

Time and Eternity.

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Now, as for time, I noticed that the conduct of these meetings has been most deficient, and those who have spoken are very polite to end on time. There's no clock there as there is in some buildings. So I'll put my watch here and then I'll know how long I've been talking, if only I can remember when I began.

[Audience laughter]

Plato, the greatest of all Greeks, defined, or one may better say, described time as the moving image of eternity. This is pleasing phraseology, but it is not very informative. Nevertheless, it is not entirely devoid of meaning, for it states that there is a difference between time and eternity, and that eternity is a reality of which time is only an image.

In Christian theology, the relation between an eternal, immutable God and the temporality of the created world has long been a perplexing problem. Last century, Soren Kierkegaard, and in this century Karl Barth and Emil Brunner, attempted a complete reconstruction of what they thought was Christianity on the basis of an eternity-time dialectic. This theological trend should be sufficient to draw the attention of educated Christians to the problems of time, and the difficulties of the physical scientists who find in time should be sufficient to attract the attention of intelligent non-Christians.

For example, although it is desiring upon occasion to make measurements at two different places simultaneously, simultaneity has proved to be a great complexity. Since the scientific difficulties will not form a large part of this paper, but since also the scientific theories of time do in fact have some bearing on theology, it is best at the outset to survey them briefly.

If Plato sounds more theological, Aristotle sounds more scientific. For him, time was the numerable or measurable aspect of motion. The motion of a physical body through space was basic, and time was considered a derivative of motion. But if time is an aspect of motion, it cannot be an independent Newtonian framework. Time and space as independent realities are not in much favor among scientists today. Time may indeed be measured by motion, as motion is measured by time; but this does not result in positing an independent framework for events: rather it results in a sort of relativistic notion of time and space.

At the end of his discussion, Aristotle wonders whether time could exist if there were no rational soul. If nothing but a mind or soul can number or measure, there could be no time without this

rational activity. Aristotle does not proceed with this possibility. And as it is much anticipated by St. Augustine and Immanuel Kant, we shall drop it here.

Contemporary scientists may not be making their way back to Aristotle, but they are severely critical of Newton's independently flowing time. Briefly, a part of the argument is this: If time flows past us, or if we advance from past to future through time, this would be a motion, not with respect to time, but with respect to hypertime. If we suppose that time can be measured in seconds and if motion in space is measured by feet per second, at what speed is the flow of time? Seconds per what? Moreover, if passage is of the essence of time, it is presumably the essence of hypertime too, and this would lead to a hyper-hyper time and so on ad infinitum.

Newton in his *Principia*, the Scholium after Definition VIII, had said, "Absolute, true, and mathematical time...flows equably without relation to anything external." In contemporary physics, the result of the difficulties inherent in the concept of an equably flowing time is to posit a four-dimensional space-time continuum by which the language of science can be expressed with tenseless verbs.

Perhaps some in this audience might become a little impatient if some recent theories of time were examined in detail. However, one must insist that unless a person has some elementary notion of what time is, the discussion bogs down in vagueness and ambiguity. One cannot relate time and eternity any better than one can relate force and momentum without an idea of what the terms means.

Since all of us here are chiefly interested in theology, and since the great Augustine, bishop of Hippo, long ago tried to say what time is and relate it to problems of creation, we turn to his writings with interest and anticipation. Some of the younger generation might disdain a retreat so far into the past. But Augustine is not altogether antique. The very modern Wittgenstein, in the *Blue and Brown Books*, page 26, shows how much Augustine influenced him. In fact it may possibly be this influence helped Wittgenstein to repudiate the Logical Positivism of his earlier *Tractatus* in favor of his later *Philosophical Investigations*. At any rate Augustine's view must be considered.

In Book XI of the *Confessions*, Augustine raises the problem of creation. The question is, What was God doing before he did anything? Or, since the Latin *facio* has two translations, the question can be, What did God make before he made anything? Could God have forborne for innumerable ages from so great a work as creation?

Augustine replies that the question is not well put. God is the creator of all ages. Therefore, there could be no time before God created time. God surpasses all time by the sublimity of an

ever-present eternity. To put it more clearly, time is not an independent reality, but a function of something else. To quote again, “If nothing passed away, there could be no past time; if nothing were coming into being there could be no future time; and if nothing were now, there could be no present time.” What those things are, whose becoming and passing away makes time, remain to be identified.

