

PHILOSOPHY IN
LATE ANTIQUITY

BOUNDARIES OF BEING

CHARLES VERGEER

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By

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**Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing**



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This book first published 2019

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-5275-3284-4

ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-3284-7

Original title:

Wanden van de werkelijkheid. Filosofie van de late oudheid.

DAMON, Budel 2011.

Translated by:

Elizabeth Harding and Rens Zomerdijs

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INTRODUCTION

a. Awakening and wilting

‘Whence things have their origin, thence also their destruction happens according to necessity; for they pay penalty and retribution to each other for their injustice according to the assessment of time.’¹

This is Western philosophy’s earliest surviving text. It is a statement made by Anaximander of Miletus dating possibly to about 570 BC. We would not have known it were it not that around AD 540 Simplicius of Sicily cited these words. That was well over a millennium since they had been spoken or written down. Simplicius quotes Anaximander’s statement in a commentary on the *Physica* of Aristotle. As a result of this we tend to read and interpret this text within the context of Simplicius: it has to do with the origin and perishing of things – *tois ousi* – the natural things. But if we do this, the second part about moral issues, guilt and atonement – justice and punishment – *dikè kai tisis* – seems a bit odd.

So do we actually know what the text is about and which necessity is at stake? We have to restrain our tendency to understand ‘*kata to chreōn*’ as ‘according to the laws of nature’. We should even perhaps delete half the text. The obscure and somewhat poetic statement of the second part was probably explained by Simplicius in understandable terms before he cited it. The text is full of Aristotelian terminology, *genesis*, *phthora*, ‘origin’ and ‘perishing’, the things and the necessity.

So, how should we read the statement? As an authentic text with two almost parallel claims? The first sentence as the actual core and the second as an explanation or extension? Or vice versa: the first sentence as the explanation of the original text? Are we reading a statement about nature and its fixed regulation of interaction and return, which is subsequently transposed to the field of human relations? Is the first sentence the core or an addition, an explanation or even a hindrance to ever reaching the meaning of the second, the original, sentence? If we were to read the second part of the statement without any interference by a later added

¹ G.S. Kirk and J.E. Raven: *The presocratic Philosophers*, Cambridge 1966. D.K. 12 B 1.

explanation and interpretation, what would we understand of it? It is about 'according to the course of time'. *Taxis* is not yet 'order', the meaning that the word would not have until Late Antiquity. *Taxis* is the fixed position that something or someone has, for example the position in a row or the fixed order according to which something happens. *Chronos* would not mean 'time' for centuries. In the fourth book of the *Physica* of Aristotle he deals with *topos*, the 'spot' where something is; *kenon*, the lack of anything tangible and *chronos*, the duration in which something can become mature. In translations we often come across the words 'space', 'vacuum' and 'time', concepts still unknown to Aristotle. *Chronos* is not the countable course of time, but is the 'time' we mean when we say 'there is a time to come and a time to go' or 'time will tell'. ●r to indicate that it is now 'time' to harvest or to sow, or that after nine months 'the time is ripe' to give birth. In the same way that *topos* is the suitable or appropriate place 'in order to ...', *chronos* is the appropriate time 'in order to ...'.

In order to ... what? To undergo punishment and atonement, 'for their injustice', according to our translation. *Dikèn (...) didonai* meant for Simplicius to pass a sentence and impose a penalty. For Herodotus and the Attic orators the meaning these words had a millennium earlier was more likely to 'receive satisfaction'. If justice has been done, both parties will be satisfied and each receive their rights. That is not a punishment, neither is *tisis* a penance. *Tisis* is the compensation, the requital, that which counterbalances the suffered wrong doing.

The phrase used in the translation, 'retribution to each other for their injustice', is wanting in expressing the interaction and reciprocity. '●ne after the other they give satisfaction and when the time comes, put to right the injustice done.'

Anaximander is the first philosopher of whom we have a portrait and the first Greek, according to Themistios, 'who had the courage to publish a text "About nature"'.² Through his writing the word *archè* became the term for 'beginning' and 'principle'. Also, the statement discussed here would be about the principle of all things and the ability to see nature as inexhaustible because its elements continually change with the tide; they grow and perish, they awaken and wilt.

Why cite these earliest sentences in a study about the philosophy of Late Antiquity? To show the path, the long and laborious path along which the words of the wise men have reached us. A path partly lost, but visible within quite another context. It is our task to derive something else from the same words and sentences.

² Themistios: *Oratio*, 36; D.K. 12 A 7.

Nietzsche pointed out how the earliest archaic Ionian thinkers were covered under the ‘blankets’ of the Attic Greek of Athens’ classical philosophy, the Hellenistic interpretations of the scholars of the library of Alexandria and the Roman appropriation of Greek philosophy that also involved the Christian revival. Through the above-mentioned processes the words of the archaic Ionian thinker were lost to a large extent. He showed that the road leading to Anaximander from Milete went from Berlin via Paris, Rome, Alexandria and Athens and ... then we usually got stuck somewhere. We read the Presocratics in the manner in which Plato and Aristotle cited and interpreted them. When we read Plato we also hear the voices of Plotinus and Augustine echoing through these texts and thoughts. Who is able to reach Aristotle without first having to bypass Hegel and Thomas Aquinas?

Late Antiquity is a philosophical landscape that is neglected to a large extent: the Athens of Plato and Aristotle is the focus of interest and even Cicero’s and Seneca’s Rome is seen as a derivative. The world of Late Antiquity appears to offer a confused and diluted form of philosophy. And yet, most of Greek and Latin philosophy has reached us because of the efforts of the thinkers and writers of Late Antiquity and often in the shape they finally gave them.

b. Birth and growth

Almost everything changes over time. Anaximander used *genesis* for birth and growth, the induced gestational force. In the time when the break between the tradition of antiquity and later forms of Platonism was nearly completed, Plutarch of Chaeronea explained in his essay about the gods and evil, that *hè genesis* meant ‘tendency towards the earth – *neusis eis gèn*’³ and Origen came some decennia later with the devastating opinion and statement that ‘birth on earth is the germ of death – *hè epi gès genesis thanatou archè estin*’.

For the earliest thinkers, for Heraclitus, but also for Aristotle and his followers and for the Stoic philosophers, *Logos* was the divine power and force that brought unity, coherence and meaning. But Philo of Alexandria turned this upside down and described *logos* as a ‘cutting weapon – *tomeus tōn sumpantōn* – always busy cutting off all immaterial from material things’.⁴

It was not merely this increasingly sharp division between two worlds, two realities that made the difference. The ideas of philosophers or Church

³ Plutarch: *Moralia. De sera numinis vindicta* § 27.

⁴ Philo: *Quis rerum divinarum heres sit*, cap. 26.

Fathers in their turn reflected the actual changes in the world: the different ways of living and regarding one's body, the relationship between women and men, mind and body, slaves and freedom, state and family.

In this study, as in my previous books *Greek Philosophy: First Questions* and *Philosophy in Ancient Rome: A loss of Wings*,⁵ we will time and again look at change, at being different and thinking in a different way. We shall not restrict ourselves to looking merely at the differences between the philosophies of the different eras – Archaic, Hellenistic, Roman, early Christian, Byzantine and that of the Church Fathers. One of the main themes of this book is how Greek philosophy had its roots severed when the knowledge of Greek was practically lost in the West. The result of this was that for more than a millennium until Immanuel Kant, Western philosophers thought and wrote in Latin. Another break is caused by the arrival of Christianity. Cities and states, armies, tricks and ruses of man will appear in shrill contrast with the City of God in Late Antiquity. Edward Gibbon eagerly cites Voltaire's witticism: '*Le christianisme ouvrait le ciel, mais il perdit l'empire.*'⁶

The major theme of this treatise will be (hence the fragment of Anaximander) the birth of 'time'. The world of antiquity knew duration and sustainability, the harmonic order of the whole, the *kosmos* and the recurring cycle of giving birth, of growth and flourishing, of wilting and decaying and then once more re-germinating. Not until Roman philosophy was 'time' seen as temporal, as something beginning and ending, a reality that was finite. 'I have put life on a slope,' says Seneca when he considers that for him reality is temporal and will stop. 'Being' and 'time' are placed in an essentially different relationship. The last chapter of this book, dealing as it does with the Venerable Bede indicates indeed the end of the philosophy of antiquity.

Although obviously keeping an eye on the chronological order, in this book there is also a geographical structure: from the Greek to the Latin world and subsequently to the peripheries of the declining empire: Andalusia and the remote country of the Anglo-Saxons. The design is thematic, in which the decay of the Greek language and the birth of 'time' play a major role. Other choices could have been made. I would have liked to include Philoponus in this study, but at the time of writing an excellent

⁵ Ch. Vergeer: *Eerste Vragen: Over de Griekse filosofie*. Nijmegen 1990 (English translation will be published in 2020); Ch. Vergeer: *A Loss of Wings: Philosophy in ancient Rome*. Newcastle upon Tyne (CSP) 2018.

⁶ Voltaire: *Essai sur les mœurs*, chap. XII. '*Christianity opened heaven, but it lost the empire.*'

study by Koenraad Verrycken about this late Alexandrian philosopher was published.⁷ A chapter on the logic and theory of necessity concerning Alexander of Aphrodisias was left out because it would have been too technical. But, whoever devotes three chapters as I do to Augustine and leaves out Ambrose, Jerome and Chrysostomus may well have to explain his choices.

c. 'The field I till is time'

During Late Antiquity, the relationship between questions, the searching and feeling one's way in philosophy and the answers from which support was derived, seemed to change. The Greeks gave us a desire for wisdom in which reality was not self-evident, and neither could we silently pass it by. Philosophy is the arduous effort to put reality into question and to put it into words. In Late Antiquity reality is considered to be only temporal. Not everlasting, as Anaximander said, but created at some time and finite. 'Time' was a blurred smear on the immense blackboard, a line into nothingness that once will be erased again. The existence of man is a token at the boundary and only behind these boundaries of being does a different, radiant and 'true' reality lie hidden.

In this world, Augustine observes merely the stones and the dust, the falling debris and the ticking of time rapidly running to the end. Because of 'time' we are bound to lose everything. Many, many centuries later Goethe would describe 'time' thus:

*'Mein Erbteil wie herrlich, weit und breit:
Die Zeit ist mein Besitz, mein Acker ist die Zeit.'*⁸

⁷ K. Verrycken: *De vroege Philoponus: een studie van het Alexandrijnse neoplatonisme*. Brussels 1994.

⁸ J.W. von Goethe: *Divan*, Hamburger Edition 2, 52.
*'My inheritance how wonderful, far and wide:
Time is mine, my field is time.'*

CHAPTER ONE

THE TREE OF PORPHYRY

a. An introduction as epilogue

The cave of Plato, the tree of Porphyry, the razor of Ockham and the whip of Nietzsche are philosophical metaphors that are well-known but rarely understood fully. The tree of Porphyry is a method of ascending from the most general to the most specific, a method which served its purpose for more than a thousand years. Moreover, this tree of Porphyry indicates the dividing line between ancient philosophy and all subsequent forms of philosophy, which are essentially different. Its roots are nourished by antiquity, its trunk and branches offering shelter to the newer forms of philosophy.

Porphyry was born in AD 232 or 233 in the ancient Phoenician port of Tyre in Lebanon. He was given the cognomen Porphyry – purple – either because of his home town where the purple dye was produced or because of his Syrian name *Malkos*, in Greek *Basileus* – King. He usually called himself *Tyrios*, referring to his native town. The Christians only spoke about him with contempt, giving him various nicknames which described him as an ignorant yokel. He probably studied first at the university in what is now Beirut. He became quite familiar with Chaldean, Egyptian, Christian and Gnostic writings. Afterwards he studied in Athens where Plato's philosophy was taught by Cassius Longinus and his collaborators. Apart from philosophy, he studied rhetoric and mathematics. When he was about thirty he moved from Athens to Rome; it was here that Plotinus had founded his school twenty years before, after having studied for about ten years at Ammonius Saccas in Alexandria. Plotinus was then fifty-nine and Porphyry about thirty. This encounter was of enormous importance for the course of philosophy.

They worked intensively and closely together for five years. In his *Vita Plotini*, Porphyry tells us about his kind and gentle teacher and especially about his way of teaching philosophy. His lectures consisted of conversations in which the Socratic dialectical method was used together

with the Academic *epochè*, the putting aside and postponing of any judgment.

Porphyry writes that the orator Diophanes, during a discussion about Plato's *Symposion* defended Alcibiades and proclaimed that love should also be expressed physically. 'Plotinus jumped up several times and was about to walk away', but each time he pulled himself together and at the end asked Porphyry to write a riposte of Diophanes' proposition and to present it the next time.

In this accommodating manner Plotinus won Porphyry over. In Athens Porphyry had learned from Longinus that the object of thinking existed outside thought. At one of the first lectures he attended, Porphyry came up with a thesis in which he fiercely opposed Plotinus' idea that *ta noèta* existed only in the *nous* and not outside of it. Plotinus only smiled and turned to his co-worker Gentilian Amelius and told him that it would be just in his line of work to solve the problems in which this Porphyry had entangled himself because he understood little of Plotinus' teachings. Amelius then wrote a voluminous exposition, Porphyry a defence, Amelius a reaction to this defence which was followed by one more defence by Porphyry. Not until after Amelius had written for the third time about the subject and an extensive exchange of opinions had followed during the lectures did Porphyry give in and write a *Palinodie*, a revocation which he read out at the next lecture.¹

We understand that after having studied at Plotinus intensively for five years Porphyry fell ill and became depressed by the deep philosophical problems that seemed insoluble and following the advice of his master he went to 'gentle' Sicily in AD 268.

But is it true? We will never know, but there are indeed indications of a profound difference of opinion. Plotinus was the last philosopher of antiquity who was involved in thinking about and commenting on Aristotle's theory of categories, and he objected in particular to the ontological status of these categories. In the treatises in particular (according to the chronological ordering 42 to 44,² the last ones he wrote before Porphyry left Rome) Plotinus took the position about the status of 'being' of the categories which must have given Porphyry much thought, or rather, were unacceptable to him.

In Sicily Porphyry wrote his own commentary on the theory of categories and does not even mention the name of Plotinus.

While in Sicily he also received a letter from Longinus, who had left Athens for Palmyra where Amelius joined him. It is a clear attempt to have

¹ Porphyry: *Vita Plotini* 18.

² Plotinus: *Enneads* V 1, V 2 and V 3.

Porphyry return to the school of Plato and to detach him from Plotinus.³ But a culmination of the conflict was prevented by the death of Plotinus in AD 270. Porphyry returned to Rome to become the leader of the school. He died in Rome somewhere between 301 and 306. Once back in Rome Porphyry published his introduction to Aristotle's theory of categories, the *Isagoge*, and some other commentaries. He then dedicated himself to the compilation of the *tracts* of Plotinus, the six sets of 'nines', *Enneads*, and to writing the hagiographical biography of his master.

The conflict with his teacher had been forgotten and as a result Western philosophy was directed to an interpretation of Aristotle's logic in which the amazingly rich legacy of Plotinus' profound thoughts was put aside, and we were satisfied with a short introduction to this theory of categories: the *Eisagōgè*.

Although this introduction marks the end of a centuries-long discussion about the status of the categories, a method of interpretation was offered that would be used for well over a thousand years. Porphyry ended a discussion of many centuries, and eminent students of the philosophy of Aristotle such as Simplicius and Augustine praised him and accepted his views. The *Eisagōgè* is not merely an introduction but it is also the slamming of a door, the conclusion of a way of thinking.

b. The status of reality

For Plato, reality is not what we see around us; that is the surface, the appearance of what is more essential elsewhere. The truth of this reality, the true reality is 'being' – *ousia*. 'Being' gradually acquired the meaning of 'being here, being present': *ousia* shifted to *parousia*. This led to the question, discussed in detail by Plato in his conversation with Theaetetus: what is the status of presence and absence? In his theory of the *sterèsis*, Aristotle makes of this word (which in everyday Greek meant theft or robbery) a technical term: 'denial', 'negation of something', 'abolition of an idea', a technical term that played an important part in the tradition of Late Antiquity and the scholastic tradition as *privatio*. Later on it became all important in Hegel's dialectical thinking as Negation, *Aufhebung*, as exemplified by the statement⁴ that absence – *apousia* – is something quite different from not being present. The absentee is not there – that is the taking away of being – but is not nothing: his absence still refers to the form; he could (according to Aristotle) have been present.

³ Porphyry: *Vita Plotini* 21.

⁴ Aristotle: *Metaphysica* 1004a 16.

Aristotle's theory of categories is not merely a tool in the process of thinking – *organon* – but is, above all, an attempt to determine what can be said about reality. The boundaries of being are examined:

what is it? – *ti estin*;
 independence – *ousia* – *substantia*
 quantity – *poson* – *quantitas*
 quality – *poion* – *qualitas*
 relation – *pros ti* – *relatio*
 location/place – *pou* – *locus, ubi*
 duration – *pote* – *tempus, quando*
 place – *keisthai* – *situs*
 posture – *echein* – *habitus*
 active – *poiein* – *actio*
 passive – *paschein* – *passio*

This is the list – a list, because it can also be constructed in a different way and the various attempts in the writings of Aristotle's *Categories*, *Topica* and *Analytica Posteriora* differ – with the original Greek words and the Latin rendering of them – in the appearance by which they were introduced and are known within the philosophical tradition and approach. They are fluid, glowing concepts at times, and since the time of Porphyry they have solidified and cooled off. Since the Latin translation of the *Eisagōgē* by Boethius, the *Isagoge*, forming the preconditions of our thinking about reality, is now considered to contain solid and factual concepts.

In November 1677 Antoni van Leeuwenhoek wrote a letter to the Royal Society in which he was the first to describe what under a microscope spermatozoa (*zaaddiertjes*, tiny seed animals, he calls them) looked like. He wrote to the president in Latin because he feared being embarrassing and he 'had an aversion to looking closer at this (sperm)'.⁵ In everything he saw and could discern for the very first time – the wheat weevil, flour moth, flea or clothes louse – he became increasingly able to determine the categories of the several species. It is especially through the taxonomy of Linnaeus that we know this as determining where the boundaries are when distinguishing one species from another, where the reality of one differs from the others.

Determination is based upon the increasing wealth of knowledge and insight into numerous tiny details, pieces of reality such as whether a tree

⁵ A. Schierbeek: *Antoni van Leeuwenhoek*, pp. 86-89. '*Hij tegenheijt haalde omme dit (sperma) nader te besigtigen.*'

leaf is serrated or lobed. Determination is a process of deciding and limiting and in doing so establishing the reality of something. The scientists who work in this way are still working within the Aristotelian tradition of deciding and confining, determining the boundaries of being or finding out the forms within which something is what it is, that this is a form in which reality only then takes shape and shows itself as it is.

At about the same time as Van Leeuwenhoek's discovery, Spinoza, in a letter from The Hague dated 2d of June 1674 to Jarigh Jelles, writes: '*omnis determinatio est negatio*.'⁶ Here determination comes to the fore in the manner as described in the tree of Porphyry and followed for more than a thousand years: limiting is robbing. *Determinatio* is the Latin representation of Greek *prosthesis*, 'to put in the first place'. In everyday use in Athens, the word meant something like 'to lean (it) against something' whereas it had a positive connotation for both Plato and Aristotle: 'to attach'.⁷ For Spinoza *determinatio* has a negative meaning.

Hegel, in his series of lectures on the history of philosophy, is ecstatic: this insight is the essential beginning of any form of philosophizing! What was stated by Parmenides in the Orient arrived for the first time in the Occident. The substance (God, according to Spinoza) is everything, the one and indivisible infinite and eternal. All the rest, that which was separated from the substance, is particular. This insight, the idea of Spinoza, is according to Hegel 'the liberation of the spirit and its absolute foundation.'⁸ Hegel stretches it a bit far; in the letter from Spinoza, the wording is not exactly in accordance with the '*Satz* – sentence' Hegel wants to read in it; the context too casts a somewhat different light on the words.

But it is clear, the status of reality is at stake: whereas Van Leeuwenhoek increasingly learned to see reality by considering the particularities, for Spinoza – and later on for German idealism – the particular is precisely a form of negation of the absolute reality, a blemish on the true substance. Hegel even goes one step further when he considers the particular, the limited as finite. Of course, that is what Spinoza did in the second definition of his *Ethica*. For Hegel the finite is that which is restricted. The particular is therefore a limitation, an imitation of the essential and only temporary. '*Finitude*' becomes one of the most important words in Hegel's philosophy, and it always means that time is interpreted as being

⁶ B. de Spinoza: *Opera III, Epistula L*.

⁷ Plato: *Phaedo* 79a.

⁸ G.W.F. Hegel: *Werke in zwanzig Bänden: 20, Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie III*, p. 164-165. '*Die Befreiung des geistes und seine absolute Grundlegung*.'

temporary, finite, and that therefore this particular reality is a form of restriction and denial, of loss and failure.⁹

That is the crucial problem of Porphyry's tree and his unfinished discussion with Plotinus. The tree gives a classification of what can be said about: being; the theory of categories; the descent from the essence – *ousia*; the increase in restriction and in the stripping away from 'being'. From these he swerves to the particular, to Socrates, or to the flour moth and clothes louse of Van Leeuwenhoek.

c. Learning to read

The philosophy of Plato was, in the centuries after his death, increasingly thought through by the Academy in Athens. The Lyceum of Aristotle had less resonance. Only when Andronicus of Rhodes, probably in Rome, published the first edition of the works of Aristotle in the middle of the first century BC and added a commentary of the *Categoriae* did Aristotle's philosophy return to the centre of philosophical education.

During the first few centuries AD, the attention paid to Aristotle was mainly focused on the problems of his theory of categories. Whereas during the Middle Ages studies and discussions centred on the *Metaphysica* of Aristotle, it was between the time of Hegel and Heidegger that the *Physica* was regarded as Aristotle's most fundamental work. But the 'Utensil' – *Organon* – was pushed aside by the *Novum Organum* of Francis Bacon, introducing the *Instauratio Magna*, the overall reconstruction of the new modern sciences and philosophy.

In antiquity there was an attempt to incorporate and adapt this tool of philosophy, namely Aristotle's theory of categories, into the predominant philosophy of Plato. Did Plato too talk about categories? Plutarch was the first to point out the *Timaeus* as the work where Plato and Aristotle seemed compatible. Discussions about the *Theaetetus* and the *Parmenides* took place in the old Academy. Finally, Plotinus believed the enigmatic passage in the *Sophist*, dealing with the *megista genè* to be compatible with Aristotle's theory of categories.¹⁰

In Late Antiquity the philosophy of Aristotle regained its prestige, but the access to this philosophy was at that time the theory of categories, which, in an attempt to align the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, was seen as the theory about the division of the forms of being. For Plotinus, the categories were *genè tou ontos*, varieties of being.

⁹ *Ibid.*: p. 168.

¹⁰ Plato: *Timaeus* 35b ff.; *Theaetetus* 152d ff.; *Parmenides* 136a ff. and *Sophistès* 254d ff.

Porphyry put an abrupt end to this tradition and interpretation with his introduction to the theory of categories. Porphyry wrote two commentaries on Aristotle's theory of categories: a comprehensive and systematic treatise, in which he carefully examines and attempts to refute the positions of the criticisms by the Academy and the Stoics on Aristotle. The treatise was dedicated to Gedalius; Simplicius quotes some interesting statements but the text itself is lost. What we do have is the *Eisagōgē*, a work meant for instruction written in the Socratic style of question and answer and unfortunately incomplete. A long and great tradition was brought to an end by a short and unfinished school book.

Most overviews of the history of philosophy state that Porphyry was a student of Plotinus. That is certainly true, but precisely at the point where Porphyry decisively influenced the next thousand years, he strongly opposed the views of his master. Whereas for Plotinus the categories were varieties of being, *genè tou ontos*, for Porphyry they were merely the simplest way to put something into words, *haplai sèmantikai phōnai*. The consequences of this were great. For Porphyry the categories had only validity and authority in this world of visible reality, the *kosmos aisthètos*, pertaining not at all to the other reality, the *kosmos noètos*.

Augustine recounts that, during his years as a student in Carthage when he was about twenty and before his appointment in Rome, he obtained a work of Aristotle called 'the ten categories'. Although his teachers in Rhetoric talked about it as something exceptional but excellent, no one was able to properly understand or explain this book. And Augustine rejected the book – it must have been a translation in Latin – because what he was looking for was God and he understood that 'everything that exists is included within the ten categories', but that precisely 'You, my God', so miraculous and simple 'cannot be put into words or contained within categories of thinking.'¹¹

In doing so the young Augustine followed Porphyry's interpretation of the categories as forms of thought with a limited area of validity, and not as superior concepts that apply to all forms of being. Through this, thinking lost its grip on the divine which remained outside the categories of thinking. That was a loss that would remain until Kant. All this on the basis of a simple school book.

Anyone who takes up Porphyry's short commentary on Aristotle's theory of categories will come across a series of obstacles. Perhaps the present-day reader will, like Augustine, have a number of related questions and problems. But the question that interested Augustine – which way leads to God? – was not the right question. Porphyry was a fervent

¹¹ Augustine: *Confessiones* IV 14, 28

opponent of Christianity and intended to take the Hellenic heritage as the starting point of his commentaries.

