? Why instead does he confront us at first with eternity, in a portrait as terse and peculiar in its logic as it is familiar in its rhetoric?

This is no easy question to answer. The problem is conditioned by the deepest ways in which the Plotinian experience of eternity and time is religious as well as philosophical. There is in fact no answer at all ahead of the exercise itself. Let us therefore let Plotinus confront us with eternity:

> One sees eternity in seeing a life that abides in the same, and always has the all present to it, not now this, and then again that, but all things at once, and not now some things, and then again others, but a partless completion, as if they were all together in a point, and had not yet begun to go out and flow into lines; it is something which abides in the same in itself and does not change at all but is always in the present, because nothing of it has passed away, nor again is there anything to come into being, but that which it is, it *is*. (III 7, 3)

This tells us that eternity is not just presence but life. Yet the illustrations are geometrical and somewhat austerely conceptual. A few chapters later, writing of the experience of eternity, the same conceptual elements are evoked in a different voice:

> Eternity could well be described as a god proclaiming and manifesting himself as he is, that is, as being which is unshakeable and self-identical and [always] as it is, and firmly grounded in life. But if we say that it is made up

> of many parts, there is no need to be surprised, for each of the beings There is many through its unending power, since endlessness, too, is not having any possibility of failing, and eternity is endless in the strict and proper sense, because it never expends anything of itself. And if someone were in this way to speak of eternity as a life which is here and now endless because it is total and expends nothing of itself, since it has no past or future—for if it had, it would not now be a total life—he would be near to defining it. (III 7, 5)

This is the discourse that caught the attention of later theologians, and its concluding definition of eternity was transmitted to the Latin Christian tradition nearly verbatim by Boethius.[6] The underlying note of the passage, that eternity is not simply the condition of divine life but its "proclamation and manifestation," provided in later mystical speculation the line of connection between the biblical God of revelation and the God of Platonic cosmology.

Now because the divine eternity has been so long celebrated in theology, these two descriptions have taken on a veneer of familiarity. This familiarity does not, however, survive closer inspection. That eternity is changeless is expected; but how then is it radiant life and power? Self-identical, very well; but how then unshakable composure, limitless sufficiency? Simple and total in partless completion; how also made up of many parts, each enjoying the same endlessness of power? Very quickly, an attentive reading discovers unexpected themes, and it is these that lead to the deeper insights.

Most familiar of all in the rhetoric of eternity is the exclusion of pastness and futurity, the consolidation of everything into presence. From this it becomes plausible to speak of eternity as a "now," a moment differing from those that make up life in time by being stationary, but like them in that its structure has the point-like simplicity of instantaneousness, all-at-once-ness. Eternity then becomes a *nunc stans,* a "standing now," in the Latin tag that derives from Augustine and Boethius. The former of the two texts cited might seem to support this image, since it describes the components of eternity in a "partless completion, as if they were all together in a point. . . ." Yet upon reflection, the figure becomes surprising: the point that is like eternity is not the point-now, which divides a familiar time-line into past and future segments, but the point that is the center for a radial outflow, a spherical radiation. If anything about time that comes to attention when we say "Now!" is instructive about eternity, it will not be the compression, elusiveness, and instantaneity of the now-point. This is because, to begin our interpretive exposition, eternity or *aiōn* does not differ from time by being simply devoid of duration!

The word *aiōn* is still in use in English, having arrived through the Latin spelling *aeon.* This has been the source of much puzzlement, however, since

if *aiōn* is 'aeon', it is not at all clear how it could have come to denominate eternity. We speak quite properly of aeons of time, whereas eternity, we are assured by those seeking to impart its secret, is altogether timeless.

This is not quite correct. Aeons are epochs, eras, great stretches across time. In one respect they are standard intervals, measured usually in some large number of years, but the defining property is not that they are lengths of time but that they are forms of completion for what goes on in time. Within them the arrangement of events has a kind of logical finish; there is a beginning and a middle and an end.