To complete the identification, Augustine first rules out the Aristotelian theory. Time is not the motion of any body. The argument is somewhat as follows: When a body is moved, we measure how long it moves by time. We cannot measure how long, unless we know when it started and when it stopped. Therefore time is distinct from any motion, since we cannot measure a motion unless we first measure time.

Some contemporary scientific objections to Augustine’s argument depend on the denial of one of Augustine’s main premises. The premise is “what does not exist cannot be perceived or measured.”

Hugh M. Lacey in a collection of critical essays on Augustine, asserts “it is very rare indeed that an event or state of affairs that is observed is simultaneous with the observation.” One may question however whether Lacey has mistaken what precisely is being measured. One always measures a length on a scale. And the scale is surely present at the time of the observation. Hence, even though it at first may seem strange that we cannot measure the time a body moved yesterday, perhaps Augustine spoke the truth when he said, “what does not exist cannot be perceived or measured.”

What then is time, if it is not the motion of bodies, but is nonetheless a change of some sort? Perhaps Augustine is not so clear as he might have been, but he clearly locates time in the mind or soul. Past time exists in our memory; future time is our present anticipation. When we measure time, therefore, we are measuring the passing ideas in our mind. To quote, “It is in thee, my mind, that I measure times. The impression, which things as they pass by cause in thee [my mind] remains even when they are gone. This is it which, still present, I measure. Either then this is time, or I do not measure times” (XI, xxvii, 36). Such is the basis for Augustine’s answer to the question, What was God doing before he did anything. The question is poor because there is no before in eternity.

That time is a function of a created being-not a created body, but a created mind-is supported also by references to the City of God and the Commentary on Psalm 105. The City of God says, “For if eternity and time be rightly distinguished, time never to be extant without motion, and eternity to admit no change, who could not see that time could not have being before some variable creature had come into existence?” (XI, vi). This means that there could have been no

time before the creation of the world. It also means that eternity is different from time because time is a function of change and God is immutable.

This Augustinian view has in the main been normative for Protestant theology. I. A. Dorner, the great Lutheran theologian of the last century, wrote, "In regard to space God is not extended, and as opposed to time, God is not successive. A kind of divisibility of God would arise in relation to time, if we thought of his Being not as eternally and absolutely realized, but as only gradually developing, as passing from the potential into the actual state by successive stages." This is essentially Augustinianism, and Dorner hardly deviates from it.

However, although Augustinianism has been the rule, there have nonetheless been exceptions. The Danish Bishop Martensen, whom Kierkegaard lampooned, diluted his Augustinianism to a considerable and inconsistent extent. This audience, however, will be more interested in some references to Reformed views. Calvin unfortunately pays little attention to questions of time and eternity. He considers them useless. Notwithstanding his great authority, however, anyone who supposes that Scripture provides some implications on the subject cannot dismiss it as entirely unedifying.

The Westminster Confession is of course a confession and not a three volume work on systematic theology; and yet for all its brevity it does not fail to note that God is "a most pure spirit...without body, parts, or passions, immutable and eternal." It may seem strange that the Confession does not specify that God is omniscient. However, the Larger Catechism, Q.7, after asserting that God is eternal and unchangeable, adds the phrase, "Knowing all things."

Charles Hodge wrote a three volume Systematic Theology. In Volume I, pages 385-386, he says, "With him, that means with God, there is no distinction between the present, past, and future; but all things are equally and always present to him. With him duration is an eternal now. This is the popular and the Scriptural view of God's eternity. To him there is neither past nor future; ... the past and the future are always and equally present to him."

This is indeed a good statement of the Scriptural position. It is not necessary, however, to follow Hodge when he asserts that "time is dependent on space" (387). Had Hodge anticipated the post-Newtonian four-dimensional theory, and had he therefore added that space is also dependent on time, one might consider him ahead of his time. But in his historical space his assertion is at best extremely doubtful.

