

Eternity

INTRODUCTION

THE notion of eternity, like that of infinity, has two meanings. One meaning may refer to something positive, yet both seem to be formulated by the human mind in a negative way. We grasp one meaning of eternity by saying that there is *no* beginning or end to time's process. The other sense of eternity we conceive by *denying* time itself and, with it, change or mutability.

Considering eternity as infinite duration, Locke says that we form this notion "by the same means and from the same original that we come to have the idea of time . . . *viz.*, having got the idea of succession and duration . . . we can in our thoughts add such lengths of duration to one another, as often as we please, and apply them, so added, to durations past or to come. And this we can continue to do, without bounds or limits, and proceed *in infinitum*."

The unimaginability of the infinite is no different in the sphere of time than in that of space or number. The difficulty, Locke points out, is the same in all three cases. "The idea of *so much* is positive and clear. The idea of *greater* is also clear." But these do not yet give us the idea of the infinite. That only comes with "the idea of *so much greater as cannot be comprehended*, and this is plainly negative, not positive . . . What lies beyond our positive idea *towards* infinity," Locke continues, "lies in obscurity, and has the indeterminate confusion of a negative idea, wherein I know I neither do nor can comprehend all I would, it being too large for a finite and narrow capacity."

In insisting that we can have no positive idea of infinity—whether of space, time, or number—Locke's point seems to be that it is

beyond our finite capacity to form an image of an infinite object. But though our imaginations may be limited in this way, we do seem able to construct—in a negative manner—conceptions that go beyond experience, and have some meaning even if they lack imaginative content. Locke indicates this other aspect of the matter when he criticizes those who assert dogmatically that "the world is neither eternal nor infinite." It seems to him that the world's eternity or the world's infinity is "at least as conceivable as the contrary."

It may not be inconsistent, therefore, to say that infinite time, while unimaginable, remains quite conceivable; for to say that eternity is conceivable is simply to say that endless time is neither more nor less possible than time with a beginning and an end. The first conception is as meaningful as the second. It is in fact formed from the second by negation—by substituting the word "without" for "with" with respect to "a beginning and an end." But unlike our conceptions, our images cannot be formed by negation. When we imagine, as when we perceive, the object before us is positive and definite. We cannot imagine, as we cannot experience, a duration, or a span of time, without a beginning and an end.

WITH REGARD TO the other traditional meaning of "eternity," Locke takes a different position. It too might be defended as a negative conception, so far as human comprehension is concerned, since it involves the denial of time itself, *i.e.*, of a duration comprising a succession of moments. But here Locke says that there is "nothing more inconceivable to me than duration without succession . . . If our weak apprehensions," he continues, "cannot

separate succession from any duration whatsoever, our idea of eternity can be nothing but of an infinite succession of moments of duration, wherein anything does exist."

Nevertheless, Locke affirms that "we can easily conceive in God infinite duration, and we cannot avoid doing so." Whether he means by this that God's eternity involves temporal succession must be determined by an interpretation of the passage in which he maintains that "God's infinite duration being accompanied with infinite knowledge and infinite power, he sees all things past and to come; and they are no more distant from his knowledge, no farther removed from his sight, than the present; they all lie under the same view."

If this passage means that time stands still for God in a single moment in which all things are copresent, then Locke may not be as resolute as Hobbes in rejecting the theologian's conception of God's eternity. Criticizing the Scholastics, Hobbes says that "for the meaning of *Eternity*, they will not have it be an endless succession of time." Instead, "they will teach us that eternity is the standing still of the present time, a *Nunc-stans* (as the Schools call it)." This, Hobbes thinks, "neither they nor anyone else understands, no more than they would a *Hic-stans* for an infinite greatness of place."

A theologian like Aquinas tries to avoid the difficulty which Hobbes finds in this conception by distinguishing between the *now* of eternity and the *now* of time. "The *now* of time is the same," he writes, "as regards its subject in the whole course of time, but it differs in aspect." Furthermore, "the flow of the *now*, as altering in aspect, is time. But eternity remains the same according to both subject and aspect; and hence eternity is not the same as the *now* of time."