The archaic cosmologies that survive into our period construct the totality of the cosmic process out of a plurality of aeons. Within each aeon the pattern of events achieves its own self-contained finish and perfection, and the perfection of the whole is a pattern of such patterns. In a Zoroastrian system, for example, there are four ages of the world: a first age of chaos; a second age of protean creativity, where the Wise Lord has the upper hand; a third age of struggle, where the Adversary tends to come out on top; and a fourth age of resolution, where the Wise Lord prevails again. Egyptian and Chaldaean systems had more complicated astronomical patterns, but the same basic structure, subcycles integrated into a grand cycle of the whole, can be seen in them. The whole is not an aeon but, in the old phrase, an aeon of aeons.

The mark of the present aeon is therefore some present configuration in events, not some distance elapsed since a past time of beginning or transition. Aeon is a present power, a reigning Presence. *Aiōn* could therefore be treated as the name of a god; it could and did translate the Persian name Zurvan, the divinity from whom the Wise Lord and the Adversary are engendered. Zurvan is Primordial Time, primordial not as the archaic but as supervening present power. Zurvanism arose in fourth- or third-century B.C. Persia, perhaps under Greek influence, as a corrective to the unmediated back-and-forth quality of Zoroastrian conflict dualism. Some historians have attributed the elevated notion of eternity that becomes thematic in Plotinus to Persian influence, but such a relationship is inside out. *Aiōn* already meant presence and power and primordial time as the form of such regnancy, long before it lent itself to syncretic theologies.

Confusion is inevitable as soon as one looks for the sudden intrusion of a *durationless aiōn* into the history of a term that originally meant "lifetime," "time span," "aeon." But eternity is never, even full-blown as we find it in Plotinus, timeless in the sense of without all activity, motion, or duration. Eternity is something *intensive* about time rather than *extensive*, and it intensifies *something about time:* time as the bearer of ordering power, time as the figure of a living presence.

We are already on the road to Plotinus, therefore, in a *gnōmē* of the fifth-century B.C. philosopher Heraclitus, in which we find the earliest surviving use of the term *aiōn* in Greek philosophy.

> *Aiōn* is a child, moving counters in a game;
> the royal power is a child's.
> (fr. 52, Diels-Kranz)[7]

Here, correctly enough if the underlying insight be sound, some translators supply "time" for *aiōn.* Certainly it would be overtranslation to write "eternity" for a text this early, but one needs to save "time" to represent *chronos,* which makes its first appearance in the sole surviving fragment of the sixth-century Milesian Anaximander, one of the "founding fathers" of Greek nature philosophy. Yet *chronos,* time, in Anaximander could perfectly well be translated "aeon," the ruling presence. What we really find at the earliest moments of discussion of eternity and time in Greek philosophy is a synthesis of both concepts, in an intuitive experience of natural beauty and truth.

What is certain is that even if final clarification of the concepts took place a millennium later in Plotinus, the time that is the image of eternity is a discovery of archaic Greek nature philosophy. To appreciate that discovery, we need to ask a primitive question ourselves: What should we understand by time? To what does the word time draw attention?

To the phenomenon of time, of course. But this answer is no help, given our recognition that there can be differing temporal experiences, in which different aspects of the world get noticed and regarded as time-like or time-showing. The characteristic Greek philosophical experience begins to show itself as soon as the word time is used to draw our attention to nature and to natural motions and changes. Time is then experienced as something about nature. Previously it could just as well have been something about rituals and the cycles of festivals, or about the fates that are acted out in the interactions of mortals and gods, or about dynasties of kings and chronicles of empires. But the new philosophical writing of the sixth and fifth centuries finds its creative center in reflections "On Nature," in Greek *Peri Physeōs.* Such books would later be called *ta physika,* and from them evolves our "physics." At first with hesitation, but soon with commanding originality, archaic Greek physics identifies and then begins to expound the timelikeness of nature.