In our time most readers will read a translation of Porphyry's work. These translations are usually of high quality, but it is like a Toccata by Sweelinck on a modern concert grand piano: different, quite different. Anyone who can read the Greek text has a great advantage, but that reader too should realize that he or she has learned to read Homer and Plato and that the number of centuries between Homer and Porphyry is about the same as between Porphyry and us. Many words in Greek were understood and used differently over the centuries. And then there is of course the strange paradox that making the effort of reading Porphyry in Greek was not taken by Augustine. Afterwards Boethius' Latin translation became the form through which the text exercised its major influence.

Also, we are used to complete texts and assume, when we study the *Ethica* of Spinoza, for example, that the book in our hands provides the text written by Spinoza. With texts from antiquity this is seldom the case. Consider the texts of the letters of Paul which are unreliable through and through – and the text we have of the *Eisagōgē*, which is both unfinished and riddled with gaps and omissions. However, the main hiatus is not to be found in the text itself, but in the context.

The text shows the Socratic method and earlier on I pointed out that Plotinus too used this method during his lectures. We may therefore assume that this kind of commentary was not created in isolation behind a writing desk, but was the result of conversations where they took shape and content. These conversations are now silenced and we only have the solidified form of the text. But, just as present-day scholars produce books and articles based on opinions and publications of colleagues, Porphyry too was naturally engaged in discussions with those who had already expressed their views about Aristotle's theory of categories. That was the case with the first publisher of the works of Aristotle, Andronicus of Rhodes, followed subsequently by Boethius of Sidon, Alexander of Aphrodisias, Eudorus of Alexandria, Albinus, Atticus, Nicostratus, Lucius, Athenodorus, Herminus and Plotinus, who all wrote their commentaries on the theory of categories. Porphyry would in all probability have been able to consult these works in his library. We are, as it were, listening to a conversation in which most of the participants have become inaudible for us. We know about this list of authors because Simplicius mentions them in the introduction when in his turn he wrote his commentary. Apart from the texts of Plotinus and Alexander of Aphrodisias, all these texts are lost.

But apart from being involved in a conversation where the voices of most of the participants are now silent, the manner of asking questions and

the way of thinking is also unfamiliar to us. In our time a physician will ask different questions from those asked by a technician and an ethicist will raise other questions in his turn, each from his own field of thinking. In antiquity there were rules for writing a commentary on a philosophical text.

Six questions had to be raised:

- What is the purpose of this text – *skopos, prothesis*?
- What does it contribute – *chrèsimon*?
- What place does it take in the complete order – *taxis*?
- What is the title and why – *epigraphè*?
- Who is the author – *sungrapheus*?
- What is the division into chapters – *diairesis*?

To us this may seem medieval and scholastic. It is not but that is not the point. This scheme is usually applied in the commentaries of Late Antiquity known to us. The question whether the book we are dealing with here really is *Katègoriai* will of course never be raised if we, for instance, pick up Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. But we actually do not really know the title given by Aristotle, if he ever used a title at all. Porphyry found several titles for Aristotle's text and possibly did not find the requested text in public collections because he did not know under which title the work was known. In manuscripts the text about the categories is also referred to as *'Introduction to the Topica'*, or *'About the types of being'*, or *'About the ten species'*. What is the correct title and what is it about? There is the unreliable anecdote about the *Metaphysica* of Aristotle not being the title, but that it was assigned by a librarian on the basis that these books should be given a place next to those about the *Physica*.

The reasons – *aitia* – for writing these texts was Aristotle's opinion that a closer study of nature resulted in new questions. Metaphysical questions arise from closer studies of nature. *Metaphysica* is not about something that does not concern this natural reality – as Kant implied – but a deepening of natural questions. 'A' *metaphysica* in itself is impossible and 'a' metaphysics of something other than the reality of birth and growth is inconceivable and impossible. For example, 'a' *metaphysica* of technology does not exist.

The discussion about title and author, which may seem so superfluous to us, teaches us at least three important things:

●ne, that philological research should indeed always raise these questions again and again. As an example: one of the most important writings of Christianity, sometimes called the birth certificate of the

Christian faith, is Paul's 'Letter to the Romans'. But this text is certainly not a letter; it was not even addressed to the Romans and no more than twenty percent of the text was written by Paul. Even 'superfluous' questions such as – is this a treatise of Aristotle? may possibly be considered as solved in Wikipedia but in recent research there are many scholars who express doubts, based on solid arguments, whether this text is a) entirely, or b) merely partially or even c) not at all from Aristotle.

Two, many of the decisions about texts, titles, authors, classifications and intentions were not made until Late Antiquity and have remained valid since then. In the debate to which I am contributing on the meaning and validity of the categories, the majority of the scholars still adhere to the Late Antique interpretation of Porphyry and reject the ontological interpretation of scholars before the time of Plotinus.

Three, the question can be raised whether we are actually able to reach and understand the original meaning of Aristotle's theory of categories. As Nietzsche taught us, we only arrived in Athens, via Paris, Rome and Alexandria. The magnificent interpretation of Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century was the door through which we once again got to know and use Aristotle – and that access to his thinking was from then on the perspective through which we learned to understand him. The translation of the writings of Aristotle into Latin made it into a worldwide philosophy and was also the reason they lost their original meaning and words. The commentaries of scholars of the ancient world and in Late Antiquity taught us to fathom the texts, while at the same time laying a different foundation under this way of thinking.

d. Thinking or being

In his *Metaphysica*, Aristotle states that a truth and a lie are not in the things themselves but in our judgments about them.¹² The judgments that we make and the distinctions that we make are not in the things themselves but in our words about them. In the same way Porphyry spoke about the meaning and validity of the categories: words to indicate connections or differences. Logical concepts, things you can put into words.

Categories are ways of putting everything into words – *ta legomena*. Categories express our thinking but the categories are not in things themselves – *ta onta*. The meaning behind both those Greek words becomes mutilated when a text is translated into Latin: for example,

¹² Aristotle: *Metaphysica* 1027b 25.

praedicamenta are *voces*, not *res*. Whereby a battle was nurtured between nominalists and realists which would last for centuries within scholasticism and which was already imprecated by one of Porphyry's pupils, Jamblichus: were not the opposing parties driven to extremes and was there no intermediate position possible?

The above-mentioned preconceived questions can be quite useful here. Why, for example, did Aristotle, if he were indeed the author of it all, write a work about the categories in three parts of which only the second section deals with those categories and the last one breaks off abruptly? Porphyry too, immersed himself in trying to solve this question and also in the remarkable series of distinctions which Aristotle deemed necessary to make beforehand. Right at the beginning of his commentary, Porphyry investigates such a distinction between two forms of necessity. This resulted in a tool that became known as the **tree of Porphyry**. The most common gender – *genus generalissimum* – is independence – *ousia*. That can be differentiated every time, by distinguishing between material or immaterial. Physical independence, the material 'being' we call 'body', a distinction being made between animate and inanimate bodies. A stone is an inanimate body, a human being is animate, a living being. Living beings can in their turn be distinguished in having sensibility and not having sensibility. The 'sensible' being is an animal. Animals can be distinguished as sensible and those who remain without reason. The sensible and intelligent being can be defined as a being that can laugh, the human being, and the being who cannot. Humans can then be defined as male or female, as Socrates and Xanthippe.

In this 'tree' the starting point is always – *ousia* – the essence, the most general, the independent. Everything else is always ancillary. Precisely that which is so decisive for us in reality is for Porphyry merely that which comes with it. It is a Neoplatonic way of thinking in which 'being' is the true reality, reality descending further and further into something collateral. Take the red nose of Socrates and his pot belly – was the image really an addition or did it betray more about the being of this person than a most general being?

e. The table of categories

At present the best known and used 'Table of categories' originates from Kant and actually gives only four categories, each as a title for three underlying variations. Remarkably, the 'first category' of Aristotle, the essence or the substance is not included in this list of twelve. Essence or substance, is strikingly absent. Within Kant's critical way of thinking,

‘the-thing-in itself’ has become unknowable and unattainable and is therefore missing in this overview. Does this mean that every remaining category is ‘for-itself’?¹³ Certainly not; they are pure concepts, *a priori* principles, not impure and polluted by being ‘attached to something’ or anything else that could affect their purity and *a priori* character.

Are the pure principles of Kant really neither ‘*an sich*’ nor ‘*für sich*’? They are indeed, their status is purely formal, separate from experience and sensory perception; they are *a priori* valid logical concepts.

The *schèma katègorias tou ontos* of Aristotle consists primarily of the first category, essence or substance, followed by the nine accidental categories, of which Kant adopted the most important ones (quality, quantity and relationship). The categories which Kant adopted and developed were only accidental according to Aristotle. ‘Accident’ implies that it is surmountable, what we can do without. The accidental categories are outsiders and really secondary; they are outside the essence and the essence can very well exist without them. But this is not the case the other way round; all of the nine accidental principles are based on the first category, the essence. None of the nine accidental categories can exist on its own; it merely assists the essence. Take colour for example – the blackness, quality, size or whatever are no more than the blackness, quality or size of this or that.

This gives the categories an important ontological status. It is an attempt to provide assistance to the essence and to attach all sorts of fleeting phenomena, such as blackness and size, to the essence. Blackness is not, as with Plato, an *eidos*, an entity form; it is ‘something attached’. The construction of an overview of the basic principles, the categories, is in itself an attack on and a turning away from Plato’s theory of ideas. In his *Analytica posteriora*, Aristotle briefly points out his categories and then sharply discusses whether whiteness can be something in itself, a form of being. ‘An object cannot be white unless it is something in itself,’ he states and then – to the consternation of the English editor of his work who rebukes Aristotle in a footnote stating that his remark is impertinent, goes on to say: ‘We can take our leave from the forms of being (of Plato) – *teretismata te gar estin* – as it is merely idle cackling.’¹⁴

Aristotle’s attempt to adequately approach reality by formulating the categories drove a kind of wedge into thinking: the substance-accident model. When the first edition of the writings of Aristotle was published in Rome around the year 40 BC, this provoked, especially in the Greek speaking part of the empire, an endless stream of commentaries which

¹³ ‘*Das Ding an sich. – Das Ding für sich*’.

¹⁴ Aristotle: *Analytica posteriora* 83a 33-34.

went on for centuries. In the Latinised West, the introduction to the *Categoriae* by Porphyry became of decisive importance mainly through its translation into Latin, known as the *Isagoge*, and the commentary of Boethius. The majority of later Latin editions of the works of Aristotle place the *Categoriae* as the first text but preceded by the introduction of Porphyry.

In antiquity, right from the beginning, some thinkers object to the ‘substance accident’ model. Augustine, for example, in his work about the Trinity recognizes the validity of the basic principles of thought and reality, but states that they only apply to our reality, not to the essence of God. Therefore, according to him, the Trinity does not fit into the substance accident model.¹⁵ One and a half centuries later Boethius has similar objections.

In the following centuries Aristotle still plays a major role in the Greek and Arab speaking world, but has fallen into oblivion in the Latin West. It was not until the tenth century that the *Isagoge* reappeared with the comments of Boethius. By then it was an introduction to scant remains, the reason being that of the six writings of the *Organon* only *Categoriae* and *De interpretatione* were available. It was as late as 1135 AD that the first edition of the Latin version of the *Organon* was published.

The problems started when around 1040 Berengar at the cathedral school of Tours for the first time took up the ideas of Aristotle that every concrete thing on earth, such as a piece of bread and some wine, for example, has properties (*accidentia*) such as form, taste and colour, which cannot exist if the substance itself does not exist. Because bread and wine do not change taste, colour or shape at the Eucharist, the substance cannot essentially be changed in its entirety. So bread and wine did not become the body and blood of Christ; at most it could be said that a divine substance was added to bread and wine. That was obviously a reprehensible statement for the Church authorities and was strongly condemned. Divine secrets such as the transubstantiation could not be captured in human concepts like the categories.

The renewed increase of confidence in philosophically and scientifically supported thinking relying on the Aristotelean categories, forms of logic or dialectics, which had once again gained ground through this formulation of the basic principles, provoked an unprecedented fierce response. In the Latin West this came from the side of a well-schooled hermit from the area of Ravenna, later the powerful cardinal of Ostia, Peter Damian. According to him it was the devil that invested man with the arrogant delusions of believing that through his thinking he was able to understand

¹⁵ Augustine: *De Trinitate* X, 10.

truth and reality. Dialectics and logic are the spawn of Satan and philosophy has no more status than that of a lowly servant in the service of theology. God's omnipotence is completely free to do away with any logic or natural necessity. The point of view of Jerome which was that even God could not undo all that had ever happened, such as – possibly quite a surprisingly worldly example for a Church Father – defloration, was fervently rejected by Peter; God could undo anything, even the fact that Rome had ever been founded.¹⁶ Opposite the extreme view that every reality, natural or supernatural, was founded on the basic principles of thought and reality set by Aristotle, stood the equally disconcerting standpoint that God's omnipotence was able to undo all causality, logic or natural necessity – in fact, every truth and reality.

At the same time, in the Arab world where similar philosophical discussions were held, Al-Gazhali published his work *Tahafut al-falasifah*, *Incoherence of the Philosophers*. This book put an end to the flourishing and freedom of Arab science and philosophy for centuries. Not nature, but God is the cause of everything and causes to happen all that He chooses, wrote Al Gazhali. According to him, this meant that pointing out cause and effect in nature and the world and, formulating, in imitation of Aristotle, the prevailing principles of thought and reality, had to be dismissed as an illusion; even worse, the activity was an affront and an infringement of God's omnipotence.

These opposing attitudes adopted by the Latin West and the Arab East with regard to the philosophical thinking of Aristotle was the cause of a decisive rift between the further development of both cultures. Whoever believes that God, through his omnipotence is free to act against all logic, necessity, reasonableness and human understanding, does away with any ground for any reasonable or moral act and destroys every certainty. That God should be able to play cruel games with mankind was always a fearful dream for Luther; and Descartes needed to do away with a God who was capable of deceit and able to upset the regular and reasonable order, before he could establish the certainty of thought. 'Something can only be certain and indubitable (*certum et inconcussum*)' if the possibility of 'the cheating God – *le Dieu trompeur*' is ruled out.¹⁷

We talk about the *Organon* as being the writings on logic of Aristotle. But in his *Categoriae* Aristotle does not formulate the logical principles of our thinking at all. In his two main works, *Physica* and *Metaphysica*, he investigates nature and the backgrounds of nature. In *Categoriae* and *Metaphysica Γ* he is looking for the basic rules that are valid in nature, he

¹⁶ Petrus Damiani: *De divina omnipotentia*, Ed. Migne, 603c.

¹⁷ R. Descartes: *Méditations*, VII 24.

is describing and thinking about natural phenomena and movements. The basic concepts that he finds apply only within the natural reality of growing and blossoming, begetting and withering. If these categories are also meaningful for thinking, then that is merely because they reflect the *logos*, the logic of natural coherence and meaningful connections. Aristotle realizes very well that the categories are only valid when we are thinking about natural phenomena and that if we start from other fields of study, such as looking for proper rules of conduct or the rules that apply to mathematics, we should use other basic principles than the categories formulated here.

Starting in Late Antiquity, in the fierce discussions among the Neoplatonists and between Plotinus and Porphyry, the categories are transformed from basic principles that can be applied to natural relations, to basic concepts of thinking.

Then in scholasticism, the validity of the categories is shifted away from thinking about the ways of nature to thinking about the supernatural being. The criticism then focuses on this aspect, as is already apparent from Augustine, that the basic principles of our thinking means that we can never grasp or understand the unthinkable beyond all grounds and boundaries. Something Aristotle never claimed anyway.

With Kant everything is once again thoroughly shifted and thinking gets a completely different foundation. Whereas for Aristotle the categories for carefully looking at natural processes were applied in order to discover the basic principles, logic and to formulate rules, Kant turns away from all experience and sensory perception and tries to construct his 'Table of the Categories' based upon purely logical judgments, thereby establishing purely logical principles. Those clean or pure principles can be applied *a priori* because they have just been purified of any contamination from experience or the senses. Kant then reproaches Aristotle that his principles are naive and remain logically impure, something that Aristotle, however, never claimed or even intended.

The categories of Aristotle are not the basic principles of morality or reason nor the basic principles of formal logical thinking; they are not even the basic rules of thought. They are the principles through which we can understand nature, other than in a mechanical or geometric manner. Obviously, we cannot grasp or understand anything on the basis of the categories; Aristotle was not concerned with this, but we can 'touch – *thigain*'¹⁸ – what we are interested in.

¹⁸ Aristotle: *Metaphysica* 1051b 24.

And first and foremost, that both insight or understanding – *kai logōi*, transparency or knowledge – *kai gnōsei*, and duration, durability – *kai chronōi*: is the ‘being’ – *hè ousia*.¹⁹

f. Where?

Then follow two categories that at first glance we immediately believe to recognize: *pou* – where? And *pote* – when? Space and time therefore. In his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant discusses the concepts of space and time in the ‘*transzendente Aesthetik*’ before he introduces in the ‘*transzendente Logik*’ the ‘*Table of the Categories*’. Kant attempts to come to pure concepts of space and time, concepts that are in no way affected by things, ‘*von Gegenständen affiziert werden*’.²⁰ Space and time may in no way be attached to the things; nothing is allowed to be ‘on’ or ‘at’ them. After a remarkably short analysis, Kant comes up with the well-known definition: ‘Time is the formal condition *a priori* of all phenomena in general.’²¹ ‘Time’ is a necessary representation that underlies all contemplation of reality. Kant writes about the role that time plays in the realization of our knowledge of reality, not the ontological status of time. If there was no time, reality would become unimaginable, but time itself is nothing.²²

Immanuel Kant, with his analysis of the pure principle of time, separates himself from the things in time, whereas Aristotle asks by means of an *interrogativum*, *pote*, (when?) for an orientation, a time-determined place in reality. *Pote* asks for the ‘sometime ever’, ‘once’.

The pure principles of Kant’s time and space are only logical, but have no point of engagement in reality. The logic of both the syllogism and the Pythagorean theorem apply everywhere and at all times and are neither bound to space nor time. But what Aristotle is asking for is exactly this connection with reality: where and when?

As in the case of ‘to be’ and ‘to have’ in modern philosophy, ‘space’ and ‘time’ are separated as each other’s counterparts stand in a completely illogical way. In fact, they are separate from each other in a kind of logical vacuum, as both are necessary conditions for coming to a perception of

¹⁹ Ibid: *Metaphysica* 1028a 32.

²⁰ Kant: *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* B 33, A 10.

²¹ Ibid: B 51, A 34. ‘Die Zeit ist die formale Bedingung *a priori* aller Erscheinungen überhaupt.’

²² Ibid: B 52, A 35. ‘Die Zeit ist also lediglich eine subjektive Bedingung unserer (menschlichen) Anschauung (...) und an sich, ausser dem Subjekte, nichts.’

world and reality. They are necessary conditions for getting to know reality and are completely unreal in themselves.

For Aristotle, the requirement that the categories have counterparts, and thus have a place in the natural balanced order, is met. Unlike Kant who deals with space and time in the context of the theory of knowledge, his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Aristotle deals with time and space (let us hold on to these words for the moment) in his book on living nature, the *Physica*. There are the chapters about: *Topos* (*Physica* Δ 1-5), *kenon* (Δ 6 - 9), *chronos* (Δ 10 - 14) and *apeiron* (Γ 4 - 8). Space is the opposite of emptiness, time is opposed to the indefinite.

g. And when?

Both time and space are, for Kant, formal conditions for acquiring knowledge. In the philosophy of antiquity both were primarily seen as objects of unintentionally acquired sensory perception. Later, such as in the *Timaeus* of Plato and especially in the Hellenistic philosophical schools, increasingly more attention was being focused on mathematical relations, to such an extent that even the link with the natural reality was broken and thinking tried to purify itself – *katharsis* – of all ties with the senses. For Kant, space is merely a formal condition for pure knowledge. Just as ‘time’ seems to unfold from one point (‘now’) into three dimensions: past, present and future, so the existence of ‘space’ too originates from one point via the line to three dimensionality. That is a logical, but not a natural perception.

In the seventeenth century the study of mechanics achieved its first highlights in the light and gravity theories of Christiaan Huygens. In his *Traité de la Lumière* of 1695 he defends the Cartesian point of view that ‘in true Philosophy, we conceive the cause of all the natural effects according to the laws of mechanics. Which in my opinion is what we should do, or give up hope ever to understand anything in physics’.²³

Hegel deals with space and time in his *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften* under the heading: ‘Die Mechanik’. ‘Space’ is the first abstract generality of the appearance of nature.²⁴ ‘Space’ is defined geometrically: an uninterrupted congruent infinite magnitude. One, even more abstractly, in the theory of knowledge as a form of ordering. For

²³ ‘Dans la vraie Philosophie on conçoit la cause de tous les effets naturels par des raisons de mécanique. Ce qu’il faut faire à mon avis, ou bien renoncer à toute espérance de jamais rien comprendre dans la Physique.’

²⁴ G.W.F. Hegel: *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften*. § 254.

Kant, space is a logical form through which the acquiring of knowledge becomes possible. But we cannot live in that space.

Aristotle uses the word *topos* which actually does not mean space at all (he would use *chōra* for that) but ‘place’, or even more succinctly, ‘spot’. *Topos* is place, area or region, favourable location, the right opportunity. Instead of ‘time’ and ‘space’, ‘span’ and ‘zone’ might be more adequate translations.

In his *Physica*, Aristotle provides an analysis and definition of the concept *topos*. Space is the innermost boundary of the surrounding body: for example, the place of the wine, the space occupied by the wine is limited by the inside of the vessel. *Topos* is therefore in the first place something like the boundary within which something is contained, the stretch or space within which there is room for this or that. Because space brings limitation and determination with it, it requires an environment whose immobility is ascertained. After all, when everything is constantly changing and moving, there is no place or ‘spot’ for anything, it will be nowhere. A place is a permanent, fixed spot. Something only has its place and can only take its place when it can get hold of an immovable boundary. Everything is only somewhere in this ‘somewhere’ which is in relation to something else that does not disappear into a nowhere or never.

It was not until the fifth century of our era that Damascius, a commentator of Aristotle, came to describe place (from the ill-understood definition of ‘time’ as the quantity of motion) as the set of geometrical quantities that determine the position of an object. From then on the concept *topos* – *locus* in Latin – slowly shifts from ‘place’ to something that could be understood without its location – *thesis* – or – *positio* – as a purely geometrical determination. In scholasticism, for example in the work of Thomas Aquinas, ingenious differences appear such as between *ratio loci*, *locus situs* and *locus superficialis*. ‘Space’ is then only understood as an abstract, geometrically determined magnitude. The place taken in by objects or humans does not actually add or reduce anything to that abstract determination. We do not matter and have no place in this geometrically constructed space.

But for Aristotle ‘place’ or ‘spot’ is precisely ‘being somewhere’, being on the spot and having found your place. Things are contained within the natural order on their spot, at the place that naturally belongs to them. A heavy stone does not float and a palm tree does not grow on an icy surface. Just as everything has its own time, so everything also has its own place. Just as *chronos* is the counterpart of the indefinite and unrestricted – *apeiron*, and duration is the opposite of the vague and unestablished – so is *kenon* the opposite of being somewhere on the spot –

topos: – *kenon*. This Greek concept – *kenon* – entered the Latin tradition as *vacuum*, the empty space. Space is in essence ‘somewhere containing something’ and ‘empty space’ is just as impossible for Aristotle as a shortage of time. Aristotle passionately contests the possibility of the existence of an empty space. Dijksterhuis, in his classical study *The Mechanization of the World Picture* dryly observes ‘on the whole the entire opposition is based more on emotional than logical reasoning, it is more the expression of self-preservation than refutation.’²⁵ Dijksterhuis found it difficult to see in Aristotle’s *Physica* more than ‘a fruitless wandering on paths that could never reach to an end.’²⁶

The path taken by Aristotle and the methods used in modern science and philosophy do indeed result in completely different concepts: natural experiences are then confronted by purely logical concepts. Nature abhors a void. The scholastic adage ‘*natura abhorret vacuum*’ can be traced directly to Aristotle. The natural abhorrence for emptiness – *horror vacui* and the fleeing away from the void, *fuga vacui* is apparent in every wave of the sea, in every piece of fallow land, any area of high air pressure or any heat wave. Between the trees there is open, empty space just as there is empty space to make any movement possible at all. Between the trees there is an empty space, a void, but a complete and absolute void is totally inconceivable and is not mentioned anywhere in Greek philosophy. Even to the Atomists emptiness was *paresparmenon kenon*, an empty space between the atoms in the same space.

Just as opposed to ‘time’, the ‘once’, ‘never’ remains inconceivable, in the same way that opposite space, the ‘somewhere’, the ‘nowhere’ is inconceivable. Time and space are ‘attached to something’, the ‘somewhere’ and ‘once’ existing as a span and zone.

In the stretch or span of time, no hiatus can occur; similarly no vacuum can exist in an area or region, no more than can a vacuum within be drawn by the region or landscape to the front of the vacuum: for the first there is no time and for the other there is no room.

Until Leibniz, scholastic principles based on the work of Aristotle maintained that ‘*natura non fecit saltus*’. ‘Nature does not make jumps’ and does not skip anything; it does not allow any hiatus. The essential determination of time as a continuum is the positive opposite of it not allowing gaps. In the same way the essential determination of space is the positive opposite of it allowing no absolute void, no vacuum. It is

²⁵ E.J. Dijksterhuis: *De mechanisering van het wereldbeeld*. Amsterdam 1950, p. 43. Translation: E.J. Dijksterhuis: *The Mechanization of the World Picture*. New York 1961.