The notion of the eternal as the timeless and the immutable does not belong exclusively to Christian theology. In the tradition of the great books it is found, for example, in Plato and Plotinus. Eternity, according to Plotinus, is "a Life changelessly motionless and ever holding the Universal content in actual presence; not this now and now that other, but always all; not existing now in one mode and now in another, but a consummation without

part or interval. All its content is in immediate concentration as at one point; nothing in it ever knows development: all remains identical within itself, knowing nothing of change, for ever in a Now since nothing of it has passed away or will come into being; but what it is now, that it is ever."

Eternity so conceived is perhaps even more unimaginable than the eternity which is infinite time. We may feel that we have some sense of an infinite duration when we talk, as Ivan does in *The Brothers Karamazov*, about a billion years or "a quadrillion of a quadrillion raised to the quadrillionth power." Infinite time is *like* that, *only longer*. But because all our experience is temporal through and through, it is more difficult to get any sense of that which is both absolutely timeless and endlessly enduring.

Poets, and sometimes philosophers turned poets, have struggled to give this concept imaginative content by contrasting "the white radiance of eternity" with a "many-colored glass," or by speaking of time itself as "the moving image of eternity." When Dimmler in *War and Peace* tells Natasha that "it is hard for us to imagine eternity," she replies that it does not seem hard to her—that eternity "is now today, and it will be tomorrow, and always, and was there yesterday and the day before . . ."

These and similar attempts may not succeed as much as the insight that if we could hold the present moment still, or fix the fleeting instant, we could draw an experience of the eternal from the heart of time. "The *now* that stands still," Aquinas writes, "is said to make eternity according to our apprehension. For just as the apprehension of time is caused in us by the fact that we apprehend the flow of the *now*, so the apprehension of eternity is caused in us by our apprehending the *now* standing still."

TO UNDERSTAND the opposed views that constitute the major issues with regard to eternity, it is necessary to hold quite separate the two meanings of the word which have run side by side in the tradition of western thought. The first of these two senses, signifying interminable time, is the meaning of "eternity"

which has greatest currency in popular speech. This is the meaning which appears in the chapters on INFINITY and TIME. It is also the sense in which philosophers and theologians debate the problem of the eternity of the world—whether the world ever began or will ever end.

Since that which exists interminably is imperishable, the word “eternal” is also applied to substances which are thought to be everlasting. Thus Ptolemy, and the ancients generally, think of the heavenly bodies as “beings which are sensible and both moving and moved, but eternal and impassible.” Aristotle calls the heavenly bodies “eternal and incorruptible.” For Lucretius and the atomists, the atoms and the atoms alone are eternal. They are everlasting, he says: “Were this not true of matter, long ago/Everything would have crumbled into nothing.” If the atomic particles “were to wear away, or break in pieces,” Newton argues, “the nature of things depending on them, would be changed . . . And therefore, that nature may be lasting, the changes of corporeal things are to be placed only in the various separations and new associations and motions of these permanent particles.”

The heavenly bodies and the atoms may be thought everlasting, but they are not immutable in all respects, for local motion is of their very essence. Imperishable in existence, they are also endlessly in motion. In Aristotle’s view, local motion can be perpetual or eternal *only* if it is circular. Circular motion alone has neither beginning nor end.

The eternal circular motion of the heavens, according to Aristotle, in turn communicates an eternal cyclical movement to the rest of reality. “Since the sun revolves thus, the seasons in consequence come-to-be in a cycle . . . and since they come-to-be cyclically, so in their turn do the things whose coming-to-be the seasons initiate.” Such an eternal return, it would seem, is also applied by Aristotle to human things, for he writes that “probably each art and each science has often been developed as far as possible and has again perished.”

SINCE THE HEAVENS and the atoms are in motion, even though their motion is everlasting or eternal, they cannot be eternal in the second

meaning of “eternity,” which is the very opposite of the first, not a variation or extension of it. In this meaning, the eternal is an existence absolutely immutable—a being which neither comes to be nor passes away, nor changes, nor moves in any respect whatsoever. Aquinas uses the word in this sense when he says that “the nature of eternity” consists in “the uniformity of what is absolutely outside of movement.”

He also includes in this meaning of “eternity” the notion of interminability; for, he writes, “as whatever is wholly immutable can have no succession, so it has no beginning, and no end.” Yet Aquinas preserves the sharp distinction between the two meanings when he differentiates the sense in which the world might be called eternal and the sense in which he would attribute eternity to God alone. “Even supposing that the world always was, it would not be equal to God in eternity,” he writes; for “the divine being is all being simultaneously without succession, but with the world it is otherwise.”