I emphasize that it is nature that supplies the phenomena in which time is identified, because, strictly speaking, time itself is not a phenomenon. That is to say, like space or pure matter or pure consciousness, time is invisible by itself, transparent and empty. A phenomenon is something that

appears and can be subjected to scrutiny. By nature Greek philosophy means the phenomenal in general, the domain of what we would call sensible reality.

Nature, then, is physical existence as it appears in perceptual experience. What is physical is not just material, however. Whereas modern physics excludes living nature and restricts itself to material being, it was the biological aspect of sensible presence that most shaped Greek physical imagination.

Living things arise and subside; they show themselves openly or withdraw into latency; they are generated and they perish. When life is the clue, when physics is physiology, physical appearing is like an emerging or an unfolding, not simply the blank overtness of matter. The Greek word itself says this: *physis*, "nature," is from *phyein*, "to emerge or appear," which is the verb for what a *phyton* does, a "plant." Plants do not just emerge in the sense of growing, adding stature by accretion. They unfold their form from out of themselves, budding forth as though from some invisible interior reservoir of form. Whether or not such a botanical image was at work in the original choice of the term *physis*, a late writer like Plotinus certainly hears it there. He quite regularly lets the image of a plant stand for sensible being as a whole.

The arisings and subsidings of things are part of a coherent process that shows patterns. This is the most primitive observation of any possible empirical science. It directs the most primitive of possible analyses, an account of the structure of pattern itself. To these topics archaic Greek physics devoted itself, and so it was primitive. But here primitive means fundamental.

Time in the old physics was associated with the patterns in natural motions and changes, not just with the seriality of one thing after another. And so the question of the identity of time was quickly directed to the structure and power of pattern and order. The oldest surviving original text from Greek physics is a sentence from Anaximander the Milesian, and in it the word time itself, *chronos* in Greek, plays a pivotal role. In order to cite it, a bit of context is necessary. Because this requires reconstruction of lost argumentation some uncertainty is involved, but the general outline is clear.

Anaximander put a name on what was later called the *archē*, the first principle of things. He called it the Limitless, which could also be translated the Infinite. Itself not manifest, it was the source or substrate of all that is manifest. If the source is called Limitless, what arises from it will exhibit Limit, limitation. It appears that Anaximander distinguished two stages in the constellation of the patterns of limitation displayed in nature. At a

higher stage, directly engendered from the Limitless, he placed the simplest form of limitation possible, that in which polar contraries stand apart from one another: day/night, hot/cold, up/down and the like. At a lower stage, deriving from these fundamental oppositions, he placed the much more complicated limitations that emerge among individuals which become and perish.

Sketchy as this may be, it is enough of his position for us to recover the train of thought that leads to our surviving fragment. Begin on the level of the cosmological opposites. Hot stands apart from cold. Let loose the limit here, the difference between these opposites, and they cancel each other, lapsing back into the undisturbed Limitless. Hold the limit, however, and a tension is created from which motion and change might take rise. Drawing from a whole inventory of such simple and intelligible contrasts, the world of sensible becoming is a life modulated by necessity and balance. But what holds the limits open, what calls them into play among the individuals that are born and die? Anaximander says time does.

> Into the same things from which generation comes to existing things, perishing too takes place, in accordance with what is needful; for they give satisfaction to one another and make reparation for their injustice, in accordance with the order of time. (fr. 1, Diels-Kranz; trans. P. Manchester)

This is a very rich text, the vocabulary full of allusion: justice ("satisfaction") given and injustice repaired suggest jurisprudence, for example, and have much to tell us about the earliest sense of natural "law" and the emerging importance of the tribunal in Greek civics. It is also an ambiguous text: which are the "they" in the give-and-take, the cosmological opposites or the becoming things that derive from them? Many such questions are still disputed among scholars. Happily, what is needed for our account is relatively clear: it is the "order of time" that articulates the necessity and orchestrates the justice that prevails in natural processes. Time for Anaximander is an ordering power, not just a succession in events. As the force on whose behalf the Limitless allows itself to be broken open into limitation, time is the name of creative power itself. Its order is not simple sequence but meaningful structure, pattern; not just "this after that" but "this for the sake of that," "this in order for that."

