

Time, Moment, and Eternity - Plato, Augustine, and Kierkegaard on the Theory of Time

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“What we call the moment, Plato calls τὸ ἐξαίφνης [the sudden]. (...) Thus understood, the moment is not properly an atom of time but an atom of eternity. It is the first reflection of eternity in time, its first attempt, as it were, at stopping time.” (CA, p.88) These lines were written by Kierkegaard in his work, The Concept of Anxiety. But what do they mean? Is time fundamentally the present (Kant), or is it an infinite succession (Hegel)? The existentialist approach – whether in Sartre, Jaspers, or Heidegger – is largely based on Kierkegaard's concept of time. Without going into detail, Heidegger's conception of time (Dasein, or “being-there”) is also based on existence in the present moment: “True, Da-sein is ontically not only what is near or even nearest - we ourselves are it, each of us.” (Heidegger 1996, §.5.13.) The temporal situation of each individual raises the problem of how the totality of time and the timelessness within it affect the existential situation of the individual, and how they influence their relationship to themselves and to the outside world. This formulation of the question of time differs radically from previous conceptions (Plato, St. Augustine, Kant, Schelling, and Hegel), but Kierkegaard always defines his own position in relation to them. In my view, although the connection between Plato and Kierkegaard is well known, as is that with Hegel, Schelling's late philosophy—and indeed, the conception of time in transcendental philosophy—is exceptionally close to the Danish thinker's interpretation, which is no coincidence; one need only consider the lectures from 1841–42. (Gyenge 2020, p.109)

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Plato and Augustine

The starting point is to decide on a question that determines the initial thinking about time. Another question is the relationship between the one (τὸ ἓν) and the many (τα πάντα), recalling Heraclitus, as well as the question of the one and the many (πολλά), namely whether this is a mutually dependent or antinomic relationship. Paul Friedländer puts it this way: the many are connected to the one, or the many and the one are separated from each other. (Friedländer 1975, p.184) This, then, is the initial question. Kierkegaard thoroughly analyses the Platonic concept described in the dialogue Parmenides. We must not forget that this is precisely a refutation of the Eleatic assumption: „One path only is left for us to speak of, namely, that (what is) is. In it are very many tokens that what is, is uncreated and indestructible, alone, complete, immovable and without end.” (Parmenides, DK 28.B8) From the perspective of Kierkegaard's theory of time, the question of whether the one changes during the transition from rest to motion is by no means irrelevant. If it does change,

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what does it become? What does it turn into? „What about this? Does the one seem capable of being older or younger or the same age as anything?” (Plato 140.e.) It is precisely this question that shows that the relationship between the two, which Plato expresses with the category of “transition” also raises temporal connections, on the basis of which Kierkegaard argues that Plato was forced to acknowledge the problematic nature of transition. (CA p.82, SKS IV. p. 384.)¹ In contrast, Kierkegaard notes that we are given no further explanation of the nature of Hegel's transition (Übergang, Overgangen) (ibid), which, in his view, is no accident, since it is limited exclusively to the realm of conceptual and logical movements, and Hegel simply refers to Aristotle without offering any particular clarification. (Aristotle 1929, 200.b.) As Kierkegaard formulates it: „In recent philosophy there is a category that is continually used in logical no less than in historical-philosophical inquiries. It is the category of transition.” And he adds: “However, no further explanation is given.” (CA p.81) Yet this question, concerning the one and the many, is just as significant for Plato as it later was for Hegel. It is therefore no coincidence that the question of time does not arise in his logical movements. In Plato, on the other hand, in the relationship between the one and the many, we immediately encounter the difficulty of transition, which is caused not only by temporality, but rather by a moment that exists in time yet stands outside time. To be precise: what is this momentary thing that Plato calls “strange thing” or “suddenly” (τὸ ἐξαίφνης)? “Well, in that case, is there this strange thing in which it would then be when it changes?” What sort of thing? *The moment*. Indeed, the moment seems to indicate something of this sort, such that there is change from the moment to either state. For a thing does not change from resting while still being at rest, nor does it change from moving while still being in motion. But the moment is this strange nature, inserted between motion and rest, existing in no time at all, and indeed to this, and from this, the moving changes to being at rest and the resting to being in motion.” (Plato 2021, 156.e.) According to Kierkegaard, this implies that Plato perceives the moment as an atom of time, which is something “wonderful” (ἄτοπος) to him. In other words, he does not really know what to do with it and therefore cannot truly complete his investigations.

