



Time and Eternity (I)

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INTRODUCTION

"Need there is, methinks, to understand the sense in which the Scripture speaketh of Time and Eternity" (Dionysius, *De div. nom.* X.3).² Here, the doctrine of Time and Eternity will be discussed in Vedic, Buddhist, Greek, Christian, and Islamic contexts. Both terms are ambiguous. "Time" is either all or any part of the continuum of past and future duration; or that present point of time (*nunc fluens*) that always distinguishes the two durations from one another. Eternity is either, from our temporal point of view a duration without beginning or end or, as it is in itself, that unextended point of time which is Now (*nunc stans*).

From what may be called the fundamentalist or literalist point of view, time in the first sense is thought of as having had a beginning and as proceeding towards an end, and so contrasted with eternity as everlasting duration without beginning or end. The absurdity of these positions is made apparent if we ask with St. Augustine, "What was God [the Eternal] doing before he made the world?" the answer being, of course, that inasmuch as time and the world presuppose each other and in terms of "creation" are "concreated," the word "before" in such a question has no meaning whatever. Hence it is commonly argued in Christian exegesis that *in principia* does not imply a "beginning in time" but an origin in the First Principle; and from this the logical deduction follows that God [the Eternal] is creating the world *now*, as much as he ever was.

The metaphysical doctrine simply contrasts time as a continuum with the eternity that is not in time and so cannot properly be called *everlasting*, but coincides with the real present or now of which temporal experience is impossible. Here confusion only arises because for any consciousness functioning in terms of time and space, "now" succeeds "now" without interruption, and there seems to be an endless series of nows, collectively adding up to "time." This confusion can be eliminated if we realize that none of these nows has any duration and that, as measures, all alike are zeros, of which a "sum" is unthinkable. It is a matter of relativity; it is "we" who move, while *the* Now is unmoved, and only seems to move,—much as the sun only seems to rise and set because the earth revolves.

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The problem that arises is that of the locus of "reality" (*satyam*; *to on*; *ens*) whether reality or being can be predicated of any "thing"³ that exists in the flux of time and is therefore never self-same, or only of entities or an all-inclusive entity not in time and therefore always the same. A brief discussion of this problem will provide a setting for the treatment of the traditional doctrine of time and eternity.

Sanskrit *satyam* (from *as*, to "be"), like *to on* and *ousia* (from *eimi*, to "be"), is the "real," "true," or "good," — *ens et bonum convertuntur*. In these senses, *satyam* can be predicated of existents,⁴ for which "things" in all their variety the collective term is "name-and-shape" (*nama-rupe*): and by this (relative) truth, that of the name-and-shape *by* which God is present in the world (SB. XI.2, 3, 4, 5), and *as* which *it* is differentiated (BU.I.4. 7; CU VI.3. 2), "the Immortal, the Spirit of Life is concealed"), just as the Sun, the Truth, is concealed by his rays (JUB. 1.3, 6), which he is asked to dispel so that his "fairer form" may be seen (BU. V.I5, 1, 2; *Isd.UpA5*, 16). In the same way, the powers of the soul are "true" or "real," but "the Truth that the Self is, is the Reality of their reality, or Truth of their truth" (BU.II.1. 20); it is "that Reality, that Self, that thou art" (CU.VI. 10. 3). In this absolute sense, also, Truth or Reality (*satyam*) is synonymous with Dharma, Justice, Lex Aeterna (BU.I. 4. 14), one of His names "who alone is today and tomorrow" (BU.I. 5. 23); and he only who knows this Ultimate Truth (*paramartha-satyam*) can be called a master-speaker (*atiba-dati*, CU.VII. 16. 1 with Comm.), "nor ever can our intellect be sated, unless *that* Truth shine upon it, beyond which no truth has range" (Dante, *Paradiso* IV.124-126).⁵