The conception of eternity as absolutely immutable existence is found in the ancient pagan writers. Plotinus, as we have already seen, makes immutability the mark of eternity. The unmoved prime mover of Aristotle and the Platonic Ideas or Forms also possess this characteristic. But it is the Jewish and Christian theologians who make eternity in this sense one of the prime attributes of God.

Augustine, for example, invokes God as “the splendour of eternity which is for ever still,” and in which “nothing moves into the past: all is present.” Since time is for him inconceivable apart from change or motion, that which exists immutably does not exist in time. Referring to God’s eternity, he says, “Contrast it with time, which is never still, and see that it is not comparable . . . Your years neither go nor come, but our years pass and others come after them . . . Your years are one day, yet your day does not come daily but is always today . . . Your today is eternity.”

Time and eternity are here conceived as two distinct orders of reality. The temporal order is the order of things in change or motion, the eternal the realm of the fixed or permanent, the immobile and immutable. “As eternity is

the proper measure of being," Aquinas writes, "so time is the proper measure of movement."

The eternal and the temporal are similarly distinguished by Plato in terms of the realms of being and becoming—"the world of immutable being" and "the world of generation." In the one we find "the parts of time, and the past and the future," which do not apply to the other. "We unconsciously but wrongly transfer them," Plato declares, "to the eternal essence . . . but the truth is that 'is' alone is properly attributed to it, and 'was' and 'will be' are only to be spoken of becoming in time, for they are motions, but that which is immovably the same cannot become older or younger by time . . . nor is it subject at all to any of those states which affect moving and sensible things of which generation is the cause."

For Spinoza, the distinction consists in two ways of viewing the order of nature. "Things are conceived by us as actual in two ways," he writes; "either in so far as we conceive them to exist with relation to a fixed time and place, or in so far as we conceive them to be contained in God, and to follow from the necessity of the divine nature." Only in the second way do "we conceive things under the form of eternity." We can view things under the aspect of eternity only insofar as we know God and, through knowing God, are able to know all things according as "their ideas involve the eternal and infinite essence of God."

The separation of time and eternity into distinct spheres of reality, or even into distinct ways of conceiving the whole of being, is challenged by thinkers who find the eternal within the process of time. For both Jew and Christian, the eternal God intervenes directly in the temporal order. The most radical form which this fusion takes is perhaps exemplified in the doctrine of the Incarnation of Christ, when "the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us." But, as Calvin reminds us, "the Word was eternally begotten by God," and it is this that establishes Christ's "true essence, his eternity, and divinity."

Whitehead challenges the sharpness of the separation from another point of view. He not only makes "eternal objects" ingredients in

actual occasions or temporal events; but since the events which constitute the process of change are themselves unchangeable, they are for him eternal—even though they have their being within the sphere of change.

A similar point seems to be made in Aristotle's theory of change. When change is conceived as consisting in a transformation of matter, it is the thing composed of matter and form which changes, and neither the matter nor the form. Matter *as* matter, Aristotle writes, "does not cease to be in its own nature, but is necessarily outside the sphere of becoming and ceasing to be." The remark would seem to hold true as well of the form *as* form.

As indicated in the chapter on CHANGE, the Aristotelian analysis of motion finds in matter or the substratum of change, and in the contrary forms *from which* and *to which* a motion takes place, the elements of permanence underlying change. When a green leaf turns red, for instance, green has not changed into red; the leaf has changed from one color to another. The changing leaf is not eternal, but *red* and *green* are, since they are incapable of change. This is the sense of eternity in which the unchanging instant is eternal, or the past is eternal, even though both are somehow elements or aspects of time and the process of change.

The past may be eternal but it no longer exists. The passing moment may be eternal, but it has no duration. Lack of existence and lack of duration together distinguish that meaning of "eternal" in which it merely signifies the unchanging, from the meaning in which it signifies that which exists or endures forever without changing. It is only in the second of these two meanings that the eternal can be conceived as that which exists entirely outside the realm of time.