²⁶ *Ibid.*: p. 75.

remarkable that in the later conceptions of space and time, controlled by geometry and mechanics, their negative counterparts (hiatus and vacuum) disappeared from the definition, whereas the positive provisions (continuum and coherence) were maintained. That in doing so they lacked their basis and were left to themselves was ignored and considered something obvious.

In his *Categoriae* Aristotle neither mentions time nor space but merely raises the questions: *pote*, when? And *pou*, where?

Pou is not a desperate question, without any guidance or direction: 'where?' *Pou* asks 'where to?' The provision is already based on a certain orientation, a somewhere. More than the questions 'from where?' or 'to what?' the questions 'when?' and 'where?' are basic determinations of what something or someone is. The categories of Aristotle provide the natural, not the logical reasons of 'being'. Nothing can 'be' unless it has the time and the space to 'be'.

CHAPTER TWO

EUSEBIUS OF CAESAREA

a. In hoc signo

Around the year 90 AD, Emperor Domitian ordered one of his veterans to find out to what extent the Empire had anything to fear from that new sect, the Christians. Since the death of their anointed King of Judea, they had caused unrest and turmoil in many places in the Empire. The great fire of Rome was supposed to have been started by them near the Circus Maximus, and even after the victorious war fought by Domitian's father Vespasian and his brother Titus, things remained restless, even in Rome. Immediately after the capture of Jerusalem, Vespasian had ordered all the descendants of the royal house of David to be found and put to death.¹

Domitian was also wary of these princes and ordered them to be found and executed.

Domitian had two grandsons of Judas, the youngest brother of Jesus, brought before him from Judea. The story goes that they show him their calloused hands and say that they are farmers and that they possess no more than nine thousand denarii, not in silver but as the value of the thirty-nine acres that they owned together. The emperor then questions them about what concerns him most: that kingdom of yours, what does it involve? The two nephews explain that the kingdom is not earthly or of this world, but heavenly and angelic, and that it will only begin at the end of times when the Anointed comes to judge the dead and living. The emperor shrugs his shoulders and lets them go.²

That conversation, quoted by Eusebius of Caesarea from the writings of Hegesippus, took place around AD 85. Some years later roughly the same words will be written down by the last evangelist, John: 'My kingdom is not of this world – *ouk estin ek tou kosmou toutou* – if my kingdom was of this world, then my servants would fight to defend me.'³

¹ Eusebius: *Historia Ecclesiastica* III 12.

² *Ibid*: *Hist. Eccl.* II 19-20.

³ John 18, 36.

These ‘servants’ here are more soldierly than in the testimony before the emperor, but the governor Pontius Pilate decided to condemn the instigator of the revolt, because the real threat was the presumption that this leader was the anointed king of the Jews.

What in AD 30 was a real clash between the power of Rome and those who believed in the Almighty and his coming kingdom here on earth soon became a clash between two powers: heaven and earth. For Tertullian, in his early defence of the new faith, the separation is quite obvious: ‘nothing is as strange to us as politics, the general interest – *nec ulla magis res aliena quam publica.*’ He asks the rhetorical question: ‘What does the emperor have to do with the community of believers? – *quid est imperatori cum ecclesia?*’⁴

When the Christians, around the middle of the third century, were still a small community – an estimated two percent of the population – and were also heavily prosecuted by the government, this poignant contradiction could be put into words. But from the beginning of the fourth century, when the Emperor himself became a Christian and changed persecuting Christians into assigning power to the Church, the number of Christians grew rapidly, especially in the East. And this strongly altered the relationship between state and faith. In the West, Constantine initially carried out a policy of construction – of the great basilicas around Rome – and toleration.

The victory, later triumphantly connected to the conversion of the emperor by Bishop Eusebius – *In hoc signo* – was kept deliberately vague by the emperor himself. In order not to insult the Romans and especially the senate, he vaguely attributed on his triumphal arch the victory to ‘divine assistance’ – *instinctu divinitatis*, leaving open which deity or god he had in mind. In his proclamations or legislation he frequently used terminology derived from the solar cult. But when the Eastern part of the Empire also came under his authority, he immediately intervened decisively. In the summer of 325 the first major council in Nicaea convened under his presidency and the doctrines about the relationship of the Father and the Son were partly established and determined by him. Less than thirty years later an annoyed Emperor Valens declared to the bishops present at the Synod of Milan that they ‘had to accept his will as ecclesiastical law – *hoper egō boulomai touto kanōn*’.⁵

The bishop of Milan, Ambrose, who had earlier shown courage enough to refuse an emperor access to the basilica and to demand that he first had to confess to a massacre, retorted during his funeral eulogy for Emperor

⁴ Tertullian: *Apologeticum* 38, 3.

⁵ Athanasius: *Historia Arianorum* 33, 7.

Valentian: 'It is better that emperors persecute bishops than that they love them. – *Felicius episcopus persequuntur imperatores quam diligunt.*'⁶

That relationship between love and hatred, world and faith, power and wisdom was quite different from the conflict between Socrates and his judges in Athens, or Plato and the tyrant of Syracuse or Aristotle as collaborator with the Macedonian rulers. From Late Antiquity there were two truths, two worlds, wisdoms and powers. For Aristotle, the order of the world, the radiant and visible reality around him was still *to theion*, divine. *Theologikè* was still identified as the first wisdom, the most important of the sciences and the highest form of philosophy. From Paul onwards grew the opposition between faith and knowledge, between *hè schèma tou kosmou toutou*⁷ – the order of this world here and the longing for the kingdom of God, the second coming of the Lord and the resurrection from the dead. It was the contraposition of Athens and Jerusalem, philosophy and faith. In the New Testament, the core concept of ancient philosophy, the balanced, pure ordering of reality – *kosmos* – a reality that was till then perceived as meaningful and enduring, is constantly considered in a negative way.

Paul uses expressions such as 'the god of this world (these times) – *ho theos tou aiōnos toutou*⁸' – as an indication of evil, the devil. By the rulers of this world – *archontes tou aiōnos toutou*⁹ – he means the malevolent Jewish and Roman rulers and the evil, diabolical powers that dominate this era. The contrast was even more sharpened in the deutero-Pauline texts: 'the love of the world – *hè philia tou kosmou*' is considered to be 'enmity against God – *echthra tou theou estin*'.¹⁰

The contradiction between this world, the here and now – the *hic et nunc* which is described so disparagingly by Augustine – and the divine reality, between temporality and durability, was summed up in the rhetorical question: 'What does Athens have to do with Jerusalem? What has the wisdom of the Greeks to do with faith? What has the outcome of philosophy and science to do with the simplicity of the heart? Or what has the temporary reality created by God to do with the enduring worlds without beginning or end? Or *Genesis* with the *Timaeus* of Plato?

Plato and his predecessors the Presocratics were also thinking about the separation between visible and invisible reality, the superficial sensory perception and the deeper layers of insight. It is precisely in the creation

⁶ Ambrose: *De obitu Valentiniani*. 39.

⁷ I Corinthians 3, 17.

⁸ II Corinthians 4, 4.

⁹ I Corinthians 2, 6-8.

¹⁰ Letter of James 4, 4.

myth of Plato, the *Timaeus*, that a sharp distinction is made between the only conceivable reality, only accessible and able to exist in the mind – *noëtos* – and the sensible perceptible reality – *aisthētos*. Plato is more inclined to consider visible reality as mere semblance, and to reserve the truth or the reality that only takes shape in the mind. It is semblance not only in the sense of – *doxa* – opinion and deceit, but also semblance in the sense of reflection, a gleam of a light reflected from elsewhere. It took more than six centuries before the later Neoplatonists disconnected the two approaches of reality from each other and ended up with what would be called Platonic dualism, the theory of two worlds that was maligned by Nietzsche. And right at that very moment, during the third and fourth centuries, Christian orientated thinking took control of Neoplatonic philosophy and dressed up its religious truths in an elaborate and rich garment of Greek philosophy.

For Marcus Aurelius, who was still firmly based in the tradition of the Stoics, man was merely a tiny dot, but he was part of the *kosmos* and was permanently connected to it. 'Even when we die, nothing falls out of the organization of the whole – *exō tou kosmou to apothanon ou piptei*'.¹¹ However small and insignificant, almost negligible something may be, it never really disappears and is lost. Nothing disappears, everything merely changes constantly, and precisely because of this constant changing it does not disappear. Nothing comes from nothing, nor does anything ever disappear into nothingness. Something always remains. Because of this 'existence' in the ontology of antiquity, everything is 'in order' and meaningful.

The ontological foundation of that philosophy disappears in Late Antiquity, existence and meaning of reality being perceived as having been created and therefore dependent on the Creator. God is, and not only in a moral sense, but especially ontologically, the pivot around which the whole reality resides. In itself, without him who has created all and knows its meaning, his plan of salvation and everything connected to it is no more than dust and stones, doomed to extinction and meaningless in its temporary existence. The thought articulated by Shakespeare's Macbeth: 'There's nothing serious in mortality; all is but toys (...),' describes his situation in a nutshell. It is not right to kill the king, your guest, in his sleep. The natural order has been violated and obviously the order desired by God as well. Evil has occurred and it is a form of turning away from God's will. And with that, through his bloody act, Macbeth also lost all meaning of his existence.

¹¹ Marcus Aurelius: *Ad se ipsum* VIII 18.

For Kierkegaard, this statement was the core of our experience of existence: separation from the meaningful natural order, separation from the Christian certainties and order. In that gripping book *The Concept of Anxiety*, he quotes Macbeth's outcry and writes that Macbeth rendered his own life meaningless the moment he killed the king because he lost his freedom through this act. Only dread held him in its grasp, and the only way out of that affliction is to sink ever deeper into suffocating madness.¹²

b. No limit, gradation

The boundary between antiquity and the Middle Ages, between the philosophy of antiquity and scholasticism, between paganism and Christian doctrine is nowhere to be found. In reality it was a slow and literally debilitating process. In my own library I find it hard to maintain the separation between my interests and the several historic and literary periods. In Late Antiquity, wealthy book owners were less and less inclined to have texts from Cicero, Greek philosophy or much-copied tragedies. All scrolls that were not copied anew approximately every one and a half century became difficult to read and shortly after they were no longer readable at all. But time and again bishops and abbots ordered copies of the sermons or the commentaries on the Psalms of Aurelius Augustine to be made. This resulted in dozens of copies of popular Christian writings, whereas slowly even the most important philosophical and legal texts of antiquity were lacking in libraries or elsewhere; rarely were copies being produced at some place or another and soon none could be found.

Moreover, through imperial legislation and episcopal orders an active policy was pursued and many books were burned. Just as what happened in the nineteen thirties and forties in Berlin to books by Heine and Marx, texts of Sappho and Porphyry were burnt in public in Late Antiquity. Copiers were ordered not to copy unchristian texts any more and their hand was chopped off if they violated that prohibition.¹³

In the third century, a great scholar like Origen did not only have at his disposal a large library but also seven stenographers, seven assistants whom we would call researchers or librarians and numerous writers, copyists and calligraphers. Such people were unaffordable on the slave market. Boys and girls, farm workers and mine workers were dirt-cheap

¹² Shakespeare: *Macbeth* II, 3. See: S. Kierkegaard: *The Concept of Anxiety*, end of chapter IV.

¹³ See: C. Nixey: *The Darkening Age: The Christian destruction of the classical world*. Macmillan 2017.

and strong fighters, dancers and clowns cost more, but learned Greeks or Syrians were expensive and could only be afforded by a rich guardian and admirer of a particular scholar.

The literary sources, traditionally the most important when it comes to philosophy and sciences, are rather unreliable. Whoever reads Augustine's letters or sermons, or the Dutch *Augustinus de zielzorger* (Augustine the soul carer) by F. van der Meer, may get the impression that about AD 400 Hippo was a Christian city. Archaeology has shown – through tombs, inscriptions, devotional offerings, figurines, baths, houses, brothels and markets – that the Christian community there was very small and no more than a very insignificant minority. But the texts are beginning to let us down. Eusebius was the first in a line of Christian writers and historians who openly declared that he was not so much interested in truth but in what was useful to the new faith, his truth.

The maxim of Plato that truth is more important than friendship faded and disappeared or was turned into its opposite. An example is the remarkable distortions in the stories about the bloody persecutions. The persecutions of Christians are well documented and dramatized in our historical memory. That later on those who were once persecuted were far more ruthless and merciless in their persecution of those who did not conform to their beliefs was covered up under a cloak of denials and lies. Never had the civilized Greco-Roman world known any raging desert gods who commanded:

'Take care, lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land to which you go (...). You shall tear down their altars and break their pillars and cut down their Asherim (...) for the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God.'¹⁴ None of the gods, scholars or philosophers of antiquity was jealous and utterly intolerant of other customs, opinions or wisdom. Christianity was that to a large extent. After the tolerance edict promulgated by Constantine, many more Christians died through the hands of their fellow believers than before through the hands of the 'pagans'.

The laws of Theodosius at the end of the fourth century were cruel and oppressive and led to the burning down of the library of Alexandria, the closure, neglect and destruction of hundreds of temples and harsh tax measures against the pagan opponents of the ascending Christian communities. Through Justinian's legislation in AD 529 even a state of terrorism broke out in which hundreds of professors, priests, lawyers, educated people, authors, teachers, grammarians, sophists and philosophers were imprisoned, harshly interrogated, tortured, expelled or murdered. One of the last leaders of the Academy of Plato in Athens, Damascius,

¹⁴ *Exodus* 34, 12-14.

described how his philosophy students were arrested, beaten up and then subjected to severe and stupid interrogations by a faithful bishop. In the beginning of the sixth century the major universities of Athens, Alexandria, Beirut, Aphrodisias and Epidaurus forbade all teaching in Plato's philosophy after which they dwindled and then disappeared.

‘Thus books and philosophy were bound to fade from sight.’¹⁵

c. Late, too late

Late Antiquity is the period during which much was accomplished in a completed form which would be passed on to the future, to the Middle Ages and the modern era, but at the same time it is an almost unknown era. The culmination of philosophy can be placed in the century of Pericles in Athens. The philosophy which followed in Rome, with among others Cicero and Seneca, was, as I described elsewhere, dismissed as unimaginative imitation and consisting of mere commentaries.¹⁶ And all that came after Marcus Aurelius in the second century AD was usually regarded as inferior and in decline.

The centuries after Constantine disappear in the West behind the tumult of mass migration. In the East rigidity ruled Byzantine thinking. And above all, everything was just late, too late, and the decay of philosophy was seen in the light of contrast with the rise of early Christianity. All those later pagan philosophers, such as Martianus Capella, appeared to be so concerned about problems and metaphors that were by then worn out and almost forgotten. But Martianus' encyclopedic work *De nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii*¹⁷ was immensely popular and was eagerly read for many centuries. It was to be found soon afterwards in all monastery libraries together with many commentaries on it and from AD 1000 onwards it was even translated into the vernacular languages such as High German.

However tedious and scarcely relevant all those broad expositions of Late Antiquity may often seem to us, it was, however, a time in which philosophical ideas fermented which were later used for the foundations of Western civilization. We do read Plato and seldom Proclus' commentaries on the *Timaeus*. Yet through the centuries Proclus' contemplation on the meaning of that early dialogue remains alive and influential.

¹⁵ R. MacMullen: *Christianity & Paganism in the Fourth to Eighth Centuries*. P. 90. Yale 1999.

¹⁶ Ch. Vergeer: *Philosophy in Ancient Rome: A Loss of Wings*. Newcastle 2018.

¹⁷ Martianus Capella: *On the Marriage of Philologia and Mercuri*. This work was also known as *De septem disciplinis (On the seven disciplines or Satyricon)*.

This leads to the paradox and problem that we no longer study all those Neoplatonic explanations and quibbles, but that all those interpretations are spread in layers over the text of Plato and we often read and understand Plato in the manner that became customary in those centuries. We understand the dualism of Plato, the two worlds, transcendence, the relationship between soul and body and many other things in a way that Augustine would greet with approval but Plato might well reject with wonder.

Much of the philosophy of Late Antiquity only appears to become increasingly obscure because, at that time the light of a new way of thinking and believing, through Christianity, came to the fore. In a long line of authoritative studies on the history of philosophy, the development of philosophy from Thales to Boethius is first dealt with after which the authors go back five centuries in time to start again with the earliest Greek Church Fathers and then via the Latin fathers to scholasticism.

The fact that in those Neoplatonic philosophical schools, such as in Alexandria, master and pupil were often a mixture of pagans and Christians, but that working and writing together is rarely made clear. The impression created in most historic anthologies written in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was that the Christians and pagans and their relative ways of living and their religions, their beliefs and knowledge, their philosophies and theologies represented two completely different worlds.

‘When E.A. Judge was talking with A.H.M. Jones, the well-known authority on the late Roman empire, he told him that I wanted to investigate what changes the conversion to Christianity had actually brought about for Rome. He told him he already knew the answer: none.’¹⁸

When in Rome we descend the Esquiline at the back of the Santa Maria Maggiore and come into Via Urbana and there, some metres below us, we reach the Santa Pudenziana, a church that is considered to be one of the oldest in Rome. Let us go back and visit this church around AD 400, ten years before the Goths occupied for the first time the eternal city under the leadership of Alaric.

We walk from the Forum along the stately Vicus Patricii – still practically completely intact a few meters below the current pavement – we pass under the aqueduct built during the reign of Trajan and arrive at the imposing Porticus Illicii behind which are Thermae. The current north walls of the church are still partly those of the Porticus and Thermae. The small Ecclesia Pudentiana was an ancient prayer room that from AD 385

¹⁸ This was told to me by Robin Lane Fox when I talked with him about his then recently published book *Pagans and Christians*.

onwards was converted into a basilica with side aisles that was completed in AD 398. Then, in AD 402 work on the mosaic in the apse was begun. In those days the basilica must have been clearly recognizable as the hall of a *domus*, the house in which the senator Quintus Cornelius Pudens had lived and where – according to Christian tradition – during the persecutions of Nero he had given shelter to Simon Peter. At the back of the basilica are, to this day, the baths of Novatus, the son of the senator.

To an ordinary Roman, this basilica was easily recognizable: he heard the sounds of the street and from the baths the chatter of the bathers; he walked through the *porticus* and was well aware that the basilica was accessible to anyone. He knew that only when bells tinkled would the gods be present in their temple and that in ancient Roman fashion the bells were rung to drive out demons and evil spirits. He also understood that the Christians inside were kneeling at that moment, although he might consider this kind of eastern submission not very appropriate; that they believed that at this moment, the *consecratio*, their god was present he understood quite well, although that presence ‘in the form of bread and wine’ was to him somewhat strange and extravagant.

But when he looked up at the mosaic, he saw his own world: the figure of a radiant young ruler, enthroned as Jupiter on an imposing throne. This figure is surrounded by twelve dignified persons, dressed in senatorial togas and in a *porticus* two dignified ladies and in the background a city like Rome, with palaces and temples. There is something odd about this background; he has no problems with the mythological animals that are depicted, but that gilded cross on a hill is a bit gruesome and eerie.

Time and the restoration on behalf of Cardinal Caetani destroyed part of the mosaic irreparably. Ten of the twelve men are not looking at the ruler, but like philosophers they seem involved in a mutual debate, accompanied by outspoken gestures and individual poses and expressions. Yet an early Christian would recognize here the apostles with Peter and Paul and the bearded ruler as Jesus. Both women are the two daughters of the senator, Pudentiana and Praxedis or they might be symbolic images of Jewish and uncircumcised members of the religion. To a Christian, the city in the background is not a topographical representation of any earthly city but an image of the heavenly Jerusalem. The four animals are the symbols of the four evangelists and the cross here is not a tool of punishment such as the Christian could see nearby in the Fossa Aggeris or near the Porta Maggiore.

This was a representation of the true cross recovered in AD 320 of which Emperor Theodosius had had a jewelled replica erected on Golgotha

in about AD 390; just over ten years later this image appeared in the mosaic in Rome.

What the heathen, what the Christian saw and what we can still see is a number of men and women with uncommonly individual traits with an almost dramatic gesture of individual sensitivity – which, only a few years later, after the fall of Rome in 410 we would no longer see. It is an entirely Hellenistic arrangement of the figures, with a lot of effect and personal details, with a delicate choice of colours that is exceptional for Rome. ‘Here the Church Triumphant has adopted the art of pagan, classical Rome.’¹⁹

During the fourth and fifth centuries the dividing line between paganism and Christianity was considerably different from what was believed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The strong contrasts were constructed much later; at the time the colours were much more blended together. The joyful message and the shining light of the new faith did not stand opposite the darkness and fears of late paganism. The one God of Love did not stand in contrast to the many gods, goddesses, demons and all kinds of fear. The Saviour, Christ, was not really a front against the scabrous nonsense of homy gods and goddesses, miracle workers and silly stories and myths about demigods.

There was no sharp line dividing the pagan pessimism, desolate and hopeless, and its ‘enjoy the day, for you will die’ and the Christian doctrine of salvation, future perspective and resurrection from the dead. The amoral atrocities, circus games and slavery were not all opposed by the Christian doctrine of ‘love thy neighbour’. Slaves had access to the pagan temples and services and were still whipped to death in the sixth century on the Sicilian estates of Pope Gregory the Great. Women spread the new faith and also found in it a more oriental attitude of subjugation and servitude.

The everyday reality of the fifth century was much more diffuse than how it was later described. If, in the church of Santa Costanza, just outside Rome, you look above you, you will see a funerary church covered in mosaics with scenes of drunkenness, merry harvest festivals and wine presses. Is all that bacchantic and does it belong to the worship of Dionysus or are we willing to interpret it as an allegory of the Eucharist?

It is possible to go down, deep under some Roman churches that lead us back centuries in time. The churches are above it, underneath the past is still tangible. Far below San Clemente a sculpture was found, a similar one to the world-famous other version which is prominently displayed in the Vatican museum: Christ as the good shepherd, as the Son of David. But

¹⁹ R. Beny & P. Gunn: *The churches of Rome*. London 1981, p. 31

there are dozens of this kind of statue, and we are never sure whether they represent Christ or the god Hermes, the Bearer. Below Saint Peter's, close to the alleged tomb of Simon Peter – who was not buried there and who was never in Rome – is a burial chamber with a depiction of Christ guiding, like Apollo, the triumphant chariot of the sun. Emperor Constantine too remained in the tradition of his predecessors, as far as the sun cult of Apollo was concerned. He continued to carry the pagan title of *pontifex maximus*, and donated the golden statuette of Victoria to the Roman Senate, around which a bitter struggle would emerge several decades later. In about AD 600 Pope Gregory the Great found it once again necessary to forbid his priests to sing the hymn to the invincible sun right at the climax of the mass, during the consecration.

That many, many things changed between the first and the fourth century, between antiquity and the period of Late Antiquity, is certain, but what the key word should be that would reflect those changes or these conversions, remains difficult to ascertain. Often the belief in, or the hope of, immortality or renewed life is indicated as the key issue. Lactantius, for example, indicates immortality as the culmination of the faith – *id vero nil aliud potest esse quam immortalitas*.²⁰ Paul too states that the faith would be worthless and empty if there was no victory over death.²¹

But which aspect of this was unacceptable and unbelievable for the heathens? And what did Christians believe in all this? In the Neoplatonic philosophical schools from Plotinus, Porphyry, and Jamblichus, faith in immortality was quite common. From the third century until deep into the sixth, this was taught at the University of Athens from Syrianus and Proclus right up to the time of Damascius and Simplicius. And this was also taught in the philosophical school of Alexandria by Hypatia (who was subsequently murdered by the Christians) and by her pupil Synesius. – who became a bishop and remained a follower of Plato – by Ammonius, John Philoponus and Olympiodorus. In pagan mystery rituals too the victory over death and resurrection was the aim of rite and sacrifice. Cyprian regretted that Christians and pagans were buried in the same grounds, because whereas the pagans would wither into dust the Christians would gloriously rise up and enjoy eternal life.

Were all those Christians who allowed themselves to be buried among those heathens – *apud profana sepulcra depositus* – also quite sure about that? When we come across phrases on a burial ground of Late Antiquity telling us that the deceased is or will be reborn into all eternity – *in aeternum renatus* – it is still uncertain whether this was the resting place

²⁰ Lactantius: *Divina Institutiones*. III 12.

²¹ I Cor. 15, 14.

of a baptized Christian or of someone who had sacrificed a bull to Attys. In the Roman catacombs I have followed a guide who missed out some interesting corridors and assured me that the graves were ‘all pagan’ and insisted that in others only Christians were there. But until well into the sixth century, Christians too had spells put on their tombstones such as *oudeis athanatos* (there is no immortality), and therefore gave the advice to enjoy life *idus biotos* (life is sweet) or *euphrainete pantote* (enjoy it). Also the symbol or the invocation to the gods of the dead, *D.M.S.*, appears on dozens of Christian tombs.