Hodge further confuses the matter by positing a subjective or mental time in addition to objective or physical time. Thus he tries to merge Aristotle and Augustine, but how such a merger can be successful, he does not explain. In fact, he tries to describe God's mind on the paradigm of a

human mind. Thus he asserts a succession of thoughts in God's mind, but he pays no attention to how this contradicts omniscience or even to its inconsistency with the quotation from page 385 and its repetition on page 390. He even says it is of minor importance to harmonize how these different things can be.

This deviation from the Augustinian position seems unfortunate. When an author proposes an unusual and puzzling combination of discordant elements, he ought to give some hint as to how a harmonization is possible. But still more unfortunate is Hodge's disregard of the necessities of omniscience. If there is a succession of ideas in God's mind, then the ideas that succeeded today were not present yesterday, and presumably some of yesterday's ideas have now passed by. But this means that God did not know all things yesterday, neither is he omniscient today. Is it not clear that a temporal succession of ideas in God's mind is incompatible with omniscience? Man is not omniscient precisely because his ideas come and go. Man's mind changes from day to day; God is omniscient, immutable, and therefore eternal.

More recently other authors have written about time and God. One such is Oscar Cullmann in his book *Christ and Time*. Similarly there is an article by Carl F. H. Henry in *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*. Neither the book nor the article really discusses time. The article, Carl Henry's article, mainly considers time in the sense of *kairos*: a definite time, a date. Cullmann is interested in *aion* and *aiones*: ages of time, this age, and the coming age. Neither author discusses *chronos*, though Cullmann incidentally or accidentally makes some references to what he calls philosophic time. To keep the matter in proper focus, let it be noted that the term *chronos* occurs in the New Testament some forty times. In addition to these instances of the word *chronos*, both the Old and the New Testaments have many bits of chronological information. That the words and concepts of *kairos* and *aion* are suitable for discussion cannot be doubted. Even though *kairos* doesn't always mean the present time or the appropriate time, it has other meanings. But they should be discussed. In fact a critique of Cullmann's *Christ and Time* will immediately follow. But first we must strenuously resist any assertion that *chronos*, and its relation to eternity, omniscience, and immutability, is a subject unsuitable for discussion. Nor is Cullmann successful in avoiding these so-called metaphysical or theological problems, in spite of his desire to do so.

To begin with, the title *Christ and Time* is somewhat of a misnomer. The author has no interest in time as such. He is interested in ages (*aion*, *aiones*). To a certain extent, this is a legitimate choice of subject matter; but it is dangerous to discuss parts of time without any idea of what time is. One can measure water in a beaker, but the qualities of water which differentiate it from sulfuric acid should not be ignored simply because we determine that the beaker holds 22 cc. Similarly the Alexandrian period may have lasted a short time, whereas the Egyptian Kingdom lasted a long time-and for certain restricted purposes this may be sufficient-but a comprehensive

theology should have something to say about what that thing is that is called short and long. The length of time is the beaker; the time itself is the water or sulfuric acid.

Cullmann is primarily interested in parts of time. He describes New Testament usage of *aion*, and relates it to the Hebrew *olam*, and notes that these are conceived as temporal durations. His material on this point is at least generally correct. When he points out that “the age to come” is infinite time and not timelessness, one can pretty much agree. After all, this is hardly a new discovery in New Testament scholarship.

But then he goes beyond the limits of his texts and asserts what they do not say. To quote: “If we wish to understand the Primitive Christian use of *aion*, we must free ourselves completely from all philosophical concepts of time and eternity. In summary it may be said that the temporal sense of the word ... has in view ... specifically: 1. Time in its entire unending extension, which is unlimited in both the backward and forward direction, and thus is ‘eternity’” (48).

This quotation, the content of which controls Cullmann’s thought throughout, suffers from serious defects. Aside from the false piety of complete freedom from all philosophical concepts of time and eternity, Cullmann’s claim to such freedom is false. When Cullmann asserts that time is “unending,” “unlimited in both the backward and forward direction,” and then when he concludes that time is therefore eternity, he is indulging in metaphysics just as much as if he had said the opposite. The quotation does not equal a complete philosophic theory of time; it is not even a definition; but it is certainly a metaphysical proposition. A denial of the distinction between time and eternity is not Platonic metaphysics. Nor does it agree with Augustine or Charles Hodge. But it can perchance be fitted into an Aristotelian metaphysics, for in ruling out the former ones, it asserts something like the latter, the Aristotelian.