At this earliest moment of its career in philosophy, time is in fact the name for something more than time, since the concept includes the intelligibility and power that will later be reserved for eternity. Even when the concept of eternity makes its entrance in the Platonic tradition, time never entirely loses its association with an order stronger than mere sequentiality.

In a similar way, eternity itself enters Greek philosophy as the name for

something not yet altogether separate from time. In Anaximander's successor Heraclitus, in fact, *aiōn* plays very much the same role as *chronos* in Anaximander.

Whereas Anaximander had seen a necessity at work in nature and specified it through metaphors from jurisprudence, Heraclitus was the first to characterize the lawlike or intelligible quality of natural process as *logos*, "reason," the source of our term logic. He too was concerned with the relationship between truth on the level of fundamental reasons for things and the flux of transformations that is the face of nature to sensation. To his mind, this was a relation of great intimacy and immediacy. To discern the Logos at play in nature required no appeal to some other world of gods, but simply a transformation of attention and intuition, from self-involved and limited human concerns to the universal common cosmos. I speak of the Heraclitan Logos "at play" in the world to bring out the spontaneity and, as we would say, naturalness of the patterned beauty of truth, which he was at pains to defend against the artifice of divinity as the poets portrayed it. It was to make this point that he compared *aiōn* itself with child's play in the aphorism previously cited:

> *Aiōn* is a child, moving counters in a game;
> The royal power is a child's.

Aiōn here could never mean eternity in the sense of a higher order of truth, separate from what transpires in time, because the whole point of the statement is to celebrate the effortless rationality of the flux of natural changes. Yet it could also never mean time, except in the enriched concept at work in Anaximander, where its flux is a purposive and creative ordering power. As the two terms *aiōn* and *chronos* evolve into their more specialized denotations, which have begun to stabilize in the vocabulary of Plato, they retain this reciprocal implication, this reference to one another within that interplay of rationality with sensibility which is nature.

Eternity then is the pure presence of intelligibility, time the image of that presence in the natural cosmos. But what of the mind, the whole interior dimension of the experience of eternity and time, which is so distinctive of the Plotinian development of the theme? As mentioned above, mind, like time itself, is not directly a phenomenon on its own, but meets itself in reflection on that in which its presence is made manifest. Once individual consciousness or self-awareness is identified with mind, as it has been in European philosophy since the seventeenth century, this reflex closes in on itself all too quickly, to create that strange and solitary node we call the Ego. Mind comes to itself in the Greek experience of eternity and time,

however, in an apprehension not of the Ego but of the Sphere of the All, the *ouranos* or sky.

It is no accident that the famous description of the origin of time as an image of eternity in Plato's *Timaeus* has astronomy as its context. Mediated to Greek philosophy above all by the Pythagoreans, the Egyptian and Chaldaean vision of the heaven as the paradigm for the beauty and intelligibility of order produced a tradition in which the Sphere is the epiphany of eternity and the figure of time. Plato has *Timaeus* tell us that all living things learn the obedience to number which is the principle of order from the primordial twofold of the day/night cycle (*Timaeus* 39C).[8] Even Aristotle, who thinks that only the regularity and observational convenience of the movements of the sky give the sky any priority in regard to time, still cites the tradition in which the Sphere shows something deep about the nature of time (*Physics* 4.10.218b1–2; 14.223b19–223a1). That contemplation of the sky as the Sphere of the All can be a religious experience is, of course, evident from the connotations of the alternate translation of *ouranos* as "heaven," the disclosure space of divine presence. In a place where he calls attention to this very distinction, Plotinus says:

> The gods in that higher heaven, all those who dwell upon it and in it, contemplate through their abiding in the whole of that heaven. For all things and earth and sea and plants and animals and men are heaven, everything which belongs to that higher heaven is heavenly. (V 8 [31], 3, 34–36; trans. A. H. Amstrong)

Under this aspect the sky is the epiphany of eternity. There is, of course, a silly version of this notion in popular imagination, ancient and modern, in which God or the gods dwell in the sky in such a way that their non-appearance to a cosmonaut can be promulgated as evidence for atheism. This is an obvious fallacy. A more sophisticated version would station God beyond the sky, somehow on the other side. But this too is excluded by modern cosmological geometry.

As we learn from Plotinus, I believe, all such interpretations of the exaltation that is experienced when microcosm meets macrocosm under the sky are inside out; they mistake up for down. Plotinus is often said to be a mystic, and the mystic is regularly portrayed as someone elevated, always seeking to ascend, in caricature to float off the ground. The gift of Plotinus was instead his capacity to descend, to come down in his thoughts and be perfectly present and attentive to persons and affairs, yet without interruption of his contemplative presence-of-mind, his contact with the above (Porphyry *Life of Plotinus* 8.11–21). He describes this descending as the originary motion of time itself, in which the soul opens up eternal intelligible

being into temporal forms which can be participated in by sensible motions. At the pivotal point in his treatise "On Eternity and Time," where he makes the transition from eternity to time, he writes:

> What it means to be in time and what it means to be in eternity may become known to us when we have discovered time. So, then, we must go down from eternity to the enquiry into time, and to time, for there our way led us upwards, but now we must come down in our discourse, not altogether, but in the way in which time came down. III 7, 7, 6–11)

What is the experience of coming down from eternity with time? Since astronomy has provided so many key ideas in this connection, we try again a meditation on the sky. It is like the ecstatic apprehension in which, prostrate beneath the hemisphere of heaven to which our vision is at any time restricted, as much by the one-sidedness of our gaze as by the earth that interposes between ascendant and descendant hemispheres, we suddenly complete the Sphere in imagination, surround ourselves with wholeness, intuit not just the Two of time but the One of eternity, and find ourselves concentric with its all-inclusiveness and finality. The heaven opens around us as an abyss into which we are falling; it is the dizzying abandon to this All-At-Once-Now that is the true exaltation of the religious experience of eternity and time.

It is not just the doctrine but the experience of Plotinus that Presence There *reaches* presence here. Duration, once touched by this insight, is never again merely time, nor is it only eternity.

Epilogue: The Eternity of the Future

There remains a third form of temporal experience from which follows a characteristic religious experience of eternity and time, that which places the future in the first place. Its foundational events and literature were contemporary with the rise of the spirituality of presence which has been described, but it did not really come into its own until the post-Reformation period in Christian Europe and the dawning of modern historical consciousness. It is therefore only an epilogue to our story here. I refer to the temporal orientation of that extremely intense but short-lived religious experience which produced the visionary Jewish literature called apocalyptic, out of which in turn earliest Christianity emerged.

For the apocalyptic sensibility, eternity is the "world to come," time the dimension of "this world," which is already coming to an end. Its visions use an elaborate allegorical imagery to reveal (Greek *apokalyptein*) how events in time—in one's own time, which is the last time—have come into

a constellation that proves that the New Age is at hand. The characteristic religious problem confronted in this experience is divine judgment, which is to say, the meaning of human life and history in the perspective of the end of the world.

If we say that this experience involves a kind of looking to the future, we will be misled if we supply a modern notion of future as the away-from-now into which expectation, progress, planning, and prediction reach. Apocalyptic speaks out of an experience of the immediate moment, the time of call and decision—in Greek, the *kairos.* This is the Now not of Presence but of Advent, and it is very much a group experience: "It's us! We're the ones who will see! Lo, the Judgment is already being revealed!" The future of the Day of the Lord is present, not absent. It approaches us, we do not march toward it, and certainly we do not bring it about.