Christians too lit torches in honour of Tychè above water wells, kissed doorposts and poured wine and performed all sorts of other rituals just like their pagan neighbours did or which other pagan neighbours might no longer perform, considering them to be just superstition. Philosophers pointed out how many Christians also wore amulets to ward off evil, spit at the evil spirits around them, read their fate in the stars, kept lanterns above bubbling water, clung to soothsaying, had the intestines of cattle or the livers of birds studied by augurs, returned home if they heard the cry of a particular bird or bought something if they saw three birds passing them on the right side of the road, held meals with the dead or held any other form of ritual despised by philosophers as silly superstition. They were Christians in name but still pagan in daily life.

d. The bishop and the library

Eusebius of Caesarea accidently – he himself would, correctly, have denied this – played a major part in the history of philosophy. Born around AD 265, he became bishop in an insignificant harbour town in Palestine. Christians knew this to be the town where Pontius Pilate had resided. But it was especially known to be the town where Origen had worked and had left behind a school and an impressive library. Dionysius continued the work of Origen and became bishop of Caesarea. When Eusebius became active, the philosophic-theological studies originated by Origen were still in full swing. Jerusalem was a deserted army camp and the later authority of the patriarchates did not yet exist.

It was in that vacuum that Eusebius acted as a writer, but above all as a counsellor to Emperor Constantine he could assert his influence. As a philosopher he was a supporter of Plato, Clement of Alexandria and Origen. Origen had not yet been declared a heretic and Clement was mainly familiar with the writings of the Neoplatonists, especially those of Plotinus from which he quotes frequently, using the edition of Eustochius and not from the Enneads published later by Porphyry.

Eusebius preserved some important philosophical aspects from antiquity and thereby saved them for the late period of antiquity where these insights counterbalanced the preponderance of the ideas of Augustine. For Late Antiquity the ideas of Augustine on the omnipotence of God, his omniscience and predetermination and the important role of his mercy became an obstacle to maintaining the idea of the free will of man. Moreover, his impressive exposé on the two cities in *De civitate dei* limited to a large extent the possibility of any historical development.

Both these enduring cities, here on earth and the heavenly city, also worked to deny the power of time. Even the progressive Christianization of the world, this world here, was actually something that Augustine was not interested in.

●f course, Augustine acknowledged the freedom of the will, both in being free from coercion and as a possibility of self-determination. For Augustine, the freedom of the will is both a fact that we experience and as something that is part of the essence of the soul. But the knowledge on which the will rests is for Augustine either rational knowledge of the material substance – *ratio inferior* – or a higher form of consciousness – *ratio superior* – and in both forms they depend on the *rationes aeternae*, the eternal truths of God and the divine illumination of our feeble minds.

In his *De libero arbitrio* and *De magistro*, but even more so in his work written in his mature old-age *De Trinitate*, Augustine, believing that man was no longer free after the Fall puts the emphasis largely on divine predestination. An Irish monk, Pelagius, protested against this view and his protest was widely supported within the Eastern Church, but in the West the importance of Augustine was greater. Augustine sees the divine will as all important and for a thousand years the philosophical discussion about freedom of the will, complicated enough as it was before him, would be overwhelmed by theological presuppositions and burdened with ecclesiastical coercion. It is only since the dawn of the modern era that a more open discussion has been once more possible.

When Erasmus opposed the Reformation, he chose the defence of free will as a breaking point. An Augustine monk, as he still was, Martin Luther reacted with his *De servo arbitrio*; John Calvin put an even more extreme emphasis on the doctrine of predestination.

When modern philosophy through Hegel attaches great importance to the free will as a condition of the value and meaning of man, when Schopenhauer considers the world as 'will' and when Nietzsche sketches '*der Wille zur Macht*' as the metaphysical core of his philosophy, it can be considered each time as an attack on Augustine. Especially for Nietzsche is Augustine the enemy of the free spirit, an '*Untier der Moral* – moral

monster', a loudmouth who lacks a sense of decorum in an insulting manner. Just read a few pages of Augustine, writes Nietzsche, and you will observe 'what kind of unsavoury individual comes to the surface.'²²

Opposite the weighty views of Augustine stood Eusebius with his plea for free will and the possibility that time and history could be influenced and further progress possible. The idea that in antiquity fate was all decisive and that free will was only brought to the fore by Christianity, is totally incorrect, as is apparent from a mere glance at the writings of Augustine.

The Greek concept *Tuchè*, destiny and inevitability, became *Fortuna* in the Latin tradition. Both functioned as abstract concepts and were personified in the shape of a goddess. Although the Greek concept seems to indicate more something like a sad 'fate' and *Fortuna* seems to point in the direction of fortune and happiness, both concepts were actually neutral, simply one's fate. *Tuchè* and *Fortuna* did in themselves not indicate whether misfortune or happiness had been assigned to someone.

A lasting impression was made by Herodotus' conception of *Tuchè*. The fate of Croesus, the wisdom of Solon. But for Thucydides, fate is by no means supernatural or divine, but the unforeseen events that thwart human endeavour. The power of fate is overwhelmingly large in the history of Polybius and Sallust – to name both a Greek and a Roman historian – but the concept of fate, destiny, as used by them was essentially different from the meaning it has for us.

For us the course of events is determined by subsequent causes and 'fatal' is an occurrence which has no apparent cause and therefore remains unexplainable. In antiquity, fate was that which no man could influence, the unforeseen. Thucydides has Pericles making a speech on the eve of the outbreak of the Peloponnesian war. In it he gives the Athenians a wise and gentle warning: 'For often the changes in fate are as incalculable in the course of events than there are in the plans of men, and this is why we usually blame our 'fate' or 'fortune' when things happen in ways that we did not expect.'²³ Dependence on fate – *ten tuchèn* – is here contrasted with that which we did not expect, what we did not understand or was intended – *para logon*. Polybius writes more or less the same thing but uses a different word. 'I write my history with an emphasis on the role of *to paradoxon*: people expected something to unfold in a certain way, but

²² Friedrich Nietzsche: *Werke in zwölf Bänden*, 5, 270 (*Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*) en 8, 178 (*Götzendämmerung*). '(...)was für unsaubere Gesellen damit obenauf gekommen sind.'

²³ Thucydides: *History of the Peloponnesian war*. I 140 Translation by R. Warner, Penguin Classics, 1979.

contrary to this expectation – *to para-doxon* – the course of events would unfold in a completely different way.²⁴ The drama of his history lies therefore to a large extent in the unexpected, the sudden disappointments or windfalls.

Aristotle laid the philosophical basis of the philosophy of chance. In his *Physica* he gives the example of the man who goes to market and comes to a place where he normally has no reason to go but there he unexpectedly meets someone who owed him some money. Getting back this money was not foreseen – *proairesis* – but it was also partly due to well-understood actions and insight – *dianoia*. What, according to Aristotle, his fellow citizens would call ‘striking lucky’ – *tuchè*. Coincidence is therefore part of deliberate action and insights, but with something that happens as ancillary, but that is not in contrast to free will; on the contrary, everything that happened was the result of the free will of the man who decided to go to the market. Fate, therefore never affects the inanimate; it is, in order to put it in more modern words, no mechanism. Tossing a coin to see whether it will be heads or tails, therefore has nothing to do with fate. Fate, Aristotle says, only plays a role as the ancillary of the coincidental within human expectations and calculations. By saying this he disengages fate from what the divine has assigned to us and he links it to an important philosophical concept: *to kata sumbebèkos*, ‘that what was added on’.

In mediaeval and modern thinking this became *per accidens*, the essence – *substantia* – and what is connected or attributed to it – *accidentia*. Within the Academic tradition of the Neoplatonic Nemesius of Emesa, Eusebius adopted this definition of Aristotle’s.²⁵ He thereby circumvented the future discussion, the popular stance of the later Stoics in the antiquity: ‘Fate’ is that which is withdrawn from the insight of man. In their metaphysics the later Stoics took the position that everything in the universe was determined, subjected to laws. That left no other room for fate than that of a kind of blind spot, ignorant of applicable laws.

In this perception by the Stoics an important tragic aspect of human existence was lost. Of course, the gods determined man’s destiny and lashed out at mankind by means of lightning bolts delivered by Zeus, or earthquakes through Poseidon or the plague through Apollo. But the goddess Aphrodite attacked mankind with pathos; anger, hatred or love filled man and thereby were the cause of the destruction of others and of himself.

²⁴ Polybius: *Historiæ* I 1, 4 ff.

²⁵ Aristotle: *Physica* II 5, 197a 5.

That was the motive of the tragedies: the goddess merely needed to ignite the pride of Phaedra or the love of the chaste Hippolytus, and could then sit back and see how they destroyed themselves. Herodotus already saw how the unforeseen character of reality, the events that suddenly and unexpectedly overtook men, have their counterparts in their own actions or in neglecting to act at all. The gods are jealous and hate people who are over-ambitious; they must have struck Xerxes with blindness at Salamis, causing this King of Kings to rashly meet his fate.

But at the same time, the Athenians themselves played their part as well, cunningly luring Xerxes into the trap they had set for him. Eric Dodds in his masterly book about the irrational in the Greek world describes this as being 'overdetermined'.²⁶ Destiny, the gods, the natural course and the human will and free choice cooperate to achieve the fateful result. And this is also the manner in which Eusebius interpreted and used the Christian historiography and philosophy of history. But, he based it on entirely different assumptions than the Greeks of antiquity, which he often quotes, usually in a reproving sense. As is to be expected, the idea that there was a fate – *Tuchè* – that surpassed even the power of the supreme god, is incompatible with the idea of an Almighty and Eternal God.

'No one escapes his fate, not even a god.'²⁷ Obviously, Eusebius, a Christian bishop could not, as a believer and a theologian, quite agree with this. But it is much more fascinating that as a Greek and philosopher he not only attempts to exempt God from this doom of destiny but, also, in fact primarily, mankind as well.

His arguments are fascinating in themselves. The voice of the allotted fate, foreseen and foretold by a god or seer – *mantis* – is the oracle. Thucydides was the first to draw attention to the fact that of the many oracles about the war between Athens and Sparta none were correct, except for the oracle that predicted that it would be a long-term war, which was what most people expected anyway.²⁸ The same kind of simple empiricism is characteristic of Eusebius.

Farther reaching is his insight that the prediction of an oracle will actually only come to be true because the persons concerned contribute to its fulfilment. The tragedy of the misfortune rests in the manner in which the victim acts in full awareness of what must lead to his downfall. Without pride, vanity, stubbornness or overconfidence, in short without

²⁶ E.R. Dodds: *The Greeks and the Irrational*, p. 30-31. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London 1971.

²⁷ Herodotus: *Historiae* I 91.

²⁸ Thucydides: *Historiae* V 26, 3-4.

the character of man the prediction would never be fulfilled. With which Eusebius has come to the free will of man.

Moreover, here he breaks away from the then common idea of the Stoics that there is a distinction between what depends on us – *to eph' hēmin* – and what does not depend on us – *to ouk eph' hēmin*. The latter is fate, which should not interest us because we cannot do anything about it. The consolation of the Stoics rested on the idea that it was impossible to influence the course of events and therefore we should not attempt to resist, but merely subject ourselves, bend in order not to break.

Perhaps the best way to understand the world of Eusebius' thinking is by going with him to his starting point: this world and reality was not born and grown – *phusis* – but created by the Creator God. That was not 'mere coincidence', but in creating, God had a purpose. *Providentia*, providence is an axiom that belongs to *Creator* and *Creatio*. A reality understood as *phusis*, born and grown, will always remain something remarkable and unpredictable.

In the debate about the creation of the world, Eusebius occupies an odd position. God created heaven and earth. In the book of *Genesis* this is done by Spirit, and since the gospel of John by the *Logos*, the Second Person of God, the Son. In the debate with the Greek philosophers it was understood that the *Logos* determined the shape of the unordered matter and formed it into a meaningful and coherent reality, *kosmos*.

For Eusebius 'creating' is not merely a process of giving shape to an already present matter – as it was understood by Plato and Aristotle – but the making of everything, matter and form. This solution is clear but not really thought through: it is the Father who gives form to everything through his *Logos* and creates all matter – *hulè, ousia* – through his will.²⁹ That same interest in the creation of reality attached to the will of God, Eusebius will also attach to the will of man and thereby to his free will. The conclusion is that God not only created reality as it is – *phusis* – but also wants everything that happens. Philosophically said: creation encompasses both matter and form and extends both over the essence – *ousia* – of reality and the incidental events: *ho (...) tōn kata sumbebēkos dēmiourgos*.³⁰

Here we see the return of the concept that Aristotle had used in his definition of chance. After all, Aristotle had used the added extras – *to kata sumbebēkos* – as a technical concept for the inevitable, destiny – *tuchè*. The technical term Aristotle constructed – *ta sumbebēkota* – denotes the many *accidentia* in contrast to the one *substantia*. Eusebius,

²⁹ Eusebius: *Praeparatio Evangelica*. 7.12. 1-2 (320c) and 11.24. 1-3 (546d-547a).

³⁰ *Ibid*: 6.6. 29-30 (246d-247a).

however, used this in the same sense as every other Greek, as a past participle of *sumbainō* – an indication of how things had taken place. Through this he gave God's will a hold on the course of events, on history.

This offered Eusebius an opportunity to free himself from the iron grip of destiny on the course of history.

What in antiquity was called *tuchè*, *heimarmenè*, *anagkè* or *chreōn* and fanned out from fate to coercion, violence and ill-fate, is then neutralized by Eusebius by means of the technical term he used for destiny: *ta sumbebèkōta*. The unforeseen characterized as *accidentia*, incidental, that which would happen anyway. In the same way that God's providence extends itself over the creation of everything, form and matter and over both the laws of nature and the 'ancillary', the events, man too has a hold on events.

For Eusebius, free will is primarily a moral concept, for him it has nothing to do with everyday decisions. Only when good and evil are at stake is it up to the free will to make a choice. The key word is *sunergia* – cooperation. Both man and God are not made powerless by Fate, but the fatal is contained in the events and nature itself, in the reality in which we decide and act. This opens the way for a philosophy of history and with it the *Historia Ecclesiastica* of Eusebius, in which is shown how God's will is recognizable in events and how the free will of rulers like Constantine give direction to the event.

It is precisely because the decisions of people are free that they are unpredictable or inexplicable. Why Constantine decided to Christianise the Empire we can only discover by knowing what he said himself about this decision. Constantine imputed it to an appearance: *in hoc signo!* But Eusebius was more down-to-earth and wrote that the emperor constantly believed he had been receiving signs and appearances of the divine. Two years earlier it had been the invincible sun god Apollo who had appeared to the emperor and before a battle Constantine had his tent erected far apart from the army camp in order to wait there for a sign from the god and only then hasten to his army in order to carry out what had been revealed to him.

In a way, the emperor was far beyond the church historian; unlike the rationally thinking bishop, he was already a medieval man, caught up in a world of miracles. Gregory of Tours and Gregory the Great would have understood Constantine much better.

For Eusebius, the reality remained a product of God's hands, and God, as Plato had taught, remained abysmally incomprehensible but knowable through the *Logos* which had expressed his will. The ability to know and comprehend – the logical structure or the laws of nature, we would say –

the world and reality rested in the *Logos*. God appeared in reality, in nature and in history. And here Eusebius clashes with the great concept of Augustine, in which it was impossible and inconceivable that God or His providence showed itself in empirical facts.

Nowhere is the Eternal visible or does He show His will, but only in the unintelligible fact that everything was created by Him. Being here, on earth and in time and history, *epi gēs*, is of great importance to Eusebius and filled with the splendour of the divine. For Origen, this ‘being on earth’ was a sign of death. For Augustine, the *hic et nunc*, ‘here’ on this earth and ‘now’ confined in this time, is experienced as a profound turning away from the true reality. For Eusebius, the free will of man makes him an associate to whom God not only in the beginning at the creation, but ongoing and daily gives shape and, not merely on one miraculous and exceptional occasion, but can always be recognized in the course of events. He shows himself in the course of history.

e. Scrolls and gathered sheets

The young Eusebius, whether or not coming from Caesarea, we only get to know in the forty years of peace between the several persecutions of the Church. In all probability he was a young scholar working in the great library of Caesarea. The nucleus of this library was formed by the books by Origen. Later on came the wealthy Pamphylus from Berytus (present-day Beirut) who bought or had many books transcribed and who made the library into one of the richest in the world. It is estimated that the library possessed 30,000 book rolls.

In antiquity this meant – in stark contrast to our easy access to any library through the internet – that a visitor entered a large hall with closed cabinets, on which or above which a short indication was given about the content. He then walked to the cabinet indicating, say, philosophy and had it opened and he would see shelves loaded with sealed brass tubes. He had a heavy tube handed to him, he opened it and would take out the scroll it contained. He had to unroll it partly in order to be able to read the *Archè* or *Incipit* with the title and indication of the further content.

In Pamphylus’ library there would undoubtedly also have been many *volumina*, these were not scrolls but stacks of paper or parchment, usually with thick covers or bindings on top and underneath. To have real access to this rich source of text it was really essential that there were the researchers who wrote catalogues and overviews of the works. This is what Eusebius did, in his studies on places and names in the holy land, with overviews of the several eras and what happened in those times and

through his most famous work, the *Ekklesiastikè historia*. We translate this with ‘ecclesiastical history’, but at the time it meant history of *orthodoxia*, the righteous faith and it was his intention to make the existing texts of the first three centuries of the new faith accessible and clear. It was more a manual than a history.

When exactly the first version of ecclesiastical history was written by Eusebius, is a contentious issue. The earliest date seen as a possibility is around AD 295. That first version contained the first seven books and ended with the death of Emperor Aurelian, who was murdered in AD 275, and possibly concluded with an ode in praise of Pamphilius. Eusebius himself had even assumed his name and called himself Eusebius *tou Pamphilou*. There came probably an abrupt end to its compilation owing to the decree of Diocletian in Nicomedia issued on February 23, AD 303 which precipitated the severe persecution of the Christians, lasting for more than eight years, especially in the east of the Empire. In that edict it was expressly ordered to track down and destroy the books of the Christians and so the perhaps most precious library of them, that of Origen and Pamphilius at Caesarea, was in acute danger. We do not know how the library was saved, but the consequences were great.

The second version of Eusebius’ book appeared about ten years later, in AD 313, after the ending of the persecutions. It is a broken work: the first seven books filled with a desire for peace and then that eighth book, that cruel text about the bloodthirsty persecutions in Palestine and then a provisional conclusion in a ninth book. Two years later a third edition appeared, in which the eighth book was completely rewritten and changed in tone and the first part of the tenth book was added. A final, fifth edition appeared around AD 325. The name and deeds of Emperor Licinius, who had just been defeated by Constantine, disappear from the text and the second half of the tenth book, with the account of the victory of Constantine, forms the final ending.

The editing of the text was not quite finished when Constantine had his son Crispus put to death in AD 326, Eusebius published a revised edition in which the often mentioned and acclaimed name of Crispus had disappeared.

A lot had changed over the years, during the compilation of this masterpiece. From being a young researcher and assistant at the library, Eusebius had become one of the most important bishops of the young Church, a man who later turned down the opportunity to become patriarch of Antioch. From Caesarea he exerted his influence on the court and the Church. But also the man himself had changed, from a follower of Origen,

with an aversion to the world and as a consequence filled with an aversion to power and violence into a man who had seen and recognized how the Church was being bloodily persecuted and that it was thanks to the violent intervention by the armies of Constantine that the Church was preserved. Eusebius had learned to understand and appreciate the world and its powers. And he had seen the role of free will.

In the middle of the forty years of peace that the Church had known, while it grew and became esteemed and found followers right up to the highest circles, even in the highest governmental circles and at the imperial court, all of a sudden, through the will of a few men, there was the edict that led to the great slaughter of Christians – and then came Constantine, a man who in his power desired and ordered that Christianity be recognized.

Ten years after completing his Church history – Eusebius must have been around seventy-five by that time – came the culmination in his life and career, his address in Jerusalem in the church of the Holy Sepulchre in AD 335. It was one of the first buildings that Constantine had ordered to be erected for the new faith, and its dedication took place on September 13 or 14, the same day where many centuries before Solomon had dedicated the first temple and also the day on which Helena, the mother of Constantine, had found the cross here, on the same spot.

Two years later, on May 22, AD 337, Constantine died and Eusebius began writing his last book: *The Life of Constantine*. The man who changed the world of his own free will and influenced it for more than one and a half thousand years. The relocation of the seat of the Empire from Rome to the new Rome, Constantinople, and the recognition of the new faith, Christianity.

Although Constantine's thirst for blood had many traits in common with that of, say, Stalin, he is, of course, according to Eusebius a devout emperor, *eusebès – pius*. He is entitled to the title of the Hellenistic kings: *Epiphanès*, because in him God came to the fore. That is still the usual way of indicating the pope as Christ's custodian; it goes back to a title first given by Seneca to Nero: *deorum vice*.³¹

³¹ Seneca: *De clementia* 1.1.2, 1.7.1.

CHAPTER THREE

SHACKLES OF CLAY

a. Gregory of Nyssa and his sister Macrina

‘The second of the four brothers, Naucratus, who came next after the great Basil excelled the rest in natural endowments and physical beauty in strength speed and ability to turn his hand to anything. When he had reached his twenty-first year and had given such demonstration of his studies by speaking in public, that the whole audience in the theatre was thrilled, he was led by a divine providence to despise all that was already in his grasp, and drawn by an irresistible impulse went off to a life of solitude and poverty. He took nothing with him but himself (...) – *ouden epagomenos meth’ heautou plên heauton.*’

This is how Gregory of Nyssa in the beautiful biography of his sister Macrina describes the sudden conversion of their brother Naucratus. Gregory was schooled in rhetoric and that is quite noticeable in his work. He knows how to catch our interest, just as much as his brother captivated the audience in the theatre. In order to increase the effect of narrating the conversion, he applied a few tricks. It happens ‘suddenly’, and under ‘divine inspiration’.

Moreover, the conversion is described in contrasts: the living in utter loneliness and without any possessions contrasts sharply with the crowds in the theatre and the idle display and entertainment given there. On the previous page Gregory describes how their elder brother, Basil the Great, too ‘forsook the glories of this world and despised fame by speaking, and deserted it for this busy life where one toils with one’s hands. His renunciation of property was complete (...)’.¹

But that conversion, too, will not, in reality have been so drastic and sudden. In fact, the brothers came from a family whose grandparents were already Christians who had been persecuted and their maternal grandfather was a martyr, tortured to death for his faith.

¹ Gregory of Nyssa: *The life of Saint Macrina*. Pp 28 ff. Ed. W.K. Lowther, B.D. London 1916. https://archive.org/details/lldp_11899093_000

Even the divine inspiration here is more an obligatory rhetorical figure than a historically reliable message. On the contrary, in his *Life of Macrina* Gregory attempts to indicate that it is she who managed to convert their mother, Emmelia, and her famous brothers, Basil the Great, Naucratus, Gregory of Nyssa and Peter of Sebasteia. It was she who ignited the fire in them.

The role women played in the fourth century in the transition to Christianity is great and in many instances decisive. Paul had received a lot of support from women, but soon the Deutero-Paulinists after him and in his name, wanted a Church with exclusive male authority and literally silenced the women in the community of believers.² And also a much more amiable and erudite man such as Plutarch, half a century after Paul, thought it necessary to warn husbands that ‘a woman cannot simply have friends. She must treat her husband’s friends in a friendly manner and regard the gods as her actual and only friends. She only needs to know about the gods worshipped by her husband and she must keep the doors closed against any alien worship and foreign superstition. For the gods themselves do not find joy in stealthy and secretive honours offered to them by women.’³

This situation had changed dramatically during the fourth century. Behind Basil the Great and Gregory of Nyssa stood their sister Macrina; behind Jerome there were many women, Marcella, Blasilla, Eustochia and Paula; John Chrysostom was supported by Olympias; the empress mother Helena played a decisive role in the conversion of Constantine the Great; Ambrose of Milan found support in his sister Marcellina; and the conversion of Augustine is unthinkable without the influence of his mother Monica. Not only did Christians assign influential positions to women but in the same century lived the famous Neoplatonic philosopher Hypatia, professor of philosophy in Alexandria and murdered there by a Christian mob stirred up by the patriarch. Or think of that mysterious woman Sosipatra, for a long time believed to be the leader of the philosophical school in Pergamum.

A great deal changed in the Roman Empire between the first and the fourth century, both among Christians and non-Christians. That change was certainly not in the first place due to conversion to the new faith. The change does not have to be sought in ‘world-shaking’ events such as the conversion of the Emperor Constantine. Nor in the conversion to the faith in the Saviour, Jesus Christ. The Greek, Roman, Syrian or Egyptian

² *I Corinthians* 14, 34-35.

³ Plutarch: *Moralia* 140 D.

religions were all well acquainted with a kind of 'saviour' and in all those religions people believed in various forms of resurrection from the dead.

The changes were often unobtrusive, involving perhaps more a kind of debilitating process. It was something like the slow fading of colours before dusk. The sun has sunk lower, the shadows start to lengthen. But whereas admirers of the civilization of antiquity will reflect on this time with the image of the setting sun, in which everything becomes more and more faded and vague, others will see it as the dawn of a new faith and the ascent of Christianity, the renewal and rejuvenation of a threadbare civilization that was coming to an end. The world of antiquity, which today often may seem serenely white with its temples, togas and statues of pale white marble, that world was in reality vividly colourful right up to the end. The colours did not fade but changed. The deep red that we know from the frescoes of Pompeii or the cheerful orange and green from the frescoes in the villa of Livia at Porta Prima, change into the deep blue that can be seen in the mosaics of the Santi Cosma and Damiano near the Forum, or, even darker in colour but sparkling with gold, in the tomb of Galla Placidia in Ravenna.