The same applies to later philosophy, when it encounters against the question of the moment. St. Augustine, for example, arrives at this concept through a peculiar reduction of time, namely through the extension of the dimensions of time. Augustine starts from the division of the year, through the division of the month into days, hours, minutes, etc., to the last, indivisible unit. “And that one hour passes away in fleeting particles. Whatever of it has flown away is past, whatever remains is future. If any portion of time be conceived which cannot now be divided into even the minutest particles of *moments*, this only is that which may be called present; which, however, flies so rapidly from future to past, that it cannot be extended by any delay. For if it be extended, it is divided into the past and future; but the present has no space.” (St. Augustine 1957, 15.20.)

¹ And, of course, Kierkegaard here refers to Hegel: „Der er en Kategori som bestandig bruges i den Nyere Philosophie i logiske ikke mindre end i historisk-philosophiske Undersøgelser, det er: Overgangen.” (There is a category that is constantly used in modern philosophy, both in logical and in historical-philosophical studies, namely: the transition.)

In other words, there is something in time that cannot be further divided, something of the nature of *ἄτομος*. However, if this is true, then we only need to answer the question: *what is the atom of?* Time? The Platonic and Augustinian philosophies provide an answer to this, but according to Kierkegaard, they forget the true nature of time, since they should realize that this moment contains a peculiar contradiction. In any case, it is true—and this is why Kierkegaard holds these interpretations of time in such high regard—that this conception approaches the question of time from the perspective of existence, i.e., the question of time is also the question of existence, and vice versa. (Hermann 1971, p.78) Augustine thus arrives at the moment through a reduction of time, while Plato finds it in the transition from the one to the many. For him, the moment is a non-existent, (*Ikke-Værende*). (SKS IV. p.388) According to Kierkegaard, Plato does not go beyond this statement because the Greeks defined temporality primarily in terms of the past rather than the future: „The moment and the future in turn posit the past (*Forbigangne*). If Greek life in any way denotes any qualification of time, it is past time. However, past time is not defined in its relation to the present and the future but as a qualification of time in general – as a passing by. Here the significance of the Platonic “recollection” is obvious. For the Greeks, the eternal lies behind as the past that can only be entered backwards. However, the eternal thought of as the past is an altogether abstract concept. (SKS IV. p. 393, CA p. 89) That is why the Greeks' relationship to eternity (the past) is nothing other than remembrance or recollection (*ἀνάμνησις*), which cannot include the present moment. The Greek conception cannot, of course, deal with the concept of eternity in the same way, but according to Kierkegaard, this is no coincidence. The reason is that neither Greek nor “recent philosophy” (CA p.81) knows what to do with time. To be honest, we should note that, when it comes to the concept of eternity, Kierkegaard does not point out here or anywhere else in his work that the Greeks had several concepts for it. One was “Chronos” and the other was “Aion”, which, as we know, do not mean the same thing. However, he does not distinguish between the two.

German Idealism on Time

From this perspective, it is important to examine the most radical interpretation of the concept of time: Kant's philosophy. Kant does not regard time as a thing, a concept, or something that follows an objective course. “That is, time is not an object, because it does not pass objectively, and not an empirical concept that is somehow drawn from an experience, not a posteriori, but „time is no discursive or, as one calls it, general concept, but a pure form of sensible intuition.” (CPR p. 162) In the original text: “Die Zeit ist kein diskursiver, oder, wie man ihn nennt, allgemeiner Begriff, sondern einer eine Form der sinnlichen Anschauung.” (KdrV p.58) Time is an internal sense, just as space is an external sense. This is also an important starting point for Hegel. It is very interesting that Kant begins with an examination of space rather than an interpretation of time. But if we look closely, his arguments are essentially (KdrV. p.50) Kant addresses the problem of perception as a transcendental form of intuition and asserts that I am incapable of perceiving or conceiving anything outside of time; that is, *things exist*

in time, in contrast, for Kierkegaard (and Schelling), *time exists within things*. The infinity of time itself means: The infinitude of time signifies nothing more than that every determinate magnitude of time is “only possible through limitations of a single time grounding it”. (CPR p.163) For Kant, the concept of eternity converges with temporal infinity, as he uses the terms “eternity” (Ewigkeit) and “infinity” (Unendlichkeit) in a strict sense (KdrV. p.510). In this way, Kant lays the groundwork for an argument regarding the eternal that Hegel will later use.