AS WE HAVE ALREADY observed, the basic philosophical and theological issues concerning eternity cannot be intelligibly stated unless these meanings of "eternity" and "the eternal" are kept distinct.

The traditional problem of the eternity of the world asks, for example, not whether the order of nature is free from change or suc-

cession, but whether the changing physical universe ever had a beginning or ever will end. As indicated in the chapters on CHANGE, TIME, and WORLD, it is a question of the infinity of time; or, in another formulation, a question of the interminability of change or motion.

Aristotle appears to answer these questions affirmatively, especially in the last book of his *Physics* where he claims to demonstrate the impossibility of there having been a beginning to motion. Aquinas, on the other hand, does not think that the eternity of the world can be demonstrated; and of Aristotle's arguments he says that they are not "absolutely demonstrative, but only relatively so—*viz.*, as against the arguments of some of the ancients who asserted that the world began to be in some actually impossible ways." In support of this contention, he cites a remark made by Aristotle in the *Topics*, that among "dialectical problems which we cannot solve demonstratively," one is "*whether the world is eternal.*"

For Kant the problem is typically dialectical. It occurs as part of the first antinomy in the Transcendental Dialectic, the thesis of which asserts that "the world has a beginning in time" and the antithesis that "the world has no beginning, but is infinite in respect both to time and space." The fact that *apparently* cogent arguments can be marshaled for both of these contradictory propositions shows, in Kant's opinion, that the reasoning on either side is not demonstrative, but only dialectical and, as he says, "illusory."

The Jewish and Christian doctrine of the world's creation by God might seem to require the denial of the world's eternity. But in fact the theologians find either alternative compatible with divine creation, which they conceive as the cause of the world's *being*, not necessarily of its *beginning*. Augustine, for example, examines the sense in which the world is held by some to be coeternal with God, even though made or created by God. "As if a foot," he interprets them to say, "had been always from eternity in dust, there would always have been a print underneath it; and yet no one would doubt that this print was made by the pressure of the foot, nor that, though the one was made by the other, neither was prior

to the other." So, he goes on, it might also be said that the world has always existed and yet is always, throughout eternity, created, *i.e.*, *caused to exist*, by God.

Commenting on this passage, Aquinas adds the observation that if an "action is instantaneous and not successive, it is not necessary for the maker to be prior in duration to the thing made." Hence it does not follow necessarily, he writes, "that if God is the active cause of the world, He must be prior to the world in duration; because creation, by which He produced the world, is not a successive change"—but an instantaneous act.

Writing both as a philosopher and as a theologian, Maimonides—many centuries before Kant stated his antinomy—thinks he is able to show that the question of infinite time and endless motion "cannot be decided by proof, neither in the affirmative nor in the negative." Just as for Augustine and Aquinas, so for him it is indifferent—from a *philosophical* point of view—whether the created world and its Creator are coeternal or whether, as Genesis says, "in the beginning God created heaven and earth."

But both alternatives are not equally acceptable to the theologian. Since there is no proof on either side "sufficient to convince us," Maimonides writes, "we take the text of the Bible literally, and say that it teaches us a truth which we cannot prove"—namely, that the world had a beginning in time. Aquinas comes to the same conclusion. "That the world did not always exist," he writes, "we hold by faith alone." It is not "an object . . . of demonstration or science." For Christian and Jew alike, the religious dogma that the world is not only created by God, in the sense of depending for its existence upon God as cause, but was also initiated by God, or caused to begin to exist and move, is based on the revealed word of God in Holy Writ.

Those who, on philosophical grounds, deny creation *ex nihilo* also deny the world's beginning. Pursuant to his theory of the world as a necessary and perpetual emanation from the One, Plotinus, for example, declares that "the Kosmos has had no beginning . . . and this is warrant for its continued existence. Why

should there be in the future a change that has not yet occurred?" For Spinoza likewise, "all things which follow from the absolute nature of any attribute of God must for ever exist"; and to this extent at least, the world is eternal and uncreated.

The man of faith, however, believes in a God who is free to create or not to create, not one from whom the world emanates as a necessary effect from its source. When, therefore, he affirms that God freely chose to produce the world out of nothing, he seems to meet the question, "What was God doing before he made heaven and earth?" To the questioner Augustine refrains from the "frivolous retort . . . made before now, so we are told, in order to evade the point of the question" that "'He was preparing Hell for people who pry into mysteries.'"