The reversal or conversion did not come suddenly and neither was there a sudden fierce aversion of city life and the empire; the aversion of the social and political and a turning to the inner self and the soul. In the rhetoric of some Christians, though, this is an important theme and Church Fathers such as John Chrysostom and Gregory of Nyssa have vividly put it into words, but the same development was equally evident among their pagan contemporaries. For instance, as early as Cicero, in his defence of Archias he contrasts 'the bustle of the forum', the quarrels and showing off in the theatres, the circus games and in throwing dice with the peace of reflection, study and inner contemplation.⁴

Seneca, in spite of being an advisor of the court under Nero, constantly and often quite undiplomatically gives vent to his aversion of living at the court and wishes that he could leave all this and he longs to be left alone. A century later, the emperor himself, Marcus Aurelius, goes significantly further and actually shows his aversion to court life by choosing the loneliness of his contemplations in a sober army tent or sleeping on the floor. For Plotinus, the loneliness of the contemplation of the One is almost an obsession and his aversion of the turmoil of the world is almost desperate.

Macrina died in AD 380, the same year, in Antioch, John Chrysostom, shocked his Christian fellow citizens with his unprecedented fierce

⁴ Cicero: *Pro Archias* 12.

polemic against urban civilization. His call to chastity would have met with wide-spread approval among the non-Christian citizens as well.

But his motivation of this appeal is quite revolutionary: ‘your bodies belong to you and not to the community – the *polis*.’ He meant that the purpose of marriage was not intended to help populate society. Marriage was necessary to keep the fiery desires of the body in check by the solace of the marital bed. It was the idea that Paul had stated before him: legalized sexual immorality in marriage is better than burning up in desire.⁵

Here the body is mainly seen as a threat, the physical desire inspiring deep fear. This led to the question: how do we tame the beast that devours our flesh? Chrysostom’s opinion is quite negative: the burning desires of youth can only be curbed by the threat of other fire: the eternal punishments in hell. The seclusion of the Christian family ought to be a safe haven, a counterpart to the dangerous temptations offered in the public urban world. A woman can only be safe within the seclusion of the family and under the care of her husband; if not she is virtually a loose woman. The theatre, hippodrome, agora, *thermae* are breeding grounds for public fornication: away with them! It was the appeal of a fanatic. The Christians of Antioch listened to it and went their way. When Chrysostom became patriarch of Constantinople in AD 397, he very soon came into conflict with the now Christian imperial court. He was exiled and he died soon after, in mysterious circumstances.

The last important pagan historian, Ammianus Marcellinus, was born in Antioch as well and he wrote in the same time in which Chrysostom delivered his vehement sermons. Ammianus was quite negative about the sect of the Christians. He usually ignored them. Or probably more to the point, in his world of high military officials these people were hardly present. When Christians are mentioned in his story, Ammianus is quite scornful and somewhat surprised about them. But at the same time his view on urban life and entertainment is as strict as that of the Fathers of the Church. He condemns any form of exuberance, which according to him, will automatically lead to debauchery, and he praises the solitary life of nightly contemplation. Ammianus certainly does not hold back. His ferocity and often biting tone of his *Res gestae* is practically the same as the sharp and satirical tone used by Jerome, whose letters, written about the same time, are still quite enjoyable because of this.

Ammianus is a Greek from Syria and possibly ‘*curialis*’, an influential municipal leader. He wrote in Latin but states that scientific and complicated matters are easier to express in Greek. His admiration for

⁵ *I Corinthians* 7, 1-9.

Rome, *'domina et regina'*, is unfeigned, whereas at the same time his fierce denunciation of the immorality of that city is repeated again and again. For Roman society only 'the pleasures of the gullet and brothels'⁶, are important. He is delighted when closing times for bars and restaurants are finally imposed.

He lashes out at all ranks: the nobility is rotten, the common people even more so: *'Hactenus de senatu. Nunc ad otiosam plebem veniamus et desidem.'*⁷ Oh yes, in the olden days any respectable man would have been ashamed to kiss his own wife in the presence of their daughter. But now? Rowdy scum in the bathhouses calling out: *'Ubi, ubi sunt nostrae – where are the whores!'*⁸

This is followed by a long diatribe: Don't worry about your brother being killed but make sure to be in the playhouse again on time. Your true friends, those card sharps, are still there. Heaven on earth is the circus, full of roaring scum. *Vino (...) et lustris et voluptatibus et spectaculis.* Wine and dice and fornication, pleasures and the circus. Their temple, their dwelling, their assembly and the height of all their hopes is the Circus Maximus.⁹ This is what the population is like and likewise their rulers. 'Many of them deny that there are higher powers in heaven – *Multi apud eos negantes esse superas potestates in caelo* – but they will not leave their home or breakfast without first having thoroughly studied the position of the stars to see how Mercury is or in what quarter of the Crab the moon is in its course through the heavens.'¹⁰

These lamentations are largely in line with the writings of the Church Fathers and are largely responsible for our later belief that Roman decadence, moral defilement and the decline of the Empire, while effeminate fellows held their orgies with lascivious women. From Montesquieu and Edward Gibbon onwards, this complaint about the decline of morality was raised again and it would resound all through the nineteenth century until this idea was countered by scholars such as Peter Brown and philosophers such as Michel Foucault in the twentieth century. The opposite was actually nearer the truth, the sexual norms of both Christian and other religious inhabitants of the late Roman Empire in the fourth century coming quite close to the rigorous chastity ideals of

⁶ Ammianus Marcellinus: *Res gestae* 28, 4, 4. Translation: J.C. Rolfe, Harvard 1939.

⁷ *Ibid.*: 28, 4, 27.

⁸ *Ibid.*: 28, 4, 9.

⁹ *Ibid.*: 28, 4, 29.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*: 28, 4, 24.

contemporary fundamentalists. Morality did not lapse, but the standards with which it was measured were set higher and became stricter.

As a counterpart to his lamentations about the increasing debauchery and moral degeneration, Ammianus praises his ideal, Caesar Julian. Julian is the man who, during the nineteenth century, was considered by many historians and philosophers, even by dramatists such as August Strindberg, as 'the apostate', the opposite of 'the Galilean'. It produces a nice and clear black-and-white image with beautiful dramatic contrasts: Julian the apostate, the last emperor of a faltering pagan society, in stark contrast with the rising light of the new faith, Christianity. 'How unfortunate!' exclaimed Edward Gibbon; what an opportunity missed. But the enterprising emperor died quite young during an unsuccessful campaign against the Persians and the Empire finally came into the hands of, according to Gibbon: 'Christians and barbarians'.

If 'the apostate' Julian had been able to reign for decades, it would not have changed as much in the course of events as what would have been the case if 'the conversion' of Constantine had not taken place. Ammianus wrote a eulogy immediately after the Emperor's death. According to Ammianus he was a man whom we ought to count as demigod, excelling by the splendour of his deeds and by his natural majesty. He is then credited with practically every virtue, but; 'In the first place he so was conspicuous for inviolate chastity that after the loss of his wife it is well known that he never gave a thought to love (...). His self-restraint was made still greater through his moderation in eating and sleeping. He was usually seen waking up again after a few hours of sleep and in person attending to the changing of the night guards and then taking refuge in the pursuit of learning.'¹¹

So the difference between urban society and studying, between theatre, circus and the withdrawal into solitude or between bathhouse and brothel (often one and the same) and study and prayer should definitely not be seen as the dividing line between Christians and non-Christians. However, these keywords do reflect the differences that arose between the first and the fourth century.

The change from the characteristic hostility towards women, which was quite common in Rome and Athens, Syria and Egypt, to a more lenient attitude, was also a process that took its time, but it was not dependent on the new faith.

¹¹ *Ibid.*: 25, 4, 1-2.

Socrates was still able to sigh: ‘Who on earth would it be less possible to have an intelligent conversation with than your own wife?’¹² In the first letter of Paul to the Corinthians, a passage was inserted half a century after the death of the writer, in which his apostolic authority would be abused to silence women: ‘(...) the women should keep silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be in submission (...) If there is anything they desire to learn, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.’¹³

A cruel and insensitive remark that after two millennia still retains its influence. The Church authorities are not interested in a correct text but are still adhering to the oppressive tradition. That is the same attitude Plutarch was to cherish and which is put into words by a contemporary of Paul, Seneca, even more adamantly. A female is, according to Seneca, not at all like a man, an individual, but merely a representative of her sex. A female is more one of a species than a person with her individuality. It is the level of drunk bachelors in the pub; when a woman does something, it is not considered as merit or the lack of it, but as ‘typically female’. The wise man is steadfast – in contrast with ‘*la donna è mobile*’ – and he is not easily taken aback, certainly not by females. ‘It would be too ridiculous if a philosopher could feel offended by a woman (...) a creature, incapable of sensible behaviour, – *imprudens animal ac ferum* – unless she is brought up by a man and taught something, otherwise she will remain an ignorant animal, unable to rein in her own lasciviousness – *cupiditatem incontiens*.’¹⁴

It was a point of view held by both pagans and Christians and both sides agreed when, a century later, the personal physician of Emperor Hadrian, Galen, who had led the influential medical and philosophical school at Pergamum, scientifically substantiated these judgments. Women were, according to Galen, failed men. They lacked a man’s warmth of life. Possibly they had over-heated heads, but in them the heat hardly went down to the stomach. That would also explain why they had soft stomachs and limpid flesh. Half-baked in fact and unpleasantly clammy. Diluted and shapeless creatures. The idea that a young man was the best representation of the fair sex would last for many centuries, including the time and opinions of Winckelmann, Goethe and Schopenhauer.

¹² Xenophon: *Oikonomikas*.

¹³ *I Corinthians* 14, 34-35.

¹⁴ Seneca: *De constantia sapienties* XIV 1.

b. 'Sojourning in the flesh'

How very different everything was three centuries later. If one were to say 'woman-friendly', it would be giving a twist that would be too modern. And yet something substantial had changed, both in reality and in the image that one had of women in general. In the third century, a dynasty of Syrian princesses managed to dominate the Empire for a time. ●f course they did so behind the façade of a husband or son, but they had the actual power. In the fourth century several women played leading roles. The appraisal of women had risen while – and that would be an incomprehensible paradox for nineteenth-century scholars – the appraisal of the body, the physical aspect, had declined.

The short but delightful booklet in which Gregory of Nyssa depicted the life of his admired sister Macrina is both a continuous eulogy on the woman and a turning point in thinking about the body. In the dedication, to an unknown ascetic, a man who spurned everything physical, we come to the remarkable sentence in which Gregory indicates that he went to Jerusalem to see there the relics of '*tou kuriou dia sarkos epidēmias*'. This is more or less untranslatable, something like: 'of the Lord sojourning in the flesh'. Probably the choice of words by Gregory was meant to be sharper, *e-pi-dēmeō*, means 'to wander somewhere for a time as a stranger'. Gregory would also have been well aware that the word was also a medical connotation since Hippocrates, and stood for 'the roaming of a disease'. Does Gregory consider the incarnation a temporary residence of the lord in bodily form? Is it a kind of being lost? Is it, according to him a kind of alien environment for the soul? Is the body for him even something similar to a kind of infection, a temporary sickness of the soul?

After the dedication the subject of the text is announced: 'We discussed the life of a famous person, in this case a woman.' When she was still very young a marriage was arranged for Macrina by her father. However, when her fiancée dies, she stubbornly manages to preserve her virginity by assuring her parents that 'in the nature of things there is but one marriage, as there is one birth and one death' and that her betrothed 'lived with God, thanks to the hope of the resurrection; it was wrong not to keep faith with the bridegroom who was away'.¹⁵

Because her father died, she got her way and with her mother, Emmelia, she retreated to an estate and formed one of the first monastic communities for upper class people and not for the common people who formed desert communities in those days in Syria and Egypt. She also managed to convince her elder brother, Basil, to put aside his pride in his

¹⁵ Gregory of Nyssa: *The life of Saint Macrina*. Pp 20-25.

studies and to opt for a solitary life without any possessions. In AD 355 Basil had recently returned from Athens where he had completed his studies in philosophy and rhetoric. Together with his close friend, Gregory of Nazianza he had attended the lectures of Libanius, an anti-Christian philosopher who some years later would become adviser and confidant to Emperor Julian, 'the apostate'.

As we have seen in the beginning of this chapter, her second brother, Naucratus she also managed to persuade to renounce the earthly, temporary life and to join the community. And also the younger of her four brothers, Peter, is unable to resist her and converts to a life of asceticism, living a life in austerity and abstinence, fasting and prayer.

The kind of life that she desired to lead, to suffer almost, and which she inspired her brothers to lead, was 'a life on the borderline between human and spiritual nature – *Par' hois methorios en hē zōē tēs te anthrōpinēs kai tēs asōmatou phuseōs*.'¹⁶

They excelled in freeing themselves from human disorders and passions. 'But they fell short of the angelic and immaterial nature only in so far as they appeared in bodily form, contained within a human frame and were depended on the organs of sense.'

A few lines further on in the text the attitude adopted by Macrina and her followers in relation to their bodies is expressed even more clearly: 'Living in the flesh – *hoti sarki suzōntes* – yet after the likeness of the immaterial beings, they were not bowed down by the weight of their body, but their life was exalted to the skies and they walked on high in the company with the powers of heaven. (...) their success increased as their philosophy continually grew purer with the discovery of new blessing.'¹⁷

'Living in the flesh' still lacks the sharpness of the Greek text. The verb *su(n)-zaō* means 'to live together'. Living together, not in the sense of cohabitation, a relationship that implies equality but more 'living under certain circumstances', 'living with what comes'. For example with *hudati*: 'living in water', or with *tini*, 'living under a certain form of government'. *Sarki suzōntes* indicates that the soul must learn to live together with the onerous circumstance of the connected body. The ephemeral, living soul is burdened with the heavy, soulless body. The soul is 'bowed down' by this burden imposed upon it and strives, in its pursuit of going upwards, to detach itself from these hindrances and to purify it from these shackles of clinging clay.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*: p. 35.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*: p. 36.

This implies that the soul does not live in the flesh, that we do not have an animated body; rather the contrary, the upward striving soul is practically crushed by the unwieldy body. Living and eternally alive is the soul; the flesh, the unwieldy, lifeless body is destined for death. Ideally the virgin Macrina would like to remove the forced bond with her own body together with her male suiters from her life.

She only succeeds in doing so at 'the ultimate limit of life under the flesh – *eschatos (...)* *tès kata sarka zōès horos*'.¹⁸ 'Life under the flesh', *kata sarka* she says: 'bowed down'. That is the ideal attitude towards your own body: you have to endure it.

When she is dying, she is finally 'released from the shackles of the body'. So that she could go to her heavenly bridegroom, the eternal Word, the Lord. Her elation in that last hour is because her real desires and wishes are finally being fulfilled. 'Dying' is called in the text an *exodos*, a way out, a liberation from the bonds of slavery. Having no longer any contact with the people and whispering to the East with a weak voice, she says her last prayer:

‘You ● Lord, have released us from the fear of death.
Su, phèsin, elusas hēmin, laurie, tou thanatou ton phobon -
 You have made the end of this life the beginning of true life.
Su zōēs alēthines archēn hēmin epoiesas to telos tēs entautha zōēs. -
 You rest our bodies for a short time in a sleep and wake them up again at
 the lasttrump.
Su pros kairon hēmōn lupnōi dianapaueis ta sōmata kai palin aphlupnizeis
en tēi eschatēi salpingi -
 You give our clay, which you have sculpted with your own hands, to the
 earth to keep in safety.
Su didōs parakatathēn tēi gēi tēn hēmeteran gēn, hēn tais sais chersī
diemorphōsas
 ●ne day you will lift up again what you have given, transfiguring with
 immortality and grace our mortal and unsightly remains.
kai palin anakomizēi ho dedōkas, aphursiai kai chariti metamorphōsas to
*thēton hēmōn kai aschēmōn.*¹⁹

In the last sentence Gregory, well trained in rhetoric, constructed a built-in tension for his Greek audience which is more or less lost in any translation. And with it the essence of its content. The sentence is taut like a bow; all words in the first part of the sentence are echoed in the second

¹⁸ Ibid.: p. 36.

¹⁹ Ibid.: p 55.

part. The downward movement of *kata* (here translated as ‘give to the earth’) contrasts after the turning point, *kai palin*, with the upward movement of the preposition *ana-*. *Ana-komizō* is a word full of meaning, here simply translated as ‘lift up’. The word itself can also mean: ‘to go up’, ‘to go upstream’, ‘to return home’, ‘to be rescued’, ‘to push up’ or ‘to make something come true’. The contrast *chersi die-morphōsas – chariti meta-morphōsas* is also elegant. In those days all readers or hearers would have noticed the contrast: ‘You let our earth, which was shaped by between your hands, perish in the earth and lift us up again in beauty, that which was dead and formless.’

In the nineteenth century an inscription was found in the forum of Timgad dating from the second century AD.

‘Hunting bathing / playing laughing / that is / living.’

Why had life changed so much less than two hundred years later? Had it become darker or lifted up in a light from above? Why was the body no longer experienced as living and a wonderful living proof of being here on earth? Why had the body, in previous centuries depicted in all its naked beauty been degraded to ‘flesh’, dead and shapeless?

Why was the body seen as a ‘casing of dust’ even before it died instead of after death? Why was the flesh considered to be a prison, the shackles of the soul? As I said earlier, much changed between the first and the fourth century AD, but nothing changed as essentially as the perception of the human body.

c. ‘A fragile pot’

Bodies were important in ancient times. Quite early on Heraclitus stated that the chain of human life was not broken by death but merely interrupted. Death is a resting point in order to awaken further life. Those who are born are mortals, new life gives birth to new death and the birth of life ensures that death is not extinguished.²⁰ Society was a community striving to survive and only when each fertile woman gave birth to five children could the population remain up to standard and be saved from extinction. The attitude towards marriage was therefore quite strict. Emperor Augustus punished anyone who, having been a widow or widower for two years, had not remarried; he imposed heavy fines on bachelors and on married couples who remained childless. The first Christians had similar ideas.

²⁰ D.K. 22 B 20.

It was imperative in antiquity to get married. Government, parents and citizens more or less forced young people to do so. The somewhat younger contemporary of Seneca, C. Musonius Rufus, as a philosopher and follower of the Stoics admitted that he did not marry out of love, nor out of appreciation for any woman, but purely out of a sense of duty. Through marriage, the husband increases his property, the wife gets her lord and the city and state its children.

Marriage was therefore mainly part of the social order and a survival strategy. The woman was a companion and property. The age differences between two partners was usually quite big. Husbands were able to treat their wives as daughters, and marriage in antiquity had something incestuous about it. For Roman or Christian girls who wanted to remain virgin by living in a closed community or monastery, that step was not as big as is often believed. Married women were hardly seen more in public outside the house than monastic nuns would have been. For a thirteen year old girl to be 'bride of the Lord' was not much of a worse fate than a marriage to a 'lord' of more than forty years old.

It is very unclear whether an inscription such as that found in Timgad, would, in the time that it was made, have shocked the town's small community of Christians. Ephraim the Syrian in his *De paradiso* written in the middle of the fourth century is still as exuberant and elated as Ovid or Catullus regarding living, loving, eroticism and sexuality. For Ephraim the legitimacy of sexuality lies for him, as in the entire ancient tradition, including the biblical Song of Songs, in the divine natural bond of all that is natural, the *sumpatheia kosmou*. 'Your shining thighs, like the moist skin of the gazelle, your breasts as mountains in the distance.' Animals, flowers, a world full of maturation and fecundity, included human sexuality. Robin Lane Fox gives some good descriptions of cosmic games held in antiquity, games in which the awakening and decline of everything was depicted, human life and adultery included.²¹

This attitude in antiquity is far removed from the playful, sexual freedom in the sixties of the twentieth century. The cosmic laws of rise and decline, of Spring and Autumn, of blossoming and withering, ripening and decaying, of intercourse and abstinence, are very strict and unrelenting. Corn does not ripen in winter and 'therefore' a pregnant or menstruating woman is not allowed to have sexual intercourse. The appeal of the first Christians, such as in the circle of the Deutero-Paulinists in Ephesus and Rome, or by Justin Martyr, to sexual abstinence and discipline were entirely in accordance with the legislation of Augustus. Also within the thinking of Paul the body and sexuality are contained in a

²¹ R. Lane Fox: *Pagans and Christians*, pp. 41-46; 110-133.

kind of cosmic stronghold. 'See how I renew all things' and 'a new creation – *kainè ktisis*²² indicates how physical experience and sexual morality are linked to a kind of universal, cosmic renewal. Paul usually uses the term *kosmos*, as he does here, in a restricted and often negative sense: the world as a contrast of the crucifixion and resurrection.

What is particularly striking about Paul is the strict dualism of spirit and flesh. There is nothing good in me, in my flesh. There is a different law in my members than that of the spirit. Who will deliver me from this lethal hold of the body? That is the sombre tone of the Letter to the Romans. It is an echo of what Paul himself wrote elsewhere: 'Our flesh 'is sown in shame', and our body nothing but 'a fragile pot'.²³

Yet this shadow looming over the body is only one side of Paul's thinking. There is also the glorious and bright light: the spirit of Him who raised the Anointed from the dead is also present in you; He will also raise your dead bodies back to life.²⁴ He who lives according to the flesh will certainly die, but he who lives through the spirit will live and 'the life of the Anointed will reveal itself also in our mortal flesh – *en tèi sarki hèmōn*'.²⁵

There is a remarkable legacy that we received from the Enlightenment in which Voltaire's and Gibbon's horror of Christianity led to two contradictory constructions. On the one hand there is the beautiful man of antiquity, full of the joy of life, a naked young athlete, a hunter, bathing, playing and laughing. On the other hand, there is the Christian, portrayed as a sort of gloomy Oriental, his body a fragile clay vessel, conscious of the emptiness of this existence here on earth, a trial in a valley of tears, full of sin and transient. Next to this black-and-white image there is the idea that Christianity is not a very intelligent religion; it is Plato for the plebs. It was Plato who started with his idea of 'Platonic love', distanced himself from the body and looked for something more, the ideal. The philosopher started to look down on the body and the Christians merely elaborated this idea into far more extreme forms of contempt.

Both of these depictions, although they are widely known and often retold, are actually far from being accurate. They are deceptive because the wrong conclusions were drawn. Before the fourth century AD only pagan philosophers were heard and from then on mainly Christian authors. The actual contrast between the first and the fourth century was thus

²² *Galatians* 6, 15.

²³ *Romans* 7, 18 and 23-24; *I Corinthians* 15, 43; *II Corinthians* 4, 7.

²⁴ *Romans* 8, 11.

²⁵ *II Corinthians* 4, 11.

replaced by the apparent one between the 'old and declining paganism' and the new faith in resurrection and salvation. Paganism was indeed quite old, but it was far from being decrepit and even during the fourth and fifth centuries it saw a remarkable revival.

The joyful message of Christianity soon lost its rebellious and revolutionary aspect. In the Spring of AD 72, a certain Mark, who is further unknown, wrote in Rome the oldest message about the life and suffering of Jesus. In it, in an almost ruthless manner, events were turned around in an attempt to make the presentation of the Anointed acceptable to the Romans. In Alexandria philosopher-theologians did the same and tried to build bridges and find compromises. And, however paradoxical it may seem, especially during the great persecutions at the end of the third century, paganism and Christianity came remarkably close to each other in many essential respects. The edicts of Constantine were practically the logical result of this rapprochement.

The whole way of thinking about the body had changed dramatically during those three centuries. And not only in philosophy, but also in every-day behaviour did it change radically. From the dynasty of the Severii onwards, the world of antiquity seems to have come to a kind of accelerated movement: according to Peter Brown much more changed in the period between Marcus Aurelius and Aurelius Augustine than in the years between Alexander the Great and Augustus.

This is the place to give a brief overview of these changes. It has to do with a far reaching perspective in which these shifts took place. One of these changes meant that the body appeared in quite a different light.

In the tradition of the philosophy of antiquity the body was not an important and noteworthy issue. Apart from in some medical works, which are to a large extent philosophically orientated, the body was mainly part of the larger order, a kind of microcosm. Breathing in and out, the expanding and retracting of the thorax, eating, digesting and secreting, drinking and sweating, giving birth and dying – it was all understood as part of ripening and decaying in our natural world; the process of germinating and withering which maintained the order of everything. The body as a microcosm formed part of the city state, the community, the life of animals and plants and of the grand order below the star-studded heaven. The idea of resurrection from death, revival or renewal of the body in a new form is within this context a natural thought that does not need much more proof than can be obtained by looking at what is going on around us. Even Paul, who writes about a new and joyful message, leans back on the old idea as it was formulated by the philosophers before

Socrates: 'For we who live are always being given over to death (...), so that life (...) may also be manifested in our mortal flesh. So that is at work in us, but life in you.'²⁶

But this basic, familiar conviction had gone by the end of the fourth century, in Latin philosophy even earlier than in Greek philosophy. The natural order, the *kosmos*, the ordered meaningful cohesion of everything, the organic whole in which the body was incorporated and of which the body as an organic entity was an example; it shrivelled, diminished and fell apart. For Augustine death was no longer a natural event at all and had no longer its place in the cycle of being born and dying. For him death was an unnatural event, breaking the connection between body and the living soul. The idea of a cycle of continued life or resurrection from death which, by Presocratics like Heraclitus, and by Plato as well, was considered completely natural and obvious, met with incomprehension in Augustine. In his last, magnificent conversation, with his dying mother in the inn next to the theatre of Ostia, very different arguments emerged in the belief in the soul's survival for the first time after a thousand years of the philosophy of antiquity. Not a natural, ordered coherence of the *kosmos*, but human existence seen as finite and temporary, broken and actually characterized by this lack of sustainability, the lack of continuity. By him, for the first time ever,²⁷ time is referred to as temporality, as a lack of sustainability and as a deficiency. Time as temporality, with a beginning and an end, coming into existence only with the breaking and the lack of duration; durability was the destruction of an eternity without beginning or end. Possibly, 'time' was from then on even the breaking down of duration.

d. Forgotten flesh

The contemplation of the body was short-lived in philosophy. Against the background of the enduring *kosmos* of antiquity this microcosm barely stood out as a separate subject for philosophical thought. The body was self-evident and it was not necessary to give it much further thought. Only illness was a reason for reflection and therefore the body appeared mainly in medical philosophical writings. When in later-Hellenistic philosophy the self-evident aspect of the *kosmos* idea is being questioned, the human body becomes more problematic and something to think about.