This approach, indeed preliminary arrival, is the eternal aspect of the divine. The ecstatic embrace of the end of this world is very much a consolation for the historically beleaguered communities and traditions that produce apocalyptic religions, far removed from the morbid satisfaction of nihilism or the wicked defeatism that cries out, "We are doomed, let it all come down!" Apocalyptic movements, notably the early discipleships of John the Baptizer and Jesus of Nazareth, regularly experience the return of prophecy, as though water had returned to a well long dry. Like prophecy itself, which along with Zoroastrian conflict dualism is one of the principal sources of apocalyptic, the revelations are diagnostic more than they are prognostic. They face the future in the sense that they inculcate a certain state of readiness *now,* an acceptance, not a plan.

The old hasidic predecessors of the Pharisees, whose scholarship went back to Persian times, experienced an outbreak of apocalyptic in late Hellenistic times, in the Maccabean period, when it seemed that the syncretism and idolatry of Empire was all-contaminating and all-destroying. Two centuries later, the disciples of John and of Jesus saw the whole rich world of intertestamental Judaism shattered by the iron fist of Rome. The most important and fully formed apocalyptic visions that survive to us are from this period, the most elaborate from the circle of John (which we know in a Christian redaction as the book of Revelation), the most perfect from the circle of Jesus (chapter 13 of the Gospel of Mark).

In the end apocalyptic always has the problem of outliving itself. It is not true that the world has not ended. Worlds do end, again and again. But tradition outlives the end. In Christianity, apocalyptic experience was mastered institutionally by the two principal Christian mysteries, the baptism by water and the blessing of bread and wine. Spiritually, it quickly ceased being the center of experience of eternity and time within Christian

tradition itself and gave way, like the mysteries themselves and the archaic temporal experience in which they were rooted, to the contemplative orientation to Presence.

Perhaps today the moment of that eternal Presence has passed, but that hardly means that it is gone. Eternity has drawn the burden of the past and the anxiety of the future into its divine composure before, and it can do so again. The spirituality of the Greek Mediterranean world is not everlasting in time, but it is certainly still eternal.

Notes

1. Augustine, *Confessions,* trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (New York: Penguin Books, 1961).

2. Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return.*

3. The familiar argument that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* begin the transposition of epic imagination from the divine to the human and are in that sense already the humanistic critique of mythology that becomes classic in Plato is expounded in relation to the developing concept of eternity by John S. Dunne, *The City of the Gods,* chaps. 3 and 4.

4. An instructive juxtaposition of the *deiknymenon* at Eleusis, the showing of the ripened ear of grain, with the Flower Sermon of the Buddha, concludes C. Kerényi's discussion of "Kore" in *Essays on a Science of Mythology,* 151–55.

5. There is a complicated philological problem in the existence of a second Greek term *aïdios,* meaning "everlasting" but sometimes translated "eternal." In early writers—and even in Plato and Aristotle, in the opinion of some—it is not clear whether a sharp distinction is understood between *aïdios* and the adjectival form of *aiōn, aiōnios.* Those who worry about this problem do so in the supposition that the mature conception of *aiōn* is an 'eternity' that is utterly durationless, whereas what is everlasting plainly has duration. Since, as argued in what follows, eternity transcends time not by excluding duration altogether but by intensifying certain of its aspects, the ambiguity of terminology in early writers does not pose any problem for this analysis, and *aïdios* will not enter the discussion.

6. "Eternity is the whole, perfect, and simultaneous possession of endless life," in Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy,* Book V, Prose 6, trans. Richard Green (Indianapolis, IN, and New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1962) 115.

7. Translation adapted from that of Philip Wheelwright, *The Presocratics,* 71.

8. He calls it "the revolution of the Selfsame."

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