Unfortunately, Cullmann does not make clear how much of Aristotle he accepts. He mentions only “unlimited in both the backward and forward direction.” This could be fitted into a Kantian instead of an Aristotelian view. Cullmann does not say enough for us to decide. This, his failure to say positively what he means by time, leaves many of his further assertions without foundation. Can one confidently assert that time is unlimited in both directions without knowing what time is? Aristotle defined time and could so assert. For him time was the measure of motion, and since he explicitly argued that motion could never have begun, he consistently asserted that the universe has always existed and that time is infinite. But a person who believes that God created the universe at a definite moment not infinitely remote in the past cannot follow Aristotle. No doubt Cullmann would repudiate any dependence on Aristotle or Kant. His wish is to be Biblical. He aims to contrast primitive Christianity with Greek philosophy. But James Barr, who was mentioned in the speech yesterday, in his *Biblical Words for Time* asserts that

Cullmann's vocabulary study fails to support his denial of a distinction between time and eternity. The New Testament does not seem to support him.

The discussion here, however, cannot turn aside to word studies. Nonetheless, it may be acknowledged that even on Augustine's definition-in fact, because of Augustine's definition-the age to come is not eternity, but is endless temporal succession. Created beings, angels, and men, because of their created nature, will always have a succession of ideas. But it by no means follows that there is no "eternity" other than this. God has no succession of ideas. He is omniscient. He never receives from some other source or from his own inventive genius an idea he never previously had. Nor does he forget. His mind is completely immutable, for otherwise he would sometimes be ignorant. This then is eternity. Time came into operation with created minds. Eternity does not change. If, however, Cullmann or anyone else disagrees with this conclusion, he must tell us what time is before he can explain why he disagrees.

For this very reason confusion occurs when Cullmann contrasts the Greek view of time with the "Primitive Christian" concept. In the first place there is no theory that can be called "the Greek view of time." No doubt Aristotle's view of time ruled out the concept of eternity, but Plato asserted eternity as distinct from time. No one of these views is more or less "Greek" than another.

Cullmann makes a better showing when he confronts the cyclical view of history held by the Stoics and the so-called straight-line development of the Christian view of history. The Stoics had a theory of eternal recurrence, somewhat similar to that of Friedrich Nietzsche; and Plato, perhaps not with perfect consistency, has world cycles within each cycle a repeated historical evolution or devolution from kingship to oligarchy, to democracy, to dictatorship. Although Christianity also allows for cycles, as the period of the Judges shows-and not the Judges only but also God's judgments on Egypt, Assyria, Babylonia-the type of cycle found in the Old Testament is basically different from Plato's or the Stoics', and Cullmann rightly contrasts them. But this is a matter of history, not of time.

The more serious point is that Cullmann does not stay with history. He had used the word time, and this inevitably leads one to think of physics and philosophy, i.e., to think of time, not of history. Accordingly, Cullmann wishes to show that time itself is "rectilinear" (53) in Christian thought and circular in Greek philosophy (51ff.): "The symbol of time for Primitive Christianity as well as for Biblical Judaism and the Iranian religion is the upward sloping line, while in Hellenism it is the circle. Time moves about in the eternal circular course in which everything keeps recurring." In a footnote he supports this idea with a reference to Aristotle, *Physics*, 4:14, "For indeed time itself seems to be a sort of circle."

When, however, one consults the context in Aristotle, the illusion of relevance vanishes. Aristotle had previously defined time as the measure of motion. Any motion will do as a measure. But the best unit of measurement is the revolution of the Sun around the Earth, because, as Aristotle says, “This is the best known.” Since this motion is regular, people often think that time is the revolution itself. “This also explains the common saying that human affairs form a circle, ... for even time itself is thought to be circular”(Physics IV 223b22-30). This passage in Aristotle hardly supports Cullmann’s contrast. Even if some uneducated Greeks could not distinguish between time itself and a unit measure of time, as some people today cannot distinguish between heat and a degree of heat, and even if common opinion thought of time as a twenty-four hour revolution, there would in this be nothing significant for theology. This was not what was best in Hellenic thought, as Aristotle clearly shows; and when one wishes to contrast Greek thought and Christianity, one ought to turn from popular misapprehensions and consider Aristotle himself, or some other notable philosopher.