'Life' is related to the Dutch '*lijf*' and German '*Leib*', which can be translated as 'body', etymologically 'life' is animated corporal existence.

²⁶ *II Corinthians* 4, 11-12.

²⁷ Augustine: *Confessiones* XI.

In Dutch and German *'lijf'* and *'Leib'* are respectively related to *'blijven'* and *'bleiben'*, 'to remain'. All those words are derived from the Gothic *'leip'*, 'to remain', 'to continue'. 'Life' 'endures, it is part of the natural order, the *kosmos*.

When the body as microcosm was disconnected from the enduring *kosmos* it became problematic and the problem centered precisely around this discontinuity between body and endurance. The body was thus caught in the temporary; it even became a symbol of temporality, 'life' acquiring so many traces of time. Starting with Augustine, this broken existence, being merely temporary became almost an obsession. Death, the ending of all that is here, fascinated Augustine. Death breaks through every form of duration and sustainability; it destroys everything. As a result of this thinking the body was once more of no interest to philosophy and remained unobserved for another thousand years only to reappear in Nietzsche, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty. But then in a completely different form.

As early as in Deutero-Pauline and editorial interventions spread over the authentic texts of Paul around AD 100, the growing aversion to the body can be traced. Medieval scholastic texts often show an almost obsessive fear of the body, the wicked flesh. The contrast of an enlightened author, such as Edward Gibbon, and later on a romantic like Friedrich Nietzsche and the rigid conservatism of ecclesiastical authorities concerning sexual morality, contributed to the creation of a myth which is still adhered to today: Christian doctrine is supposed to be hostile to the body. But it was not so much the aversion to the 'flesh' that formed the driving force behind Christian thinking; it was far more the fervent desire for renewal of life and body. Paul can be rapturous when he writes about this desire, this yearning for the salvation of 'a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come' and obtains 'a new and glorified body'.

In the works of the greatest philosopher of the third century, Origen, we often come across appeals such as 'change your life!' His time, the beginning of the third century, was permeated with confusion and agitation. It is as if the boundaries at that time between man and the divine were experienced as oppressive and restrictive and that there was an urge to look for different and more far-reaching possibilities. Existence had to be given a wider horizon and mankind had to be renewed and liberated.

In his main work, *Peri Archōn* Origen nowhere writes about the body in the derogatory manner that Gregory of Nyssa uses in his *Life of Macrina*. For Origen there were no shackles of clay, fragile vessel or a prison of the soul. Entirely in the tradition of antiquity, accepted by earliest Christianity,

he considered the body as being precious. The value of the physical must even be increased. The body and life have to become glorious. The body should not be rejected but transformed – in Greek the same word used by Gregory in his *Life of Macrina*, metamorphosis. In the time and world to come the body will also have to undergo complete change. From dull dust to something that is light, silvery and ephemeral. In the tradition of Paul, Origen does not consider our existence as being in darkness, but as a kind of dawn. Our body seems to awaken and rise at the end of the night. The first sunbeams of expectation shine even on our sinful body and marriage, sexuality and childbirth are like specks of dust, dancing in the rays of this early light.

Origen remains within the tradition of Plato and says that all visible beauty, including that of our body, is only a reflection, a distant and weak reflection of true and divine beauty. But even this, our body can be thought of as perfect beauty, when it arrives in the realm of true being, with God. Origen is probably the first to put this idea of Plato into words using the famous equation: the body is like a temple for God. The body is a sanctified place, admittedly of dust and earth, but sacred because God made it His home. The incarnation is thus more or less extended from 'the Word has become flesh' to each body of mankind.

In the Orient the influence of Origen was considerable for a long time. Eusebius of Caesarea was one of his followers and Cyprian of Carthage was greatly influenced by Origen when he formulated his thoughts not only about the contraposition of Church and body, but also 'his nefarious era – *saeculum*'. In his youth Jerome was a fervent defender of the heritage of Origen for many years before he turned against him. The works of the youthful Jerome, however, were enough to extend the influence of Origen up to Erasmus and Luther. Possible Origen was Erasmus' real great love. On May 15 1518 Erasmus wrote to Johan Eck: *Plus me docet Christianae philosophiae unica Origenes pagina quam decem Augustini* – one page of Origen teaches me more about Christian philosophy than ten pages by Augustine.²⁸

The influence of Origen was also a determining factor on the life of Macrina and her brothers. The timespan between Origen and the Cappadocian Church Fathers is less than three generations, and yet it is a bewildering example of how quickly human thinking and acting changed: less than a century after Origen's glorification of the body the appreciation of the human body reached its nadir.

²⁸ D. Erasmus: *Epistula*, 844.

The grandparents of Macrina and her brothers were living in a totally pagan city, Neocaesarea in Pontus. According to the biography of Gregory Thaumathurgus, there were only seventeen Christians in this capital of the province. This Gregory, 'the miracle worker', was actually called Theoporus. With his brother Athenodorus he was on his way to the university of Berythus – Beirut in Lebanon – to study Roman Law. On this journey, however, he met Origen in the harbour town Caesarea in Palestine. For five years he remained under the spell of this great personality and studied under him. Then he returned home, but went into the mountains and lived for a time in harsh conditions until he was called to become bishop of his native city. During his episcopate the years of murderous persecution by the Emperor Decius took place which caused a lot of suffering in the city. Soon afterwards, the persecuted Christians were victorious, even half a century before the edicts of Constantine were issued in the West.

Gregory Thaumathurgus, Gregory of Nazianza and his friend Basil the Great and his brothers Naucratus, Peter of Sebasteia and Gregory of Nyssa and their sister Macrina, a group of great Capadocians, all sprang from the school of Origen, who at that time had already been condemned as a heretic by the Church. Yet there is also a division between Origen and these followers. Basil and Gregory are trained philosophers, erudite men who were quite familiar with the thinking of Plato, Origen and Plotinus. They repeat, quite often literally, their ideas, but always in a different key and duller in sound. The lighter tone of earlier writings about the physical – let alone the seductive – such as in *Lysis* or *Charmides* and the *Symposium* of Plato – became grimmer, threatening even, for instance in *De Virginitate* of Gregory. Like his sister Macrina, Gregory is deeply troubled by the world of wealth and prosperity and the attachment to earthly possessions. It is the world in which he grew up, the world of his youth that he observes around him every day. Gregory and Macrina's greatest fear was the worldly property most difficult to renounce, to which their bodies were bound. Only death would deliver them from it, only at the end would the hope of liberation dawn.

Gregory writes that after Macrina's death, when they were washing her corpse, a close friend of his sister's showed him a small scar quite high on her chest. There she had suffered from a malignant tumour that had almost taken her life. Yet she preferred to prostrate herself in prayer time and again rather than uncover her bosom for a doctor. Gregory praised this prudery. Two generations earlier everyone would have shrugged their shoulders about such silly behaviour and a couple of decennia earlier it would have been seen as a sign of pure madness. However, it was a form

of madness that would have an important and macabre influence in the future.

Gregory considered sexuality a sad duty. He was the only one of the brothers and sister who had been married. But for him sex was sadly the only means to beget children. And that in itself also meant unfortunately, that the sad fate of mankind would not end and had to be dragged on. Giving birth lengthened the road to salvation and added another grievous generation.

Gregory no longer experienced life and death as an ongoing cycle of natural order, the *kosmos*. He breaks with the antique tradition in which life and death mutually ensure continuity. The duration and sustainability of existence is being broken by him. Instead of the constant cycle of life and death through reciprocity, temporality comes into being with a beginning and an end.

Gregory was the first author where the appreciation of the body turned negative, as appears in his description of the life of his sister Macrina. This is of great importance philosophically, culturally and historically. Philosophically, the importance of this devaluation of the body lies mainly in the underlying idea. Where death no longer counts as a rest, as an interruption of the cycle of life and death, but as a disjunction with life, the taking away of duration and durability of being, there in that fracture, time, temporality and physicality come to the fore as a deficiency.

The eleventh book of Augustine's *Confessiones* is often studied, precisely because of these definitions of time and temporality, the finiteness of our existence here. But the origins of this revolutionary new philosophy concerning time and the temporality of our existence – an existence that is no longer enduring, but is a fall, a decline into death – are to be found in some rarely studied texts of the brothers Basil and Gregory. In the next chapter on Augustine and time, the influence of Basil will be discussed. The philosophy of time can especially be found in Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Moses*, a very interesting text that is too seldom read and studied.

In that book death is seen as an intrusion into the natural order, a breakdown of this continuous sowing and reproduction. Death is the abrupt end of life, the eventual shipwreck of our existence. That existence, by this rupture, is deprived of duration and sustainability by this break, and reduced to 'only temporary', short and too short. Gregory would never have written in such a deprecatory way about body and physicality, and be so enthusiastic about virginity and abstinence, if in the background of this philosophy of the body were not his thoughts about time and temporality. Augustine, a thinker of much greater quality, would really think through this breaking with the philosophy of being of antiquity. Gregory, however,

was quite able to put into words this deeper layer of his thinking in his *Life of Moses*.

‘Because that is the greatest conceivable contradiction – *Touto de to pantōn paradoxotaton pōs* – how the same thing is both a standing still and a moving – *to auto kai stasis esti kai kinēsis*’. The course of time – *hō dromos* – was once at the time of the first man, Adam, when he was still without sin, ‘rock solid’ – *stēsō (...) epi tēs petras*.²⁹ A sentence containing a reference to Exodus about the coming of God.³⁰

Through the sin of Adam came death, and with death came ‘time’. Time being doomed to die is temporary. Time seen in this way is restless; it is slipping away from us and the essence is decay. To live within time is treading in a treadmill, it is a constant pursuit of something that is unfulfilling, like an attempt to fill barrels full of holes. Living in time and looking for solidity is like building on sand that is being scattered by the wind.³¹

The attempt to close the circle was finally given up as a failure and the continuous cycle of life and death as part of the ordered *kosmos* was gone. What remained was the meaningless repetition of the revolving treadmill; the life of a captured slave instead of the liberating cycle of renewal of the *kosmos*. Death had broken the cycle and with it had broken our existence. What remained was only the longing for that ‘timeless time.’

The tragedy of this vision is further deepened by Gregory because he is aware of being shackled with his body to time. It is impossible to escape ‘time’ and this ticking of the clock, the passing of the hours and the slipping away of the years, is especially experienced by Gregory in the decline of his body. The relentless ticking of the clock frightens him; in it he hears the approach of death. The first cry of a new-born, the agony of a woman giving birth fills him with fear; they are the tell-tale signs that the road to salvation is once more extended. Time is delay, the ticking of time postpones salvation. It is as if ‘time’ is an ongoing attempt to avoid death and the grave by begetting new life again and again. The hopelessness of death, ‘time’ always attempts to overrule by providing the false hope of birth. For Gregory the only real hope is beyond cradle and grave, elsewhere with the Risen Lord. As in the quite different other idea of world and reality, of body and time, this new philosophy of time as a break with the ongoing cycle, also creates a new understanding for the ‘elsewhere’ of Plato.

²⁹ Gregory of Nyssa: *Vita Moses* II 243. Translation by the author.

³⁰ *Exodus* 33, 21.

³¹ Gregory of Nyssa: *Vita Moses* II 244.

With Gregory of Nyssa, Basil the Great, and John Chrysostom emerged the concept of the separation between this world and the 'elsewhere'. Through them the dualism of Plato is transformed here into a doctrine of two separate worlds. Transcendence is only a conceivable concept when the cosmic cycle in which the 'being' is included, is broken by experiencing time as temporality. Thereby awakening a desire for a world 'elsewhere', different from the temporary reality of the here and now. That transcendence can only be a meaningful concept when it is founded on time as temporality and existence as finite, is the theme of *Sein und Zeit* of Martin Heidegger. 'Being founded on the horizontal unity of ecstatic temporality, the world is transcendent,' Heidegger writes.³² In his analysis, transcendence is no longer dependent on the thinking subject, nor on consciousness or self-awareness, but on the 'ekstatischen Zeitlichkeit – ecstatic temporality', the transcendence of temporality.

Only for those who abstain from sexuality and thus from the tragedy of reproduction and the continuation of life, only for them the oppressive ticking away of time will come to a standstill. Chastity is a ready means to escape time.

This is how Gregory describes the life of his sister. For Macrina, time had almost come to a halt early in her life. Everything that restlessly hurried on in the surrounding world, became more and more quiet in her. She refused to allow her body to be used, abused in her eyes, for the begetting of new generations of children on their way to the grave. She refused to allow her body to be abused, as Gregorius puts it 'as an instrument to perpetuate death'.³³

The struggle of Macrina with time is apparent right from the beginning by her renunciation of all worldly, temporary things. She died without any possessions. When her brother visited her she was already close to dying: 'She was not lying on a bed or at couch, a sack had been spread on a board, and another plank propped up her head (...)'³⁴ The rich bishop's garments of her brother would have been a stark contrast.

In those years, from the middle of the fourth century onwards, both Roman aristocrats and Christian bishops were shocked by the sight of people who were dressed in rags, in a kind of cassock that was derived from the simple cloak, the *palium*, worn by philosophers. It erased all outward signs of social status, but was also of gender and wealth: whether

³² M. Heidegger: *Sein und Zeit* § 69c. 'In der horizontalen Einheit der ekstatischen Zeitlichkeit gründend ist die Welt transzendent'.

³³ Gregory of Nyssa: *De Virginitate* XIV 1.

³⁴ Gregory of Nyssa: *The life of Saint Macrina*. P 41-4 (976a).

a person was a slave or was free, male or female, who would be able to see the difference?

In the letters of Jerome we come across women, whose men controlled vast areas of the Empire, behaving like Paula, 'who mourned and fasted, filthy in her rags.' Blasilla went around with tangled hair, dressed in a black shroud and slept in the dirt on the floor. And about Fabiola Jerome mentions: 'her deliberate filthiness and, in condemnation of the silk robes of other women, her ordinary clothes of a slave.'

These were all ladies who belonged to the upper aristocracy of Rome. Influenced by the same Jerome, the powerful and rich senator Pammachius appeared in the senate in a hairy cowl. Through this '*mutatio vestium*' he showed his changed attitude towards his body. Whether it was sitting down to opulent meals, visiting the theatres or bathhouses, he detested it.

In his Autobiography, Edward Gibbon describes how, on the evening of October 15, 1764, contemplating the ruins of the Capitol, he saw the barefoot Franciscan friars passing by on their way to sing the mass, where once the temple of Jupiter had stood (in which he was mistaken). At seeing this he decided to write his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. This enlightened spirit would have looked at the appearance of senator Pammachius with resentment and aversion, and would have described it as an abomination that such an obnoxious lot dared to enter into a gathering of such a splendid and noble company. The senators themselves wouldn't have blinked an eyelid at the time. The increasing horror of the body that manifested itself in Late Antiquity, both among Christians and pagans, was made visible through this transition from wearing a toga to wearing habit and cowl. The folds of the toga can show the body, make it seductive. The undulating movements, the curves of the body seemed to be revealed through the toga. A cassock reveals nothing. It conceals stature and status, sex and beauty. The forms of the body disappear in the rough and straight plainness of the habit. If in antiquity a man had to do heavy physical labour, he would take off his robes and preferably work naked. With the arrival of the habit nudity disappeared. Modesty and shame receive a different connotation.

The body is not only obscured through thinking and wearing different clothing. Whoever looks at the mosaics in Ravenna in the chronological order of their creation, can see that the figures seem to freeze and become rigid, their movements coming to a stop. The moving people from antiquity are turned into the rigid figurines of the Byzantine period.

Around AD 410, probably in the same scriptorium in Rome, the *Vergilius Vaticanus* and the *Quedlinburg Itala* were written. A pagan and

a sacred text, both with miniatures in which the figures and the landscape seem to lose their reality. More or less about the same time, the magnificent series of mosaic panels were installed in the nave of the Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome, which also shows a kind of reality steeped in a sort of illusionist haze. Less than three decades later, manuscripts such as the *Iliad Ambrosiana* and the *Virgilus Romanus* were created, in which for the first time those frozen faces and rigid, frontal figurines which are well-known from the Middle Ages, appear both in Europe and Byzantium. The natural spatial relations are abandoned, human beings are schematised, the gestures became symbolic and the forms are sharply outlined and captured in symmetry. The form becomes more abstract; it loses its real body.

Not only the human being, its body and the surrounding landscape, but also its way of thinking and believing becomes more abstract and loses real content. For example, God and the gods lose their names and idiosyncrasies in Late Antiquity. They become abstract, indeterminate and transcendent, far from daily, earthly reality. Emperor Julian, 'the apostate', who was so intense in his views on religion, addressed his soldiers about a 'numen', an eternal holy and superior power.³⁵ That is quite an indeterminate divinity. That abstract divinity was indefinite enough: 'At the feast that the Christians celebrate on the sixth of January, and which they call 'the epiphany', he went into their church and solemnly prayed to the superior – *progressus in eorum ecclesiam et sollempniter numine orato*.³⁶

● On the triumphal arch of Constantine there is on both sides this kind of abstract and obscure reference '*instictu divinitatis mentis magnitudine*'.³⁷ In the past this was usually supposed to be a diplomatic formulation which enabled Constantine to confess his Christian faith without denouncing the still pagan senate. But it is, as a matter of fact, the same abstract manner of honouring the divine, the gods or God, which were so often apparent in those decades, and certainly not exclusively referring to the Christian God.

Jacques le Goff called this disappearance of the body, the freezing of the body into an abstract figure '*la dérouté du corporel* – the routing of the body.' Le Goff considers this as preeminent in the transition from antiquity to the Middle Ages. The path chosen by Macrina and her brothers, the great Cappadocian bishops, would lead even further. Around AD 1000 the abhorrence of the body is unusually fierce. Gerbert of Aurillac, who later on became the '*papa philosophus*' Sylvester II, defined

³⁵ Ammianus Marcellinus: *Res gestae* 23, 5, 18.

³⁶ *Ibid*: 21, 2, 5.

³⁷ *CIL* VI 1139.

man as *'formatus de spurcissimo spermate, conceptus in pruritu carnis – formed from filthiest seed, conceived by the itch of the flesh.'*

More nuanced but no less negative is the judgment of Hildegard of Bingen in her *Ordo Virtutum* of around 1152. Within a tradition that still reverted to, the Neoplatonic philosophers and the earliest Church Fathers, she sketches the origin of our body. The source of everything is 'the Father, who formed his only Word, from which He created the primeval matter, which was disturbed by Eve – *per quod creavit mundi primam materiam, quam Eva turbavit.*'

After this fall, the ephemeral matter changed into the heavy body and our life in glory changed to the strenuous toiling, sweating and lamenting of our temporary existence. 'Oh, we are strangers here, wanderers (...) who have lost the heritage of the first man. – *nos peregrine sumus (...) hereditatem quam in Adam perdidimus.*'

Time and body were made problematic during the fourth century and possibly also corrupted. The consequences can still be observed. Françoise Sagan published her successful novel *Aimez-vous Brahms?* in 1959. Right on the first page the main character is pondering about her outward appearance, which is affected by time and will be lost. She is thirty-nine years old and considers these years as a defeat. Time will humiliate her ever more and more destructively and finally silence her. The devastation will show itself on her face, her body. The powerless make-up will not be able to cover-up the image that the mirror shows her, nor will the scarf hide the wrinkles in her neck. 'She discovered that it was time itself that killed her, slowly but surely, and impaired an apparition that, as she knew very well, once had been loved.'

CHAPTER FOUR

AUGUSTINE AND TIME

a. ‘*Nescio*’, ‘I don’t know’

(...) *nisi quia nescio, unde venerim huc, in isto dico vitamini mortem mortem vitalem? Nescio.* (...)

I do not know where I came from in this, what should I say, mortal life or in this, living death? I do not know!¹

Possibly Augustine is the philosopher who resembles Socrates most of all as described by Plato. Asking questions, questions, questions, anxious questions mostly and especially questions about his life. In the tradition of the Western Christian Church Augustine became one of the four Church fathers on whose ideas the Latin Church was founded, but he himself is an exceptionally undogmatic man. ‘*Fides quaerit* – faith is searching.’² It does not matter whether one agrees with his ideas or not, it is still quite possible to be fascinated by his thinking, his honesty and directness. His influence on Western thinking is enormous. Even when he was still alive he acquired great fame in the Latin West.

In the millennium that followed, great thinkers such as Anselm and Thomas Aquinas would have been nowhere without him. Scholastic standard works, such as Peter Lombard’s *Sententiae*, written in the middle of the twelfth century, are filled with quotations from his texts. The Renaissance experienced its influence and Petrarch always carried a pocket-sized edition of the *Confessiones*. The reformation was started by an Augustinian monk, Martin Luther. Blaise Pascal more or less continuously conducted a dialogue with Augustine, and succumbed to it, ‘the greatest victim of Christianity,’ according to Nietzsche.

Ludwig Wittgenstein remained a life-long attentive reader of Augustine’s work, as was my tutor, Comelis Verhoeven, who immersed himself evening after evening in the folio edition of Augustine. He never

¹ Augustine: *Confessiones* I 7.

² Augustine: *De Trinitate* XV 2.

went to church, but the evenings were reserved for the sermons of the bishop of Hippo.

Without Aristotle and Augustine, Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* would have remained unwritten. Only Friedrich Nietzsche could not find enough words to brand Augustine enemy of the spirit, the monster of morality, brawler, someone who in an insulting manner lacked any form of personal dignity. 'One has merely to read one of those Christian agitators, for instance Augustine, to understand what kind of shady characters came floating to the surface.'³

Among the notes for *Der Wille zur Macht* there is a venomous one, but possibly quite to the point: '*Bei Augustin und Luther ist alles rein persönliche Not, es ist die Frage eines Kranken nach einer Kur.* – With Augustine and Luther everything is pure personal distress, a sick man asking for a cure.'

Aurelius Augustine was born on 13 November AD 354 in Thagaste, a Numidian provincial town, now Soek-Ahras in Algeria. His ancestors were Berber and in his sermons sometimes Berber and Phoenician words can be found. He spoke Latin and was learning Greek. He studied rhetoric and philosophy and acquired a comprehensive knowledge of the philosophical tradition of antiquity. And yet, it was completely different from the antique philosophy we are familiar with. From his example, Cicero, especially through his *Hortensius*, he had learned that Latin was not inferior to Greek as a philosophical language.

His first contact with Christian writings, through the *Itala*, the earliest Latin translation of the Bible, was a disappointment and made him averse to that world of nonsensical and immoral stories.

A decisive factor in his thinking was that he read the Greek philosophers in a way similar to that of many contemporary scholars, who read the English translation in a Loeb edition and occasionally cast an eye over what is written in Greek. Augustine mastered discussions such as those about free will versus natural necessity, determinism and fate, but he used the Latin translations of the *Katégoriai* and *Peri hermèneias* of Aristotle. From the Stoics he took many elements of logic and ethics and quite remarkably – something that probably inspired Wittgenstein – an interest in linguistic philosophy and in the relationship between thinking and language or at any rate the possibilities of communication. Illustrative of his open-mindedness is that, although he rejected the ideas of Epicurus,

³ Fr. Nietzsche: *Der Antichrist*, § 59. '*Man lese nur irgendeinen christlichen Agitator, z. B. Augustin, um zu begreifen, was für unsaubere Gesellen damit oben auf gekommen sind.*'

he was perfectly capable of correctly explaining the Hedonist point of view.

Next to Cicero it was Plato who inspired the thinking of Augustine. And yet he never even attempted to read Plato in Greek. Of course, it is possible to read Hegel in French and Heidegger in Japanese, but it is like hearing operas played on a barrel organ. Not only was the language different, but also a preference for certain texts was quite different from ours. Augustine mainly read the *Timaeus*, because of the cosmology developed in it, *Phaedrus* because of the reflections on the survival of the soul, and Plato's *Laws* because of the connection between philosophy and the ordered society. Influenced by the works of Plotinus, he read the later dialogues: *Parmenides*, *Sophist* and *Theaetetus*. As a rhetorician he was interested in the dialectic developed in these texts, and as a philosopher his attention was mainly focused on the problems of identity and difference developed in those texts.