Instead he points out that the question itself is illicit for it assumes a time before time began. "If there was no time before heaven and earth were created," he writes, "how can anyone ask what you were doing 'then'? If there was no time, there was no 'then.' " In the phrase "before creation" the word "before" has no temporal significance. It signifies a different kind of priority—the sense in which eternity precedes time, the sense in which Augustine says of God that "it is not in time that you precede it . . . It is in eternity, which is supreme over time because it is a never-ending present, that you are at once before all past time and after all future time."

TURNING FROM eternity in the sense of infinite time to the eternal in the sense of the timeless and unchanging, the great question is whether anything eternal exists. The atoms of Lucretius are not eternal in this sense, nor are the supposedly imperishable heavenly bodies. Nor is it sufficient to point out that change itself involves aspects or elements of permanence; for the question, strictly interpreted, asks whether anything exists in and of itself which, having no beginning or end, also has no past, present, or future—no temporal phases in its continued endurance. Only such a thing would be utterly nontemporal or changeless.

Since nothing made of matter is exempt

from motion, it is generally supposed that no material thing is eternal in this sense. Not even God is eternal unless God is absolutely immutable as well as spiritual. The angels are spiritual beings, yet, according to Christian theology, they cannot be called "eternal" because, in the first place, they are creatures and had an origin; and, in the second place, they are subject to spiritual change even if they are not involved in the sorts of motion to which bodies are susceptible. The theologians, therefore, use the word "aeviternal" to signify the mode of angelic existence in that it is "a mean between eternity and time." Aeviternity, Aquinas explains, has "a beginning but no end," while "eternity has neither beginning nor end . . . and time both beginning and end."

THE QUESTION ABOUT the eternal as timeless and immutable existence has two parts: Does an immutable God exist? Does anything else exist which is immutable?

To the first question, it does not suffice to reply by affirming the existence of God. Some modern theologians deny God's absolute immutability, and so deny the eternity of His being in the precise sense under consideration.

With regard to the second question, we must observe that, in the tradition of the great books, eternity has been claimed for two things other than God, namely, for truth and ideas. Whatever "is produced by reasoning aright," Hobbes says, is "general, eternal, and immutable truth." On somewhat different grounds William James declares, "there is no denying the fact that the mind is filled with necessary and eternal relations which it finds between certain of its ideal conceptions, and which form a determinate system, independent of the order of frequency in which experience may have associated the conception's originals in time and space." He quotes Locke to the effect that "truths belonging to the essences of things . . . are eternal, and are to be found out only by the contemplation of those essences."

The common phrase—"the eternal verities"—which James uses testifies to the prevalence of the notion that truth itself cannot change, and that when men speak of a new truth or the growth of truth, the change they

refer to is only a change of mind with respect to what men think is true or false, not a change in the truth itself. Whatever is true now, always was true and always will be. Time and change make no difference to the truth of *two plus two equals four*.

But even so it can still be asked how the truth exists, for the attribution of eternity to anything also requires us to consider its mode of being. If, for example, the truth exists only in the mind, then it exists unchangingly only in the mind of an absolutely infallible knower, a mind which neither learns nor forgets, nor changes in any respect with regard to what it knows. If God is such a knower, eternal truth can have existence in God's mind.

The theologians sometimes go further and identify absolute truth, as they identify absolute goodness, with God. Aquinas writes, for example, that "if we speak of truth as it is in things, then all things are true by one primary truth; to which each one is assimilated according to its entity, and thus, although the essences or forms of things are many, yet the truth of the divine intellect is one, in conformity to which all things are said to be true." On this view, it would appear that there are not two eternal beings, but only one.

James finds immutability not only in the truth, but also in the concepts of the human mind. "Each conception," he writes, "eternally remains what it is, and never can become another. The mind may change its states, and its meanings, at different times; may drop one conception and take up another, but the dropped conception can in no intelligible sense be said to *change into* its successor . . . Thus, amid the flux of opinions and of physical things, the world of conceptions, or things intended to be thought about, stands stiff and immutable, like Plato's Realm of Ideas."