Instead, he writes: “Time is a necessary representation that grounds all intuitions. In regard to appearances in general one cannot remove time, though one can very well take the appearances away from time. Time is therefore given a priori. In it alone is all actuality of appearances possible. The latter could all disappear, but time itself, as the universal condition of their possibility, cannot be removed.” (CPR p.162) Due to inaccuracies in the translation, it’s worth checking the original text as well: “Die Zeit ist eine notwendige Vorstellung, die allen Anschauungen *zum Grunde liegt*. Man kann in Ansehung der Erscheinungen überhaupt die Zeit selbst nicht aufheben, ob man zwar ganz wohl die Erscheinungen aus der Zeit wegnehmen kann. Die Zeit ist also a priori gegeben. In ihr allein ist alle Wirklichkeit der Erscheinungen möglich.”

In Hegel’s philosophy, the process of absolute knowledge emerging at the level of the spirit is presented in relation to two interconnected series. The relinquishing of spirit (Entäußerung) is the first process, while the second – history – also has an idealistic aspect in relation to the first. Knowledge is “going within” (Insichgehen), in which spirit abandons its existence and surrenders its form to memory. (Hegel 1986.a. p.590., Hegel 2018. p.466)

“In that new shape of spirit, it likewise has to begin all over again without prejudice in its immediacy, and, from its immediacy, to rear itself again to maturity, as if all that had preceded it were lost to it and as if it were to have learned nothing from the experience of the preceding spirits. However, that inwardizing recollection has preserved that experience; it is what is inner, and it is in fact the higher form of substance.” (ibid) In other words, cognition is the application of knowledge to the created world, the understanding and mastery of it, without which it would remain a mere dead outline. Absolute knowledge is the spirit that knows itself as spirit, which finds its own path and power in the memory of spirits, conceptually grasped history (die begriffene Geschichte), the relationship between the two processes: concept and history – “they form. the recollection and the Golgotha of absolute spirit, the actuality, the truth, the certainty of its throne, without which it would be lifeless and alone.” (Hegel 1986.a. p.591) All this clearly shows that the spirit is created in time and reborn in recollection.

However, Kierkegaard does not deal with time in connection with the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, but rather by examining Hegel’s view of nature. Time and becoming are linked in Hegel in the same way. The essence of his view is that not everything arises and passes away in time – time itself is this becoming, this arising and passing away, the abstraction of being, and then he states, time itself is this becoming (Werden), this existing abstraction, the Chronos who gives birth to everything and destroys his offspring.– That which is real, however, is just as identical to as distinct from time.” (Hegel 1986.b. §.258) In agreement with Karl Löwith, we can conclude that Kierkegaard found reality *in actu* – as opposed to

rational construction – in existence. (Löwith 1981. p.167) Therefore, the question for him from this point on is: how can finite existence come into contact with the infinite, when human life is unique and irreversible, and our understanding is imperfect and constrained by limits? The question, then, is how a finite, mortal human being can come close to the eternal being without becoming like God. The first man (Adam), therefore, not only commits sin, but also postulates time, since the consequence of the first man's fall into sin is the emergence and dominion of time; and the realization that he can never escape death. Sin and time are interrelated concepts, and humans are bound to both; they cannot escape either but can only—in sub rosa—hope for it. It is possible, however, to step outside this system; this does not mean that our finite existence becomes timeless, but rather that a connection with the timeless – with eternity – is possible, which, however, leads us into the realm of faith.