This meant that he read and understood (for his time) a 'modern', Plato, as it was discussed in the writings of Plotinus and Porphyry, but Augustine only knew both of these Neoplatonists through the Latin translation by Marius Victorinus. Also for the logic of Aristotle, and particularly the introduction that Porphyry wrote, Augustine was completely dependent on the Latin translation, or rather interpretation, that Victorinus produced.

In the Seventh Book of the *Confessiones*, Augustine tells us how, after having been a rhetorician in Rome for a number of years, he met Ambrose – a man who was quite familiar with the Greek language – and that in Milan he was admitted to a group of Christian Neoplatonists led by Simplician.

This group of Neoplatonists in Milan concentrated on spiritual aspects and not on material ones. It is essential only to know 'He who is eternal,' and all things that surround us only distract us from that one true and eternal reality. They drag us down into the world of the body and the belly, home and property, in short, the vain world of the outward appearance, that which hardly is.

Right from the first pages of the *Confessiones* onwards the immense longing of the mortal, fleeting and passing creatures for the eternal, stable being is the central theme. Here, during our life, we are misshapen, misplaced, imperfect creatures hankering after pure being. The young Augustine is still filled with that immense desire and is confident about its fulfilment. Such as in the familiar phrases in the first book of the *Confessiones*: '(...) *quia fecisti nos ad Te et inquietum est cor nostrum, donec requiescat in Te*, – for You have created us unto You, and our heart

is impetuous until it finds rest in You.’ He wrote these sentences when he was about forty years old. Then he still relied on the possibility that ‘in a flash of sudden, awe-inspiring insight – *in ictu trepidantis aspectus* – the visible becomes transparent and shows the unseen.’⁴ The older Augustine would have a much more desperate view and no longer held these certainties of the Neoplatonists.

For this Milanese circle of Christian Neoplatonists, Plato, Paul and Plotinus still seemed to stand side by side. Plato and Christian doctrine are, according to him, so closely related that ‘by changing some words here and there the mindsets are in agreement and Platonists can become Christians.’⁵ An idea of Augustine that was thankfully taken on by Nietzsche. In a fierce attack on Christianity, ‘*gehört zum Vulgus* – belongs to the plebs’, ‘*ist décadence* – is decadent’, ‘*eine Herdenreligion* – a religion for a herd’ and a ‘*Plebejisches Ideal* – plebeian ideal’, he summarizes his disgust in the famous exclamation: ‘*Christentum ist Platonismus fürs Volk* – Christianity is Platonism for the people.’⁶

When he was older Augustine had a little more understanding of the differences between Plato and Paul. In the passage quoted above about the sudden awe-inspiring insight, he assumes the possibility of the sudden transparency of reality and that ‘the unseen of You becomes known’ and we ‘can penetrate to that which is – *et pervenit ad id, quod est.*’⁷

For Augustine the visible reality is a kind of unreal obstacle to true vision. ● Only in a flash, a sort of tearing apart from the world, may a brief opening occur that offers a view of its Creator. Plotinus too had this kind of vision but for him the world and reality were not as unreal as they were for Augustine. The two worlds, clearly presented as opposites in the book that Augustine wrote when he was old, *De civitate Dei*, were still unthinkable for Plotinus; there might have been a vague suspicion, but no more. The contraposition of the created world and its Creator, was as yet unknown to Plotinus. Plotinus and other Neoplatonists did not yet see beyond all reality, or through the twilight world of the here and now, the totally different, the absolute Being. They saw the ● One in their visions and not the complete ●ther.

⁴ *Conf.* VII 23.

⁵ Augustine: *De vera religione*, VII.

⁶ Fr. Nietzsche: *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, in the beginning of the book.

⁷ *Conf.* VII 23.

b. 'Only You!'

The formula with which Augustine, right at the beginning of his *Soliloquies* indicates the two opposites of his thinking, is unusually succinct and powerful:

*'Deus et animam scire cupio
Nihilne plus? –
Nil omnino (...)
'I desire to know God and the soul.
Nothing else?
Absolutely not.'*⁸

It is a statement that is repeated several times, such as in the following book of the *Soliloquies*: I only know the burning desire to know 'who I am, who You are – *noverim me, noverim Te*'.⁹ Or, with the same certainty, the statement that philosophy can be reduced to two themes: 'God and the soul – *de Deo, de anima*'.¹⁰

The comment is a turning point, a sort of double face, like that splendid head in mosaic of Emperor Justinian in the San Vitale in Ravenna. The cruel character traits are shown in a realistic Roman way, and at the same time the portrait is already in the grip of the fossilized Byzantine court culture with a face that does not reveal anything. As a sixteen-year-old I saw it for the first time while on holiday and since then, Late Antiquity has captivated me.

As does the almost programmatic statement of Augustine: '*Philosophiae disciplina (...) cuius duplex quaestio est, una de anima, altera de Deo*'.¹¹

The position expressed appears at first sight to be fully in line with the Neoplatonic ideas of Plotinus and Porphyry. At first glance, but philosophy goes further. By using identical words, words that we too soon take for granted, gaps in thinking, cracks in philosophical tradition, even chasms seem to be smoothed out. After all, antique philosophy too frequently mentioned god and soul, and weren't both concepts key elements in the work of Plato? True, but in both archaic and antique philosophy, god or soul appear nowhere as the foundations of thinking. On the contrary. The soul – *hè psuchè* – is, according to Plato, a cosmic force that temporarily lives in the body and strives to reunite with the divine.¹²

⁸ Augustine: *Soliloquia* I 2.

⁹ *Ibid.*: II 1.

¹⁰ Augustine: *De ordine* II 18.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Plato: *Phaedo* 79a ff.

And the divine – *to theion* – according to Aristotle is a sort of keystone in the ordered, cosmic universe.¹³ God and soul are parts of and included in the natural order, *kosmos*. The foundations of the ontology of antiquity are not god and soul, but *kosmos*, *phusis* and *telos*. Those foundations were abandoned by the Neoplatonists. For Plato, the reading of the writings of Plotinus and Augustine would have been a bizarre, hallucinatory experience. They contained so many words coined by him, and yet, so much of what was essential for him had disappeared, had been forgotten.

The same can be observed in modern philosophy. God and the soul, Kant and Sartre know quite clearly how to place God and the soul in their philosophy. But since Descartes there is a completely different contraposition than in antiquity and Late Antiquity; for Descartes there is the division between the thinking things, *res cogitans*, and the extended things, *res extensae*, between subject and object. The first is animated and the other is soulless. There is Pascal's well-known statement: '*L'homme n'est qu'un roseau, le plus faible de sa nature, mais c'est un roseau pensant* – man is but a reed, weakest in the surrounding nature, but he is a thinking reed.' He goes on with an elaboration of the Cartesian contraposition: thinking man opposite silent, obscure matter: 'It is not necessary for the whole universe to arm itself to crush him: a vapour, a drop of water can be enough to kill him. But even if the universe smashes him, man would be nobler than that which kills him, because he is aware that he is dying and realizes the advantage the universe has over him. The universe is aware of nothing. Our dignity therefore consists entirely in thinking. With that we must acclaim ourselves, and not through space and time, which we cannot fill.'¹⁴

Thinking, as a form of self-consciousness, would be rated even higher. In his inauguration speech in Berlin in 1818, Hegel contrasted the '*Grösse und Macht des Geistes* – greatness and power of the mind' with '*das Verschlossene Wesen des Universums* – with the taciturn essence of the universe'. Yet, the day following the death of this magnificent philosopher, his inanimate chair, table and shoes were still there whereas his self-consciousness was forever extinguished. And a Dane, Søren Kierkegaard, sneered: 'But as far as Hegel is concerned, oh, let me think in a Greek way: how the gods will have roared with laughter! Such a scruffy, narrow-minded little professor, who supposed to have understood the necessity of all, and believed to know all there is to know about the universe; oh, ye gods!

¹³ (Pseudo) Aristotle: *De Mundo* 399b 29-30.

¹⁴ Blaise Pascal: *Pensées* nr. 347.

‘I enjoyed reading Schopenhauer more than I can express. What he says is perfectly true, and then – I heartily allow that to the Germans – as crude as only a German can be.’¹⁵

When Augustine contemplates time, he does so from quite a different perspective than we would: the self-conscious subject that is aware of the structures of space and time, the fundamental ways in which we acquire the possibility of thinking and reaching a representation of reality. Neither does he look at it from Plato’s perspective, by looking for the position of duration and location in the well-ordered *kosmos*, subsequently regarding *chronos* as ‘a movement that participates in durability’, ‘presentation of the eternity’.¹⁶

c. No more words

Augustine does not merely leave the foundations of the ontology of antiquity; he is also the first uprooted philosopher. He no longer understands the language of philosophy and therefore breaks with the tradition of a thousand years of antique philosophy. Plotinus taught in Rome but was a Greek. Porphyry was a Syrian, but someone who knew Greek as his second mother tongue. Ambrose of Milan could still speak and write and quarrel with the oriental fathers in Greek. Jerome can still be considered bilingual, although he went to Athens to improve his Greek. Augustine, however, signals the end of this great tradition. Cicero was still completely bilingual and spoke and wrote Greek with ease. Despite the high value he attributed to Latin as a language for thinking, he continued to use Greek terms because he realized that the colour and the fullness of meaning could only be heard and understood in the original word. He was still thinking in Greek.

Augustine practically never read Greek and preferred to use translations. Perhaps he was a bit over-modest when he confessed: ‘As far as I am concerned, I hardly know any Greek and it actually amounts to nothing – *et prope nihil*.’¹⁷

His knowledge of Greek was restricted to its technical aspects. With the help of dictionaries and translations he was able to understand what was written. But the Greek world, culture and philosophy, expressed by that language, remained alien to him. With him begins what Henri I. Marrou in his standard work *Saint Augustin et la fin de la culture antique* described as *l’oubli du grec en Occident* – the forgetting of Greek in the

¹⁵ S. Kierkegaard: *Diaries*, July 1854. XI 1 A 180.

¹⁶ Plato: *Timæus* 33d.

¹⁷ Augustine: *Contra litteras Petilianus* II 38.

West'. One could say that the Middle Ages began when the supporting language of antique civilization here in the West became once more unintelligible gibberish.

It is quite odd that the Christian Middle Ages were based on the Hebrew Bible, which no Christian was able to read any more, so that in any discussion about explaining the original text would be won by a non-Christian Jew; and on the New Testament written in Greek, about which the Eastern bishops would have discussions without the Latin church prelates being able understanding exactly what they were talking about. Plato and Paul formed the foundation of the medieval West, Thomas Aquinas doted on Aristotle but could not read one letter of the language it was originally written in. Descartes, Spinoza and Kant did not know any Greek and read Aristotle in a Latin translation or adaptation. Hegel was the first who again read and mastered Greek philosophy, from Thales to Proclus. But how many barriers of misunderstanding remained there between the Greeks as seen by Hegel and Nietzsche and those wondrous fellows who walked around, chatting and mocking, in the streets of Athens or Miletus more than two millennia before,?

Be that as it may, from Augustine to Kant, philosophy did not know its own words and lived in exile or looked like those impossible composers who were unable to play any instrument themselves. Worse perhaps, there was a persistent state of

deafness and misunderstanding. The emotions remained hidden and the meaning was lost.

Anyone who has read some of Augustine's texts will remember constantly coming across those odd turns of phrase such as: 'this world', 'this body' or 'this temporary reality'. The effect of all these 'this', 'that', 'these' and 'those' is remarkably negative: 'this world' comes across as a nonchalantly, dismissive gesture, indicating the reprehensibility of 'this world'. However, this whole effect is mainly due to the fact that Augustine was unable to express himself in Greek.

One of the predecessors of Augustine, Hilary of Poitiers had lived in Constantinople for a time and was able to speak and read Greek; he was also able to understand the nuances of Greek philosophical terminology. He had observed that in 'the Latin language there are no indefinite or definite articles whereas they do exist in the beautifully logical Greek language.'¹⁸ In order to cope with that difficulty, he suggests using the indicative Latin pronoun 'ille'. This suggestion is taken over by Augustine, with which not only a flawed adaptation creeps into the language, but also

¹⁸ Hilary of Poitiers: *De Trinitate*, XI 17.

through that *'ille mundus'*, a flawed reality. An objectionable world. The lack of Greek results in a lack of reality.

Right in the introduction of his masterpiece, *De Trinitate*, Augustine states that in Latin hardly anything was written about the Trinity of the One God, and what was written in Latin was often quite imperfect. And then: 'Of course, in Greek much has been written about this subject, but it is difficult to find someone who is capable of reading and understanding these texts.'¹⁹ Shocking, especially when we consider that this core concept of Christian religion was discussed and understood only in Greek for four hundred years, and that the profound and balanced outcomes of this thinking actually escaped the Latin West.

What is astonishing is Augustine's casual admission a bit further in the introduction that he does not really understand what the Greeks actually meant or intended when they made a distinction between *ousia* and *hupostasis*.²⁰

The enigma of the essence of God, the outcome of centuries of profundity of the Greek fathers, was first brought down by the Latin apologist Lactantius when he spoke about the unity of God and the *'tres personae'*, the three theatrical masks that He could use, the three roles that God could act.

Then Augustine bluntly declares that he does not want anything to do with all those Greek nuances and decided that *ousia* should be understood as *'essentia'* and *hupostasis* as *'substantia'*. Edward Gibbon merely smiled and made this striking verdict about Augustine: 'His learning is too often borrowed and his arguments are too often his own.' Not hindered by any knowledge of Greek 'he boldly sounded the dark abysses of grace, predestination, free will, and original sin.'²¹

Although he did not really understand the essence of this *'tres unum sunt'*, his pedantic speculations according to which the Spirit was not only from the Father but also from the Son, caused a lot of havoc. The word *'Filioque'* used by Augustine was not just a deviation from the faith as laid down in the *Symbolum Nicaenum* of AD 325, it was quite frankly an incomprehensible mistake in the eyes of the Greek fathers. A mistake that around AD 800 was accepted by Spanish, Gallic and Germanic bishops

¹⁹ Augustine: *De Trinitate* III 1.

²⁰ *Ibid*: V 8, 10: *Dicunt quidem et illi υποστασιν, sed nescio quid volunt interesse inter ουσιαν et υποστασιν ita ut plerique nostri qui haec graeco tractant eloquio dicere consuerint μίαν ουσιαν τρεις υποστασεις, quod est latine, unam essentiam tres substantiae.*

²¹ E. Gibbon: *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, IV 233.

and would eventually lead to the break between Eastern and Western Christianity.

d. Beyond reality

The break that occurs through the thinking of Augustine is much more evident in philosophy. When he was still young he rejected the traditional antique way of grasping reality and to understand it as laid down in the theory of the categories of Aristotle. 'And what did it profit me, when I was scarcely twenty years old, that a book of Aristotle entitled *The ten Categories* fell into my hands (...) and that I held on to it as on something great and divine (...) and I discussed it with others who said that they had hardly understood that book despite the explanation of the greatest scholars, who not only explained it orally but drew diagrams in the sand. (...) What did all this profit me, since it actually hindered me when I imagined that whatever existed was comprehended within those ten categories. And so I tried to understand You, my God, so that even your wonderful and unchangeable unity could be understood in this way. (...) But what was that other than falsehood, not truth? It was a figment of my own misery'.²²

The Migne edition of Augustine's works contains a text, *Categoriae ex Aristotele decerptae*, a kind of extract of Aristotle's work. It was not written by Augustine, perhaps by Pretextatius. The text is quite bad and full of mistakes, but it still shows some attention to one of the basic texts of ancient philosophy. Augustine himself goes further and rejects the doctrine of categories, because it does not teach us anything about what is really important, God and soul. The reality that concerns Augustine, God and the soul, falls outside the categories of 'this world here'.

In the tenth book of *Laws* Plato says: 'the earth, the sun, the stars and the universe, the fair order of the seasons, the division in years and the months, in short the world order – *kosmos* – furnish proofs of the existences of gods. This is acknowledged by both Greeks and barbarians'.²³

The statement was given the status of argument by the Stoics and as a *consensus gentium* also accepted by Augustine as an argument for the existence of God. But Plato's actual argument, the order of the visible world providing insight concerning the being of the gods, is rejected by Augustine. He formulates it in, for instance, the well-known passage in the *Confessiones: et eunt homines mirari alta montium, et ingentes fluctus maris* (...) 'and people go and admire the heights of the mountains, the

²² *Conf.* IV 28-29. Translation A.C. Outler. Delphi Classics, Hastings 2016.

²³ Plato: *Leges* 886a.

awe-inspiring currents of sea, the wide rivers or the vast oceans and the course of the stars – and they forget themselves (and God) (...) *et giro siderum, et relinquunt se ipsos*.²⁴

The Greek way of eagerly and curiously looking at the world is for the first time considered something negative by Augustine, *curiositas*, misplaced curiosity. And it stayed that way including in *Sein und Zeit* with the famous analyses of (& 35) ‘Das Gerede – On talking’ (§ 36) and ‘Die Neugier- On curiosity’ (§ 36). There Heidegger refers remarkably extensively to Augustine and even derives from him the argument against curiously observing; it leads to lust, *concupiscentia*.²⁵

Looking around, observing, turned from a desire for knowledge to misplaced curiosity because the admirable arrangement, the *kosmos*, disappeared, and with it antique philosophy. ‘Investigating this world here, *de hoc mundo quaeruntur*,’ writes Augustine to his friend Nebridius, ‘it is not worth the trouble. It is a waste of time and yields nothing.’²⁶

Because of this, philosophy changed substantially. The emphasis of the classic layout changed and a large part of it disappeared. With Augustine *Logikè* changed into ‘*rationales quaestiones*’, the problems of knowledge and the path that leads to the highest truth, God. *Ethikè* contained the doctrine about striving for the *summum bonum*, God. And the *phusikè*, the questions that were essential from Aristotle right up to the *Naturales quaestiones* of Seneca, disappeared. Nature was created by God, so why should we worry about it? What would be the use of doing research about this?²⁷

The natural basis of antique philosophy – nature, its orderly progress and structure and its striving for completion, birth, growth and ripening, *phusis*, *kosmos* and *telos* – fades away and disappears with Augustine. ‘*Te invoco*’, ‘You I seek, he exclaims in his *Soliloquia*: You, *Deus veritas*, (...) *Deus sapientia*, (...) *Deus beatitudo*.²⁸ The weight of reality was moved. The true philosophy ‘is not a philosophy of this world, of reality here (...) but of another, intelligible reality.’²⁹ The world becomes unreal, unessential – true reality was moved to Him, ‘*qui vere est, qui summe est*.’³⁰

²⁴ *Conf. X 8*, 15.

²⁵ M. Heidegger: *Sein und Zeit* § 36. See also *Conf. X 35*.

²⁶ Augustine: *Epistula XI 2*

²⁷ *Ibid. Ep. CXVIII 3*.

²⁸ *Ibid. Soliloquia*, I 1 (3).

²⁹ *Ibid. Contra Academicos*, III, 19. 42.

³⁰ *Ibid. De vera rel.*, XXXI 57; *De Trin.*, VIII 2, 3 en 8, 3, 4; *De Civ. Dei*, XII 2.

The transition made by Augustine, or rather the break that occurs between the ontology of antiquity and Christian philosophy, is strange and confusing. It is as if in the middle of playing chess the game changes into a game of draughts. Everything changes and it changes in a most confusing way, as if the draughts pieces are still allowed to move like knights in a chess game. The first thing that is confusing is that this change takes place through secret shortcuts. Augustine himself continually emphasizes the similarities of Plato's philosophy with the message of Christ.³¹ Whereas the Greek basic concepts seem to stagger along misunderstood in Latin translation or a Latin version, the foundations of thinking are abandoned and philosophical systems are from then on constructed on the ruins of what went before. All of this still takes place backstage. What we hear is the rustling and rumbling of the 'innovators'. But what a bizarre move to define God as 'being in itself', *'ipsum esse'*, and thereby to regard Him as elusive and incomprehensible and banish Him beyond the categories of reality. It becomes inextricable when out of the ten categories which relate to each other, the first of them is being separated as the only one able to say something about the being of God.³²

Within what began as *'Begriffsgeschichte'* in German and is now called 'the history of ideas', a little more attention is paid to the cracks and crevices, the scratches and shifting colours in the history of philosophy. Michel Foucault first used Nietzsche's concept of genealogy and later replaced it with the archaeology of knowledge. There may seem, in response to a brief, superficial glance from an uninitiated viewer a semblance of harmony. But whoever takes a closer look will see the cracks and gaps and whoever looks even closer will observe that no matter how solid the construction may appear, it merely covers the underlying, rich but fragile variety.

In the everyday language of the Greeks, *ousia* meant as much as domestic property. Plato turned the word into a philosophical technical term, which indicated the essence of transient reality. For Aristotle, the word became more diverse once again and had more than one meaning. The word *ousia* in Aristotle's *Categoriae* and even more clearly in his *Metaphysica Z* and *H*, expresses the identity as the basis of being.

After Plato *ousia* is given a much more pronounced meaning and tends towards *parousia*, 'presence'. Still later, with the Neoplatonists who influenced Augustine's thinking, the concept shifts even further and is frequently understood as *hyperousios*, 'most essential presence'.

Not until the Stoics was the word *hupostasis* used as a concept.

³¹ *De Ordine*, I 11, 32.

³² *Conf.* IV 28.

This concept becomes extremely complicated and difficult to understand if we look what Augustine does:

1. He writes that he does not exactly know, and does not even want to know what the Greeks meant with *ousia* and *hupostasis*;
2. Subsequently he translates *ousia* as ‘*essentia*’ and *hupostasis* as ‘*substantia*’
3. And yet, he uses, as does Marius Victorinus, the word ‘*substantia*’ for the first category of Aristotle
4. And then finally he explains that all this does not really matter and that both words have more or less the same meaning and can be substituted for one another.³³

Even though this filled the Greek fathers with horror, a great future lay ahead for this Gordian knot. Thomas Aquinas took all this from Augustine without having any doubts and thus ‘knows’ that the first category of Aristotle should be represented by the word ‘*substantia*’.³⁴

Augustine even managed to add more confusion by finally giving ‘*natura*’ the same meaning as ‘*substantia*’ and ‘*essentia*’.³⁵

Let us take a deep breath and look back at what has happened. Then we will see that the Greek Fathers, unable to follow what was going on, lost track of what was happening. As far as they were concerned all this would lead nowhere. But the Latin fathers rejoiced about these refreshing new insights and started to work with them.

I will provide only one example, the conversation held more than a thousand years later by an Augustinian monk, from 1 to 3 October 1529. That well-known *Marburger Religionsgespräch* between Luther, Zwingli, Melancthon and Ecolampadius was about the presence, *parousia*, of Christ in bread and wine during communion. Irritated, Luther exclaimed: ‘I do not care if something is against nature, as long as it is not against faith – *Non curo, quod sit contra naturam, modo non contra fidem.*’

And if Plato and Paul, who were constantly called upon, had actually been present at this conversation, they would have believed they had entered a madhouse. Nature was rejected, natural or unnatural; what did it matter? From Thales to Plotinus the antique tradition continued to be in

³³ *De Trin.* V 2, 3: ‘*Est tamen sine dubitatione substantia, vel, si melius hoc appellatur, essentia, quam Graeci ουσΙΑν vocant.*’

³⁴ Thomas Aquinas: *scriptum super libros Sententiarum*, 23, 1, 1 ad 5: ‘*nomen substantiae (...) aequivocatur apud nos.*’

³⁵ *De moribus manichaeorum.* II 2.

contact with nature, birth and growth, and had remained close to that concept *phusis* right until the end. From the Ionic natural philosophers up to the *Physica* of Aristotle – ‘the hidden and therefore never adequately thought-through basic concept of occidental philosophy’³⁶ – to nature as the source of thought in Plotinus, ‘overflowing with life – *huperzei zōē*’.³⁷

To deny or to resist nature, quite incredible actually! And, at the same time to elevate faith to being an indisputable certainty. Faith, *pistis*, was the most questionable, doubtful form of knowledge for Plato. ‘To anyone brought up in classical Greek philosophy, *pistis* meant the lowest grade of cognition: the state of mind of the uneducated.’³⁸

In Late Antiquity, and partly owing to Augustine, a reversal was made: the sun could stand still and mountains could be moved, as long as faith remained unswerving. And precisely with this reversal of the most fundamental assumptions of philosophy, the concept of ‘time’ appears.

e. The beginning of ‘time’

Why does ‘time’ as being temporal, being confined between beginning and end, and transcendence, going beyond all limits, belong together and why do both of them appear at this turning point of philosophy? It is not my intention to explain once again what Augustine says about time in the eleventh book of the *Confessiones*.

That has often been done and was actually not really done by Augustine himself. In that eleventh book there is no analysis of time based on contemplation or study of the phenomenon ‘time’; on the contrary, ‘time’ is by-passed when Augustine is contemplating the eternity of God, and subsequently ‘time’ is considered an in-between, an impediment to fulfilling the coming ‘*ad Te* – to You’. The temporary is the provisional that should end in coming to rest in God’s eternity.

But I intend to expose not the construction but the foundation of this analysis of time.