It is, then, *from* the relative truth of name-and-form that the Comprehensor is liberated (Mund. Up.III. 2. 8); however it may be a valid truth for practical purposes, it is a falsity or unreality (*anrtam*) when compared with the "Truth of the truth, Truth absolutely, and it is by this falsity that our True Desires" are obscured. In other words, temporal "things" are both real and unreal. The Vedanta does not in fact, as has so often been asserted, deny an existence of temporalia, — "for the distinct suchness (*anyat tattvam*) of this world of affairs, evidenced by all criteria, cannot be denied" (BrSBh.II. 2. 31), "the non-existence of external objects is refuted by the fact of our apprehension of them" (BrSBh.II. 2. 28). That Sankaracarya misinterprets the Buddhist position, which avoids the extremes "is" and "is not" (S.II.17, cf. BG.II.16), is irrelevant in the present connection. The point of importance is that the Vedantic position is in perfect agreement with the Platonic, which is that things are "false" (*anrta*)^{5a} in the sense that an imitation, though it exists, is not "the real thing" of which it is an imitation; and with the Christian doctrine as formulated by St. Augustine in *Conf.* VII. 11 and XI.4: "I beheld these others beneath Thee, and saw that they neither altogether are, nor altogether are not. An existence (*esse*) they have, because they are from Thee; and yet no existence, because they are not what Thou art. For only that really *is*, that remains unchangeably; Heaven and Earth are beautiful and good, and are (*sunt*), since God made them," but when "compared to Thee, they are neither beautiful, nor good, nor are at all" (*nec sunt*). The Vedantic doctrine that the world is "of the stuff of art" (*maya-maya*) is not a doctrine of "illusion" but merely distinguishes the relative reality of the artefact from the greater reality of the Artificer (*mayin*) in whom the paradigm subsists. The world is an epiphany; and it is no one's fault but our own if we mistake "the things that were made" for the reality after which they were made, the phenomenon itself for that of which phenomena are appearances!⁶ Moreover, "illusion" cannot properly be predicated in an object, it can only arise in the percipient; the shadow is a shadow, whatever we make of it.

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NOTES FOR CHAPTER—INTRODUCTION

² Cf. St. Augustine, *De ordine* 2.51: "In this world of sense it is indeed necessary to examine carefully what time and place are, so that what delights in a part, whether of place or time, may be understood to be far less beautiful than the whole of which it is a portion."

³ The words "real" and "thing" have an interest of their own. "Real" is connected with Lat. *res*, and probably *reor*, "think," "estimate"; and "thing," with "think," *denken*. This would imply that appearances are endowed with reality and a quasi-permanence to the extent that we *name* them; and this has an intimate bearing on the nature of language itself, of which the primary application is always to concrete things, so that we must resort to negative terms (*via negativa*) when we have to speak of an ultimate reality that is not any thing. That a "thing" is an appearance to which a name is given is precisely what is implied by the Sanskrit and Pali expression *nama-rupa* (name, or idea, and phenomenon, or. body) of which the reference is to all dimensioned objects, all the accountable individualities susceptible of statistical investigation; that which is ultimately real being, properly speaking, "nameless." "Name-and-appearance in combination with consciousness are to be found only where there are birth and age and death, or falling away and uprising, only where there is signification, interpretation, and cognition, only where there is motion involving a cognizability as such or such" (D.2.63).

The Vedantic position is that all differentiation (naturation or qualification) is a matter of terminology (CU.6.1.4-6, cf. S. 2.67); and in the same way for Plato, "the same account must be given of the nature that assumes all bodies"; one cannot say of the modifications that they *are*, "for they change even while we speak of them," but only that they are "such and such," if even to say that much is permissible (*Timaeus* 50 A, B). In this passage, the "nature referred to is that primary and formless matter that can be informed, . . . nature as being that by which the Generator generates" (Damascene, *De fid. Orth.*) or "by which the Father begets" (St. Thomas, *Sum.Theol.*1.41.5).

⁴ Throughout the present article, "exist," "existent," etc. are used in the strict sense of *ex alio sistens*, and to be distinguished from "being" or "essence" in *seipso sistens*.

⁵ The Vedantic and Buddhist distinction of empirical knowledge, valid for practical purposes, and probable, from the intellectually valid and axiomatic truth of first principles is the same as that of "opinion" from "truth" in Greek philosophy; opinion corresponding to becoming, and truth to being (Parmenides, Diogenes Laertius IX.22, Diels frs. 1.8; and Plato, *Timaeus* 28, 29); opinion having to do with "that which begins and perishes" and truth with "that which ever is, and does not begin"; the distinction, surviving in Leibnitz' two forms of intuition, one giving "the truth of fact," the other "the truth of reason," is virtually, and perhaps actually, a restatement of Democritus, who recognized "two forms of knowledge, respectively bastard and legitimate, the former reached by the senses, the latter intelligible, reason being the criterion," (Sextus Empiricus, *Adv. Dogm.* 1.138 f.). Modern "pragmatism," of course, deals only with the "bastard" truth of facts, according to which, for example, we *expect* (though we do not *know*) that the sun will rise tomorrow, and act accordingly. Hence, also, the modern concept of art as a merely *aesthetic* experience.

^{5a} Cf. Aristotle, *De anima* 3.4.1).

⁶ Cf. Anaxagoras, "things apparent (*to <paiv6fir.ra*) are the vision of things unseen" (Sextus Empiricus, *Adv. Dogm.*1.140); and Romans 1:20.

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