What seems truly unacceptable to Kierkegaard, however, is Hegel's claim, that the space is the abstract generality or unmediated indifference and wholly abstract juxtaposition (*nebeneinander*). „The spatial presents itself as the form of indifferent juxtaposition and quiescent subsistence; the temporal, by contrast, presents itself as the form of unrest, of the internally negative, of successiveness, of arising and vanishing, so that the temporal is, in that it is not, and is not, in that it *is*.” (Hegel 1986.c. §.44 and Hegel 2010. §.448) If we view time as an infinite process, we are faced with the problem that individual moments also represent a process, just as the totality of moments does. Thus, there is no real presence in it at all. For the imagination, the infinite succession of time is nothing more than an “infinite presence without content.” (*uendeligt indholdsløst Nærværende*). (SKS IV. p.389) Human being encounters a moment in time that they cannot avoid, for even Plato says that what exists “will not, I presume, step over the present.” (Plato 2021. 152.b.) Thus, human beings live in the present; they cannot escape it. We could say that they cannot escape the moment. The moment is absolute and dynamic presence, which is destroyed at the very moment it comes into being, yet human beings can only truly live in the present. However, the present can only be grasped by the moment, which we might define correctly by saying: the *moment is timeless within time*. And that in itself is a paradox.

A person living in time, and thus in the moment (or conversely, in the moment, and thus in time), is therefore also connected to a moment outside of time. The eternal also exists outside time. From one moment to the next, human beings are guided by the leap (Spring). Thus, every moment in life is complete in itself. The timeless (eternal) can only be touched by a *timeless moment existing in time*. If time and eternity come into contact with each other, they can only do so in time, because – in my firm opinion – there is a difference (even if Kierkegaard does not say so explicitly) in that *eternity can appear in time, but what is temporal cannot appear in the eternal*. The moment is not independent of time, since it is contained within it, yet it is timeless, as Kierkegaard says, referring to Plato: “in order to become acquainted with its dialectic, one should keep in mind that the moment is non-being under the category of time.” (CA p.82) That is, it is without extension, immeasurable, and indivisible. At the same time, the moment is not the atom of time (*Tidens Atom*), as Plato implicitly thinks or St. Augustine expressly states, but rather the atom of eternity (*Evighedens Atom*) (SKS IV. pp.391-392): “it is the first reflection of

eternity in time, its first attempt, as it were, at stopping time.” (SKS IV. p.392, CA p.88) And he describes the present and eternal as follows: The present is the eternal, or rather, the eternal is the present, and the present is full. In this sense the Latin said of the deity that he is *praesens* (*praesentes dii* [the presence of the gods]) by which expression, when used about the deity, he also signified the powerful assistance of the deity. And what about the other one? „The eternal also signifies the present as that which has no past and no future, and this is the perfection of the eternal.” (SKS IV. p.390., CA p.87)

Schelling and Kierkegaard's Perspective on Time

Contrary to Hegel's assertion (turned eternity into the future, a single moment in time²) (Hegel 1986b §. 258), eternity is therefore not an indefinite concept of the past, nor is it, as Schelling writes in one place (“what is past is known, what is present is discerned, what is future is divined”) (Schelling 1942, p 83, WA p.3. Gyenge 1994, p.401)³, a concept of the future that can at best be expressed in predictions, but rather, in the fullest sense, it refers to the present. However, temporal man is bound by the finiteness of time, Ananke's daughters relentlessly spin the thread of his life, and Atropos impassively waits to cut it, thus ending the torments of earthly existence. Human being lives in time, existing outside of „eternal” time, so how can the two interact with each other? (Cornford 1951, p. 130)

In this work (*Die Weltalter, Ages of the Word*), the problem of being and time becomes strikingly inseparable. The three volumes of this work were intended to encompass three world ages, three temporal dimensions: the past, the present, and the future. Several versions of the first volume were completed in 1811, 1813, and 1814. Schelling emphasizes the function of time much more forcefully than anyone else—perhaps with the exception of Kant—has done in the history of philosophy. Everything is the work of time („*alles ist das Werk der Zeit*”) (WA p.12). The properties of living and non-living things, then, derive precisely from time: it is not that things exist in time, but that time exists in things. Time rests without ceasing its flight for even a moment, and flies without ever leaving its state of repose. Calm and movement at the same time. It is worth mentioning, however, the relationship between time and eternity. The problem of time and eternity is one of the most difficult questions to be answered in the history of philosophy. Schelling concludes that we generally believe time to be merely the opposite of eternity, and while it is true that they must necessarily be understood in relation to one another, this does not mean that they are necessarily mutually exclusive contradictions. There is one thing we can say for certain about eternity: „*Ewigkeit ist ewig Ewigkeit*” – eternity is forever and ever; it can never cease to be eternal, that is, it cannot become