If now we set aside consideration of history as not too relevant to the subject of time and eternity, there remain two points that can be considered as objections to the Augustinian view. The first is more popular than profound, but a brief reference to it is excusable.

The phrase “eternal life” gives some Christians the idea that our heavenly state will be non-temporal. This notion has also been supported by a particularly poor interpretation of the statement that “time shall be no more.” More profoundly is a view frequently found in the Greek Orthodox Church. With a legitimate stress on the Incarnation and a not so legitimate desire for literary balance, some Eastern theologians say that God became man so that man could become God.

Westerners normally reject the idea that salvation is deification. Nevertheless some have tendencies in that direction when they picture man in Heaven as supra-temporal. Herman Dooyeweerd, even though he is neither a Greek Orthodox nor a fundamentalistic American, refers to a supra-temporal center in the human heart. Early in his gigantic opus that will give you many headaches if you try to read it, he subsumes logical inference under temporal sequence. In a footnote, he tries to show how a syllogism, a syllogism mind you, is an aspect of time. In the next footnote, he asserts that addition and subtraction in arithmetic are temporal “because the numerical relations as well as the spatial ones are, in reality, subjected to change.” You don’t always add correctly, you change your answers. Furthermore, logical “diversity can come to a radical unity only in the religious center of human existence. For this is the only sphere of our consciousness that transcends time. Only from this supra-temporal concentration point are we in a position to gain a veritable notion of time.”

The arguments of an earlier publication in which some of Dooyeweerd's intricate confusions were analyzed, and in which it is shown how Dooyeweerd's theory leads to his rejection of the infallibility of Scripture, will not be repeated here. The present point is that for Dooyeweerd man is supra-temporal. If, however, time is the succession of ideas in a created mind, and if in Heaven man does not become omniscient, then man remains a temporal creature forever.

The only Scripture reference that seems to suggest the attainment of omniscience by man is 1 Corinthians 13:12. Commentators hesitate to draw this conclusion on the basis of this verse, though they often fail to give good exegetical reasons for their hesitation. Meyer, however, notes that the text does not say, "I shall know even as I am known," but rather, "I shall know even as I was known." But you can look at the commentaries for all that. Be that as it may, it might require another complete lecture to exegete the verse against a vigorous claim that it teaches human omniscience. For the present, let the assumption rule that man never becomes omniscient. He learns more and more in Heaven, at what rate and with what interruptions we do not know. But if we learn anything, we remain temporal creatures.

Finally, if not in conclusion, a view has recently become influential that, instead of denying the distinction between time and eternity, vigorously emphasizes it. One might anticipate that this lecture would warmly welcome any reinforcement that time is different than eternity. But while the present thesis defends a radical distinction between time and eternity, it does not follow that every theory about eternity is necessarily Biblical. The view now referred to was introduced into modern theology by Kierkegaard and elaborated or modified by such authors as Martin Kahler, Karl Barth, and Emil Brunner. These scholars matched their view of time and eternity with a particular view of history. Some of these historical implications must be mentioned, but the main concern is temporal man's confrontation or encounter with the eternal God.

The matter of concern with respect to history is its relativism. Scholarship is always revising its account of past ages, and this process never ends. We heard about archaeology yesterday, it always changes. Therefore, there is no certainty about historical events. But, argued Kierkegaard, eternal life cannot depend on an endless approximation process. Salvation cannot depend on history. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, Martin Kahler attempted to show how a living Christianity could survive the loss of an historical basis. Kahler's main question was, How can the Bible be revelationally normative when criticism shows its historical unreliability? In answering this question, Kahler invented the distinction between *der historische Jesus*, who is of no great importance, and *der geschichtliche Christus*, who is the object of faith and the content of preaching.