In the case of ideas, however, the problem is complicated by the question whether ideas exist in and by themselves, outside the mind of God or man. If, according to a doctrine attributed to Plato and the Platonists, the Ideas or Forms exist separately, then they constitute a realm of eternal beings, for their immutability is unquestionable. If, from an opposite point of view, the realm of unchanging ideas

is identical with the divine intellect, then no eternal being or beings exist apart from God.

THE PROPOSITION that God is the only eternal being, the only uncreated and immutable existence, is inextricably connected with the proposition that God is the only actually infinite being, the *ens realissimum* having all perfections. "Eternity is the very essence of God," Spinoza writes, "in so far as that essence involves necessary existence." In saying this he appeals to his definition of eternity, by which we are to understand "existence itself, so far as it is conceived necessarily to follow from the definition alone of the eternal thing." For Spinoza, as well as for Aquinas, the same fact which makes God eternal—namely, the identity of his essence and existence—also constitutes his infinity and uniqueness. It is impossible, Spinoza argues, for there to be two infinite substances. For the same reason, there cannot be two eternal beings.

As indicated in the chapter on INFINITY, when the word "infinite" is applied to God, the theologians give it a positive rather than a negative significance. They mean by it the actual infinity of perfect being and absolute power, in sharp distinction from the potential infinity by which the mathematicians signify the *lack* of a limit in addition or division.

These two meanings of "infinity" seem to parallel the two meanings of "eternity" which we have dealt with throughout this chapter—one the negative sense in which it means the *lack* of a beginning or an end to time, the other the positive sense in which God's eternity consists in that fullness of being which can exist apart from time and change. Because our intellects are finite, we may apprehend eternal being in a negative manner by calling it "timeless" or by conceiving it as infinite duration, but Spinoza cautions us against supposing that it can be "explained by duration or time, even if the duration be conceived without beginning or end."

One other theological discussion raises issues which involve in a unique way the two meanings of eternity. It deals with the revealed doctrine of perdition and salvation as eternal death and eternal life. Is the eternity of hell

and heaven equivalent to a period of *endless* duration or does it mean—more fundamentally—the *unchanging* state of souls after the Last Judgment?

It is the eternity of hell that Pascal puts into scales against the temporal brevity of earthly pleasures in his formulation of the wager between temporary earthly pleasures and eternal life. As Joyce observes, "To bear even the sting of an insect for all eternity would be a dreadful torment."

According to Augustine and Aquinas, the eternity of heaven and hell means the moral immutability of the immortal soul as well as the interminability of the beatitude it enjoys or the punishment it suffers. Only in purgatory does a change of moral state occur, but the process of purification which takes place there is always limited in period. Purgatory is, therefore, not eternal in either sense.

As Kant sees it, however, the afterlife must not only be interminable, or of infinite duration, but it must also permit a progressive moral development without end. Man is justified, according to Kant, "in hoping for an endless duration of his existence" only on the ground that "the holiness which the Christian law requires . . . leaves the creature nothing but a progress *in infinitum*." From still another point of view, Dr. Johnson questions the traditional Christian dogma that the souls of the blessed are secure in a perpetual state of rectitude—in this respect like the good angels who are confirmed in their goodness from the first instant of creation.

Boswell had "ventured to ask him whether, although the words of some texts of Scripture seemed strong in support of the dreadful doctrine of an eternity of punishment, we might not hope that the denunciation was figurative, and would not be literally executed." To this, Dr. Johnson replied: "Sir, you are to consider the intention of punishment in a future state. We have no reason to be sure that we shall then be no longer able to offend against God. We do not know that even the angels are quite in a state of security . . . It may, therefore, perhaps be necessary, in order to preserve both men and angels in a state of rectitude, that they should have continually before them the punishment of those who have deviated from it."

On Dr. Johnson's theory, the moral condition of the damned seems to be immutable. It is irremediable even by the punishments which, according to him, may exercise some deterrent effect upon the blessed who, he seems to think, are not as unalterably set in the path of righteousness as the wicked are in their iniquity.

On any of these conceptions of heaven and hell, and of the state of the soul in the afterlife, the meaning of "eternity" is somewhat altered; for eternal life or eternal death is conceived as having a beginning, if not an end, for the individual soul. As in the case of all fundamental religious dogmas, the truth asserted remains obscure and mysterious. It is not only beyond imagination, but also beyond any adequate rational conception, analysis, or demonstration.