² “Der Begriff der Ewigkeit muss aber nicht negativ so gefasst werden, als die Abstraktion von der Zeit, dass sie ausserhalb derselben gleichsam existire; ohnehin nicht in dem Sinn, als ob die Ewigkeit nach der Zeit komme; so würde die Ewigkeit zur Zukunft, einem Momente der Zeit, gemacht.” (However, the concept of eternity need not be understood in a negative sense—as an abstraction from time, as if it existed outside of time—and certainly not in the sense that eternity comes after time; for then eternity would be reduced to the future, a moment in time.)

³ „Das Vergangene wird gewusst, das Gegenwärtige wird erkannt, das Zukünftige wird geahndet.”

temporal, just as the temporal cannot become eternal. The principle of time is therefore necessarily distinct from eternity, but it is not entirely separate from it, since it requires time; for eternity, in and of itself, would have no meaning. All of this also means that time is organic; here, Schelling reaches a conclusion in his argument that is truly remarkable in every respects. And this is nothing other than the realization that “die ganze Zeit ist Zukunft” – in other words, that all of time is nothing other than the future. (WA p.82) This formulation already points toward Kierkegaard’s understanding of time, namely future-oriented time, which he explores in part in *The Concept of Anxiety and Repetition*. Kierkegaard’s answer: when existence lives simultaneously in time and is simultaneously present in the moment, he also asserts that human existence is both temporal and timeless. But of course, it is not eternal.

The paradox can only be understood in a moment outside of time. The paradox places the concept of eternity within time, and that is *moment*. „The moment is that ambiguity in which time and eternity touch each other, and with this the concept of temporality is posited, whereby time constantly intersects eternity and eternity constantly pervades time.” (CA p.89) This very important sentence reads as follows in the original: “Øieblikket er hiint Tvetydige, hvori Tiden og Evigheden berøre hinanden, og hermed er Begrebet *Timelighed* sat, hvor Tiden bestandig afskærer Evigheden og Evigheden bestandig gennemtrænger Tiden.” (SKS IV. p.392)

Kierkegaard states that this represents the synthesis of body and soul, therefore “the synthesis of the temporal and the eternal is not another. synthesis,” (CA p.88) that is, a new understanding of the synthesis of body and soul. Repetition is the beauty of life, which, according to Kierkegaard, we need just as much as a piece of bread. Repetition therefore always presupposes a practical, active relationship, as opposed to a purely speculative approach. Speculative philosophy, however, claims that all cognition is recollection, but it is wrong: all of existence and thus cognition – is repetition. Remembrance suggests passivity; instead, what is needed is an active existence based on choices. It is no coincidence that anxiety finds its ultimate meaning in this context, for its role which is not merely presumed to exist in the state prior to the Fall, but is given to every single person at all times is most crucial precisely in the face of the choice that must be made in the present moment. At the same time, this observation also transforms the relative positions of the dimensions of time, with the future taking on a more prominent role than the past. Repetition is linked to the problem of temporality (*Timelighed*), so only the Spirit’s repetition is possible, even though in time it will never be as perfect as in eternity, which is the true repetition (SKS IV.88.)⁴, namely through the act of choice, insofar as the choice itself takes place in a given situation, at a given moment; that is, it signifies a close connection between repetition and the metaphysical leap. Man makes his choice with anxiety, but in order to be able to choose, he must be conscious of what his choice entails. At the same time, even if repetition is impossible in the world of everyday life—a fact of which Kierkegaard is convinced by his own personal experiences (e.g., the events in Berlin, or let’s think about the play at the

⁴“Her er kun Aandens Gjætagelse mulig, om den end i *Timeligheden* aldrig bliver saa fuldkommen som i *Evigheden*, der er den sande Gjætagelse.” (*Here, only the Spirit’s Repetition is possible, even if in time it never becomes as perfect as in eternity, which is the true Repetition.*)