Emil Brunner, in his early work, *Der Mittler*, confines revelation to an instantaneous moment in time. Eternity cannot extend from one moment to a later moment. Consistently, Brunner adds

that the words of Christ, even if we knew them, since they took time to pronounce, are of no decisive importance for the Christian faith. Consistent though this be, Brunner cannot consistently continue in this vein. He must refer to and assign importance to such things as the Lord's Prayer and the crucifixion. Let him say that eternity cannot be a quantity in time, that revelation is the intersection of a line that comes senkrecht von oben, that faith can have no historical support or object; nevertheless, this time-eternity dialectic is so painfully anti-Christian, that Brunner in his later works must say, "Nur wenn Christus auf dem Hugel Golgotha-Only if Christ was actually, in the sense of a time-space historical event, crucified on Golgotha's hill, can he be our redeemer" (Offenbarung und Vernunft, 278). It is not surprising that the reintroduction of a minimum of Christian history into his material forces upon him a tortured epistemology. Not only must he distinguish between it-truth and thou-truth, he must also explain how one person as an historian cannot accept the crucifixion as an actual event, even though this same person as a man of faith is sure that the event happened. Furthermore, he must also make the account of the crucifixion, an account anyone can understand by simply reading it, a pointer to some other unintelligible sphere of being that no one can understand. In fact, it is this last point that spells the doom of the dialectical or neo-orthodox theology. God's eternity is so understood as to make him "Totally Other." Brunner insists that "God and the medium of conceptuality are mutually exclusive." In another place, he goes so far as to say, "God can, when he wishes, speak his word even through false doctrines."

Obviously the result of all this is to make God completely unknowable. The phrase "Totally Other" is a denial of the image of God in man, with attendant confusion both in anthropology and soteriology. Further, if what God says is or may be false, there can be no sure word of prophecy. And if God and the medium of conceptuality are mutually exclusive, there is no use of trying to think about God, and neither Brunner's literary output nor this lecture is worth the paper it is printed on.

Brunner makes heroic efforts to evade the devastation. A detailed analysis of Brunner inconsistent conversations would be highly instructive. But at this point one must be satisfied to note the contrast between Brunner's totally other, an utterly unknowable God, and Stephen Charnock's God about whom he knew some 2000 pages of existence and attributes.

For a concluding paragraph. I'm getting there. For a concluding paragraph, it may be best to argue that God's eternity and immutability entail neither Brunner's dialectic nor certain other less profound objections.

If God is omniscient, and Charnock thoroughly sustains omniscience, then God knows that Moses led the children of Israel out of Egypt. But there is no reason why this item in God's omniscience cannot be an item in the human mind also. Or, perhaps more cautiously we should

say, if man can know anything at all, he can know something about the Exodus. That man can indeed know something or other is guaranteed by the doctrine of the image of God in man. Omniscience and eternity do not require God to be Totally Other. There can be a different point of similarity. If man cannot know everything, at least he can know some things, for man is a rational being and not a dumb animal. Rationality is this point of similarity. Without divine rationality, the supposedly omnipotent God could speak nothing, and without human rationality man could hear nothing. Therefore attributing eternity to God does not make him Totally Other or utterly unknowable.

The less profound and less important objection to God's being eternal-and because less profound an anti-climactic conclusion-is that eternity and immutability prevent God from knowing human experiences. It makes God external and foreign to man, incapable of sympathy, and therefore removes him as an object of worship. Systematically the reply to this contention is that one should first find out what the nature of God is and then worship him, rather than erecting an independent criterion of what is worthy of worship and then imagining some being that fits the criterion. On a less systematic level, one can ask Christians if indeed they think of God as suffering from a toothache. Can God see the color blue or have other sensations? If he can, he must be a bodily organism, for colors are supposed to be stimulated by pulsating waves of energy hitting the retina. Such are the absurdities that result from assigning human experience to God. God indeed knows that we see blue, but God does not see blue. Nor does God have an abscess on his tooth, though he knows that we have one.

Indeed, it was because the eternal nature could not suffer that the Incarnation was necessary. The Second Person of the Trinity took to himself a physical body and a human soul for the purpose of suffering pain and death, which in his divine nature he could not do. However, there is no time left to discuss the Incarnation and Christ's two natures. Rather it is necessary to conclude quickly that according to the Bible God is without body, parts, or passions; and according to the Catechism he is spirit infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in his being; and for our devotions God is the blessed Trinity whom we worship.