Königstädter Theater) (SKS pp IV.45-46) – this does not in any way mean that repetition cannot occur or is not a reality in another sphere. An excellent example of this is Job and the lessons to be learned from his life. The *temporal* form of repetition is not perfect, so this expression is not possible in the true sense of the word. For those who believe in repetition, the opportunity it offers can also become a reality; in Job's life, this means that, through the present moment, individual existence can come into contact with the eternal. This is what the person of Christ signifies: he is both mediator and co-existent with all that has ever been. If, in the act of remembrance, the direction of movement is backward, then through moving forward, through repetition – one reaches the eternal.

In Danish, the term “to repeat” (*gentage*) inherently implies, on the one hand, an active behavior, as it simultaneously means bringing something back or regaining it something that is possible only through the active involvement of the person performing the action. In addition, it also encompasses an event insofar as the event itself takes place. The same dichotomy can be observed in it as in its German counterpart (*Wiederholung, wieder-holen*), a distinction that the German word further emphasizes when used as a verb, since the meaning differs depending on whether the separable or non-separable form is used. According to Victor Guarda, the dual function of repetition is thus inherent in the expression itself, only it is directed not backward but forward. For true repetition does not become a reality in the everyday world, but in the future as mediated by faith. “Is there not, then, a repetition? Did I not get everything double? Did I not get myself again and precisely in such a way that I might have a double sense of its meaning? Compared with such a repetition, what is a repetition of worldly possessions, which is indifferent toward the qualification of the spirit? Only his children did Job not receive double again, for a human life cannot be redoubled that way. Here only repetition of the spirit is possible, even though it is never so perfect in time as in eternity, which is the true repetition.” (Kierkegaard 1983 p.220)

Job's wealth doubled compared to what he had lost, but he did not get his children back; in other words, there is no perfect restoration in this life. Although everything can be attained in this world of earthly pleasures, if a man is not careful, he stands to lose something far more precious than any material gain and if he succumbs to despair, he loses himself. The young man in Repetition, however, who had lost everything in the material world, regained something he had never truly possessed – something whose loss we find so difficult to fathom – and which is now truly his: himself. If he were to fall into despair, this could never have happened to him, and this shows that the matter must be taken entirely seriously; it cannot be treated lightly, for despair is, above all else, dangerous—a terrible, deadly disease. Kierkegaard, however, will elaborate on this in another, later work (*The Sickness unto Death, Sygdommen til Døden*) (see SKS XI).

Conclusion

„When the Greeks said that all knowing is recollecting, they said that all existence, which is, has been; when one says that life is a repetition, one says: actuality, which has been, now comes into existence. If one does not have the category of recollection

or of repetition, all life dissolves into an empty, meaningless noise. Recollection is the ethnical [ethnische] view of life, repetition the modern; repetition is the interest [Interesse] of metaphysics, and also the interest upon which metaphysics comes to grief; repetition is the watchword [Løsnet] in every ethical view; repetition is *conditio sine qua non* [the indispensable condition] for every issue of dogmatics.” (Kierkegaard 1983, p. 149, SKS III. pp. 25-26)

Augustine's famous question, “What was God doing before that [before creation]?” (Augustine 1957. XI.10) thus receives a seemingly strange answer here. Augustine is right: the question is “meaningless”, because there was no time *before* creation, so time began *with* creation. Kierkegaard's answer, however, is different. Time did not begin with creation, but *with the Fall*, because before that there was no time in Eden – no history, no personality, no generational succession. Thus, time is the most personal, most intimate characteristic of human being – one that can never be fully understood.

Of course, it can be said that without the fundamental principles of Plato and Aristotle, Kierkegaard, who was very familiar with Greek philosophy thanks to his excellent teacher, Poul Martin Møller (at one point, there was even talk of him getting a position at the university), would have gotten nowhere. However, his rejection of the Kantian and Hegelian conception of time can be interpreted from a specific existentialist standpoint, i.e., while he rejects the interpretation of German idealism, he further develops the Augustinian view and makes no secret of this.

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