In the philosophy of antiquity, ‘time’ appears nowhere as an independent theme or problem worthy of consideration. That was not possible either, because ‘time’ as temporality, as something that once began and will once end, did not exist yet. The Presocratics did use the word *chronos*, beginning with the oldest fragment of a philosophical text, the fragment of

³⁶ M. Heidegger: *Gesamtausgabe* IX, 242. ‘Das verborgene und deshalb nie zureichend durchdachte Grundbuch der abendländische Philosophie’.

³⁷ Plotinus: *Enneads* VI 15: 12, 9.

³⁸ E. Dodds: *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety*, New York/London 1965, p. 120.

Anaximander of Miletus about the mutual satisfaction of origin and decay as the loss of the guilt of existence *kata tèn tou chronou taxin*, ‘according to the fixed order of the (flooding and ebbing) tides.’ That is the inexhaustible – *to apeiron* – source of origin and existence.³⁹

Chronos does not indicate the temporal time that started somewhere and will stop some time; on the contrary, the word indicates the sustainability of existence, remaining.

The same thing happens in another, equally well-known, but much more enigmatic fragment, the fragment of Heraclitus about ‘time, a playing child’. Here the word *chronos* is not even used, but *aiōn*, a word that indicates continuity. That is also the meaning of the text, a father begets a scion, and everything repeats itself time and again, when the scion begets a child himself: through this alternation or reversal existence remains guaranteed and life continues from generation to generation.⁴⁰

In the classical period of antique philosophy ‘time’ did not yet appear either. For Plato, *chronos* is always meant as a derivative of sustainability and eternity. In his *Timaeus* he defines *chronos* as ‘movable reflection of eternity.’ For any form of existence, he goes on, can only maintain itself within the order of the great whole, the kosmos. The movement of time is therefore circular, like the *kosmos*: *chronos* is circular without beginning or end. ‘Time’ continuously returns and because of that acquires its duration and durability.⁴¹ And that means that the identical word, *chronos*, which for Augustine in its Latin translation ‘*tempus*’, denotes temporality, for Plato still had the opposite connotation, the ongoing.

Even in the normative definition given by Aristotle of *chronos* there is still no question of ‘time’ in its later, modern meaning of limited time, temporality. Again, on the contrary. ‘Time’ is natural and is dealt with in the *Physica*. ‘Time’ is included in the continuity of the *phusis*. It is ‘something about’ the movement. For Aristotle, motion is the essence of the continuing cycle of birth and growth, of the constant alternation of generation and decay that sustains existence. Without movement, there is nothing – when everything comes to a halt, it ceases to exist. That ‘something about’ the continuous movement is its rhythm, the pulse of that constant heartbeat. For Aristotle, ‘time’ is therefore still something without beginning or end, the ongoing.⁴²

This antique tradition of time as continuity, ongoing, breaks and changes in the new sense of time as temporality. Probably Iamblichus, in

³⁹ D.K. 12 B 1.

⁴⁰ D.K. 22 B 52.

⁴¹ Plato: *Timaeus* 37d, 47a-c and 37-38.

⁴² Aristotle: *Physica* Δ, (XI) 219 b 2. *Χρονος αριθμος κινήσεως*.

the beginning of the fourth century AD, was the first philosopher who thought about 'time'. Time separate from continuation and only temporarily between beginning and end. What remains of his treatises, however, is too fragmented to be able to form a definite opinion concerning this. Later on, it is in the works of the Neoplatonist Proclus and then Simplicius in his commentaries on texts by Aristotle, where this radically new view concerning 'time' appears. Time becomes independent and substantial. Time is separated from being duration and constancy; it is seen as the opposite of sustainability and eternity. The essence of 'time' is henceforth seen in its isolation from sustainability, as the opposition to eternity.

'Time' as temporality is not given its own weight, but is precisely that remarkable floating weightlessness, ephemeral and swift, passing too quickly. If there is anything of Augustine's philosophy that still has a hold on us, even in our everyday life, it is precisely this now incomprehensible 'time'. 'Time' became the expression, the symbol of our banishment, of our being cast out and lost. God and His Word last in eternity. 'Time' once did not exist, then 'is' for a short while, temporary, and in between nothing and again nothing, and then disappears into nothing, as if it had never been. Eternity 'is' always, time is virtually nothing. 'Time' 'is' only in the now and therefore restricted to hardly being.⁴³ The circle has been broken. Again and again, Augustine mockingly claims this: the pagans wandering around in a doomed, meaningless circle, discover nothing new under the sun, and fall into an endless and aimless repetition, remaining trapped in a never ending treadmill.

'Time' as temporality had been separated and even placed opposite the order of reality, the *kosmos*. The '*circuitus temporum*' was meaningless in Augustine's perception, and was broken; the circle was broken open and straightened by the *hapax*, the absolute '*novum*' of the incarnation of God. Apart from the disconnection from the ordered reality, 'time' was left to itself, separate from the whole, by disconnecting it from its natural foundation, *phusis*.

In the well-known passage about the '*Sol stabat, sed tempus ibat*',⁴⁴ Augustine separated the movement of nature, the tides, from the progress of time. Even if Spring and Autumn were reversed, if the sun were to stand still or the sleep of the seven martyrs continue for centuries, even if all natural movement came to a standstill, time would still be separate from all this and tick on.

⁴³ Aurelius Augustine: *Enarratio in Ps.* 101, 11, 10 en 14.

⁴⁴ *Conf.* XI 39, 23 ad *Josua* X 12 vv.

f. 'On a carpet of dead leaves'

The disconnection of time and nature, temporality and ordered continual reality, had profound consequences.

- a. In the aforementioned commentary on the psalms, Augustine cites Homer's words about the generations of people, passing by, dead leaves discarded by trees. Homer emphasises the comparison of the life of man with that of a tree; the leaves wither and fall, they sprout and unfold again. The ever constant alternation of disappearance and reappearance, growing and withering ensures the sustainability of nature and man. Augustine disturbs this natural cycle, this close connection between time and nature, and thus continues his text with: 'But behold His foot, You, God, walk on a carpet of dead leaves for ever.'⁴⁵
- b. *Chronos*, explained in Aristotle's *Physica* as a form of continuity within natural movement, is actually removed from nature by Augustine and is therefore rendered incomprehensible. Augustine, in his remark that he knows what time is, but when he starts thinking about it (outside its natural connection), it is completely incomprehensible – '*quid est ergo tempus? Si nemo ex me quaerat, scio; si quaerenti explicare velim, nescio*',⁴⁶ doesn't say anything about the essence of time, but everything about his ransacking of the fundamental ontological presuppositions, about the break with the tradition of antiquity.
- c. Time, as limited temporality, as passing, disappearing finiteness, now detached from the natural ordering of *kosmos* and *phusis*, is given a new location: '*In te, anime meus, tempora metior* – in you, my soul, I measure time.'⁴⁷ But where is actually that location when nature and order have disappeared? Where is it, when everything is detached from the physical reality, the *suspensio a corpore*, the unfastening of the body?⁴⁸ Where the measuring of time takes place, is that what has no place itself, '*nullo loco animam contineri*.'
- d. But also that which is being measured, time, does not appear to take place. The passing of time scatters into fragments – past, present, future – and even these parts shatters into immeasurable

⁴⁵ *Enarratio in Ps.* CII 14 en VI 146-149.

⁴⁶ *Conf.* XI 14, 17.

⁴⁷ *Conf.* XI 20, 26; 26, 33; 27, 36 and 28, 37.

⁴⁸ *De Ord.* V 19, 49.

moments: *'et ipsa una hora fugitivus particulis agitur'*, an hour too expires in onrushing particles'. And those moments too are gone immediately. The present changes so quickly into the future – *'raptim a futuro'* – that there is hardly any 'present' or 'now'. The past is gone forever, and is nowhere without location – the future has no location as yet, and the present is merely the continuous transition from this 'not yet' to the 'never and nowhere': *'praesens autem nullum habet spatium'* – the present does not find place.⁴⁹

- e. Even the opening to time, the measuring of it, Augustine actually slams shut behind him. What exists no longer, the past, cannot be measured, neither can the future that is not yet there. Only the present, the now, exists, but if that has any size at all, that 'size' is divisible and is therefore disintegrating into past and future. But, if the present is so small that it *'in nullas iam vel minutissimas mementorum partes dividi possit'* – cannot even be divided into the smallest particles of time,⁵⁰ then of course it is obviously not measurable either.⁵¹

It is possible that Augustine in his analysis of time,⁵¹ refers to a text of Basil of Caesarea.⁵² Basil too violently opposes the identification of (God created) time with the movements of the heavenly bodies or other natural processes of change. But it is mainly the master of thought, Plotinus, who here asserts his influence in a surprising way. Of course this great thinker was well aware of the fact – which very much agitated the church fathers – that time cannot be identified with natural movements. Aristotle did not do that either, even though he says that time is 'something attached to' movement, namely the number. Plotinus takes an important step forward – a step not taken by Augustine – by indicating that the essence of time cannot be detected by the measuring of time. Time is not a *'motus ipse'*, not a movement, but – and here he is diametrically opposed to Augustine – something that has place. The word used by Plotinus, and which was already a concept forged in the preceding comments on the texts of Aristotle, is *diastēma*. In Latin, that concept is awkwardly translated in two ways: *'spatium temporis'* or *'distentio'*.

Dia indicates 'opening' and 'being open', 'parting', 'separating', and 'offering room'. *To stēma* indicates the veins at each side of the main vein of a leaf. The meaning of *diastēma* is clearest when used by Plato as a

⁴⁹ *Conf.* XI 20, 15.

⁵⁰ *Conf.* XI 15, 20.

⁵¹ *Conf.* XI 23.

⁵² Basil of Caesarea: *Adversus Eunomium* I 21

musical term for what we now call an interval, the distance between two tones.⁵³ A tone is only a tone because of its distance from other tones. A tone, say a C, is only that tone because of the space it occupies, the distance it keeps from other tones, such as C-sharp or F.

Time, in the ontology of antiquity is the duration that is necessary to come to completion, ripeness, maturity. A seed must be given time in order to come to maturity. Time itself should also be given that kind of room, only then is it time. ● Only through time does something come to reality.

In his analyses Augustine emphasizes the lack of any room for time. He chooses the translation '*distentio*'. But whereas in the Greek concept the very space to come to fruition is indicated, '*distentio*' more or less means the opposite. *Distentio animi* is the scattering, the fragmenting, the falling apart of reality, the becoming unreal. Here Augustine drew a line. '*Inde mihi visum est nihil esse aliud tempus quam distentionem* – it seems to me that therefore time is nothing but expanse' – with which he takes over the term *diastēma* of Plotinus and instead of giving it the meaning of 'taking distance'. or 'that which leaves room in between' converts it to the opposite, to that which is scattered and lost in space. '*Sed cuius rei, nescio, et mirum, si non ipsius animi.* – But of what, I do not know, and it would surprise me if it was not of the spirit.'⁵⁴

But the spirit knows no space and leaves no space for time.

g. Temporal reality as shortcoming

Time (as duration) in the ontology of antiquity indicated what came in between which offered room for what was possible to become reality.

With Augustine 'Time' (as temporary) became unreal because it no longer belonged within ordered reality – *kosmos* -; it no longer took part within the natural movements – *phusis* – and had no place – '*nullo loco animam contineri*' – because it was only measured in the mind and measured time, however brief, never really existed. It is almost as though Augustine were almost desperately asking for longer duration, for time as something enduring and is unable to find it anywhere; on the contrary, he observes how it fragmentizes again and again in the minutest moments. '*Longum tempus nisi ex multis praeteriuntibus motibus, qui simul extendi non possunt, longum non fieri* – and observes that enduring time cannot be

⁵³ Plato: *Philebus* 17c.

⁵⁴ *Conf.* XI, 13, 11.

long but by passing by and not being able to remain present, enduring time does not exist.⁵⁵

The true enduring time, eternity, is God's eternity. Our human time will always be essentially too short. That deficiency has nothing to do with analysing time, which is not really Augustine's intention anyway, but with the loss of its ontological foundation.

Chronos is still a *meriston* for Aristotle, something that consists of parts. For Augustine these parts disintegrate and none of these parts has any length or duration. '*Nullum vero tempus totum esse praesens* – no time is completely present'. And the only 'time' which one could possibly call 'present' is that quick change from being the future to being in the past, '*praesens autem nullum habet spatium* – the present is actually nowhere'. The present or 'now' actually has no place; it does not take place.⁵⁶

After Augustine the focus on the essence of time is placed on its insubstantiality, its unreality, its not being, then its scarcely 'being' and that it immediately, at the same moment sinks back in never again being at all. Time is the constant loss of reality, the collapse of everything that can never hold its own and does not actually exist. Temporality is the race without winners, the hastening towards death.

Every day, every hour, every moment, once passed, is gone forever and lost in eternity. Every hour, month or year and all centuries, nothing of them will remain. Time is only there to break us and to let us disappear forever and to be lost in nothing.

Time, for Augustine's *transitus*, is passage and undoing. A threshold between nothing and nothing. Only with one fragile thread, memory, are we 'in the spirit' still connected with what has passed by for ever. We are on a path to being lost forever, unless He, the Eternal, holds us in His memory.

The flurry of questions with which Heidegger ends *Sein und Zeit*: '*Wie ist dieser Zeitigungsmodus der Zeitlichkeit zu interpretieren? Führt ein Weg von der ursprünglichen Zeit zum Sinn des Seins? Offenbart sich die Zeit selbst als Horizont des Seins?*' – How to interpret this kind of being in time, temporality? Is there a path that leads from original time to the meaning of being? Does time itself reveal itself as the horizon of being? Those questions do not exist for Augustine. 'Of our years, which are only fragments (torn and scattered)' nothing will remain.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ *Conf.* XI 13, 11 and 20, 15.

⁵⁶ *De civ. Dei* XIII 10.

⁵⁷ *Enar. in Ps.* CI 14.

Time as shreds of a mist that deprives us of the view of eternity, the Eternal. Time seen as 'in between', a threshold and obstacle. '*Ego in tempora dissilui*', 'I have been torn to pieces by time', says Augustine; who I am has fallen apart in the course of time.

'Distentio est vita mea', 'my life has fallen to pieces', I am only a shortcoming, '*distentus*'.⁵⁸ Stripped of any duration time is undone; it is the deficit of existence that can never remain because of time. In the silent eternity, for a moment, a tone sounded, not the melody of time. Silence was there and silence will be there again – forever. But, for the tiniest moment, there was that sound, the sound that fades away ...

⁵⁸ *Conf.* XI 29.

CHAPTER FIVE

AUGUSTINE ON TRUTH

a. ‘How deeply my soul yearned for you!’

‘O Veritas, veritas, quam intime medullae animi mei suspirabant tibi.’
‘O Truth, truth, how deeply the spirit of my soul yearned for you!’¹

Yearning and desire are the most characteristic features of Augustine’s thinking. His ‘philosophy of desire’, however, is fundamentally different from modern or postmodern attempts in that direction. For us desire means to strengthen our personality, to long to be more than we are.

For Augustine, *‘desiderium’* is the confession of a substantial loss. According to him our desire is ineffable as it is not aimed at the realization of our own possibilities, to the development of our personality, but to something entirely different: to Him. Attempts such as were made in the early twentieth century to turn Augustine into a psychologist are absurd. If he uses formulations like *‘Scis hoc, sed scire te nescis* – You know and yet you do not know that you know’,² he by no means gives an ‘exact definition of the unconscious’. He says that our consciousness falls short of the divine thinking and that the roots of our knowledge are not situated in ourselves but in the Spirit of God.

Well-known formulations, such as that man is immeasurably deep, *‘grande profundum’* and comparable to the unfathomable depths of the ocean, do not refer to any modern sense of self-awareness (such as is the case in Søren Kierkegaard and Karl Jaspers), but they indicate that Augustine considers himself to be a mere drop in the great divine sea. When at times Augustine appears to make quasi-modern statements such as ‘I have become problematic for myself’, then it is advisable to pay attention to the contexts. In this case³ he says he has become an enigma for himself ‘in Your eyes’. He then implores to be ‘redeemed and healed – *miserere et sana me*’, as he is well aware that the complicated and

¹ Augustine: *Confessiones* III 10.

² Augustine: *De Trinitate* XIV 7.

³ Augustine: *Confessiones* X 50.

enigmatic ‘personality’ is not a source of strength, but of weakness – *et ipse est languor meus*. It is merely a hindrance, an obstacle to reach as quickly as possible where he wants to be, together with his soul with God.

His desire for truth is the longing for God. The true philosopher longs for God, he is a lover of God – *verus philosophus amator Dei*.⁴ That appeal from the depth of his soul begin his *Soliloquies*: ‘I invoke You, true God (God in truth) – *Te invoco (...) Deus Veritas*.’⁵ God is not only the highest good – *summum bonum* – but also the supreme truth – *summa veritas*.

Augustine changes the character of truth. Superficially, it could be said that truth is brought under the yoke of authority. In that case, we can sum up the ancient tradition in the beautiful dictum ‘to love truth more than authority, Plato’. But on the other hand, there is the statement of Christ which annoyed Celsus, Porphyry and other philosophers: ‘I am the way, the truth and the life!’⁶ But within the tradition of antiquity existed an authority that ascertained what was truth and what was not. Truth in the antique tradition was subjected to the *phusis*, to nature and the understanding of it. In the late Neoplatonic and early Christian tradition truth became subjected to faith. What, for Plato and Aristotle was considered the most inferior kind of knowledge, trust, or belief without further reason, later on became *pistis*, a belief or blind trust in the highest form of truth.

At the beginning of the philosophical tradition about the search for truth lies a statement from Heraclitus: ‘(...) wisdom is to act and speak what is true, perceiving things according to their nature – *kai sophiè alètheia legein kai poiein kata phusin epaiontas*’⁷ The search for the truth is a search for insight into natural order and coherence. According to Herodotus’ report in the debates at the court of King Croesus the naturalness of the truth is looked for. Solon, the Athenian, points to the ‘cycle of everything that concerns mankind – *kuklos anthrōpeiōn prēgmatōn*’.⁸ Human destiny knows its ups and downs, its rise and decline just as the seasons and the tides. A person has to adapt to this natural course; if not he will be crushed under this wheel of time. What Croesus was reproached for is that he did not submit to that natural limitation, but exceeded the *horos*, the limit. It was an act of *hubris* that would lead to destruction.

⁴ Augustine: *De civitate Dei* VIII 1.

⁵ Augustine: *Soliloquia* I 1.

⁶ John: 14, 6.

⁷ D.K. 22 B 112.

⁸ Herodotus: *Historiae* I 32, 5-9.

This is also the theme of the dramatic discussions that King Darius holds with his advisors before he invades Greece. They cannot be understood as rational attempts to find the truth through the power of arguments. Herodotus introduces these conversations with a description of the *kuklos* of the Persians. The wheel of history of the Persians has been turning upwards since Cyrus but has reached its *akmè*, its peak with Darius. Failure and further decline, going down, is the natural course.

The conversations between the king and his counsellors are dramatic precisely because they always take place at the most successful period, the turning point. The same division of roles can be noticed again and again, roles that can also be seen in the tragedies among the actors and choristers: persons who want to take action and those who warn them against it.

Croesus, who was later warned by Solon warns Xerxes, who can look back on a string of successful victories and claim that he wants to put the crown on his endeavours; then there are his counsellors who believe that the top has been reached, and that therefore any further step will lead to disaster. Victory and decline lie side by side in this kind of discussion and nobody really knows how far the pendulum of fate has swung. All are well aware that any upward movement in the cycle will ultimately lead to an all-the-more-heavy and crushing defeat. That was also the reason, according to Polybius, that Scipio Africanus wept at the destruction of Carthage, thinking about the inescapable fate of Rome. This kind of old wisdom can at times still be found in our world, for instance in the idea that truth will prevail. The natural order will ultimately show the truth.

b. Truth and riposte

Against this vision of truth subjected to the yoke of nature the Sophists were the first to argue that truth should be strengthened by arguments. A truth that became more dependent on laws, agreements and idle gossip – forms of truth that could go against nature. This attempt by the sophists led to fierce opposition in Greek philosophy. Especially through the work of Plato and the political reaction after the defeat of Athens, the way in which sophists searched for the truth only became an undercurrent in thinking. Both the Academics, Plato's followers, and the followers of the Stoics remained faithful to the ideal of the coupling of *phusis* and *alètheia*. Being – *on* – and truth – *alèthes* – were impossible without each other. Not until the end of the fifth century AD would the truth be brought under another yoke.

With regard to this change it is instructive to consider some events that took place in the years before Augustine became Bishop of Hippo. In his

Confessiones he writes that ‘from Milan a letter was written to Symmachus, the *praefectus Urbis*, city prefect, of Rome asking whether a teacher in rhetoric could be sent and if so, could he be sent by the state mail service.’ In the autumn of AD 384 Symmachus sends Augustine, who was not yet 30 years of age and had been teaching in Rome for less than a year. During that autumn Symmachus’ conflict with the Bishop of Milan, Ambrose had reached its peak. It was like this: the majority of the Senate in Rome was non-Christian and was very much attached to the statue of Victoria in the Curia. Rome’s greatness was connected to it, they believed, and the sessions of the Senate were opened with sacrifices to her. However, the emperor and his Milanese court ordered the removal of the altar statue, an image that, such is the irony of history, had been presented by Constantine after his victory at the Pons Milvius, as a result of which the empire became Christian. The quarrel over this image was led on the Christian side by Ambrose and by Symmachus as representative of the senate. Ambrose reproached the tolerance of ‘pagan statuettes’. An emperor should be guided by *fides*, faith, and remove all superstitious nonsense. Symmachus, in his third *Relatio*, takes a human and tolerant stand against this kind of fanaticism. Ambrose calls on the emperors to be soldiers for God. Symmachus writes that ‘the mystery is so profound that no one road should be singled out to penetrate its depths. It is but one pathway of many – *Uno itinere non potest perveniri ad tam grande secretum*’.⁹

c. Wisdom and wistfulness

That is the voice of the past, filled with wistfulness and wisdom. For centuries, the philosophy of antiquity had been searching for the mysterious, the hidden unity and coherence behind this merely superficially observable reality that is contorted by our senses. That unity was the divine. But what we are able to see is only the confusion, the transient – the durable coherence, the true unity is hidden behind the reality. The divine is not visible; this world is only an obscure side of the divine light, the dust particles dancing in radiant divinity. Within the Neoplatonic tradition, the awareness of the divine unity, the One God, moved more and more away from this here and now, the debris and the dust. The Eternal and Infinite cannot be grasped, understood, seen, known or represented by finite, deficient mankind.

⁹ Aurelius Symmachus: *III Relatio*.

Plato had no problem considering the sun as an image for the infinite and divine Good. Paul wrote, ‘now we see (God) as through a dark mirror’. In Neoplatonic schools myths were considered as imperfect representations of the divine. That which escaped reason and insight could be approached by silent prayer. ‘Through the purity of silence and purity of heart we pay the homage owed to the divine – *dia de sugès katharas kai tòn peri autou katharòn ennoiòn thrèskeuomen auton*’.¹⁰ The distance between the Eternal, One God and our temporal, mortal dust is immeasurable and can only be expressed in silent reverence or stammering, in old obeisances or rites or in symbols and confused stories and myths. Longinianus, clinging to the pagan myths and rituals, wrote to Augustine that he had no problems considering this to be in accordance with his belief in the One, the God Creator.¹¹

It is the Neoplatonic attitude towards the divine that is expressed by Q. Aurelius Symmachus in his statement that the great mystery can be reached not by just one but by many paths. It is the ratio of polytheism; every nation and every time attempts to approach the eternal and unique divine in its own imperfect way. Each of those paths is totally inadequate, but to pretend to possess the ‘real’ truth and to know the only way towards it is an utter misunderstanding of the greatness of the divine.

But Ambrose chose just one way, one truth and wanted to forbid other opinions. That became manifest a year later, the first year Augustine was in Milan. (We often hardly realize what a tumultuous period this was, full of all sorts of upheavals.) These were the years in which Augustine was transformed from rhetorician to philosopher and Christian to boot. In AD 385, Ambrose repeatedly ignored repeated orders from the court and defied the will of the Empress by refusing to allow the Arians a church building in Milan. The situation was so volatile that Ambrose was besieged in the San Lorenzo by soldiers of the guard but he stubbornly continued to refuse ‘to defile God’s house’. It would not be the last conflict between the imperial court and the unyielding bishop. It is well-known that in the summer of AD 390 he refused to allow the emperor Theodosius to enter the basilica because of the murders in Thessalonica committed by order of the emperor.

More embarrassing is the so-called ‘Callinicum affair’. This had taken place two years earlier, in AD 388, when Augustine was living in Rome following the death of Monica. When in Callinicum, a town in Syria, Jews had mocked a couple of monks, a Christian rabble set fire to the

¹⁰ Porphyry: *De abstinentia* II 34.

¹¹ Augustine: *Epistula* CXXXIV.

synagogue. The tolerant emperor ordered the synagogue to be rebuilt at the expense of Christians. Ambrose opposed this imperial order and somehow managed to force the Emperor to give way. The arguments he used are fascinating; they were his way of dealing with the truth.

He allows himself to be motivated – as Christians have been doing ever since the first century AD – by anti-Semitic sentiments. He considers the construction of a synagogue by Christians as an act of blasphemy.¹² The maintenance of public order is wholly subordinate to that which the religious authority prescribes. Every consideration of humane and natural justice, the foundations of Roman law, is swept aside. Faith becomes the only criterion of justice. The Jewish faith is mere idolatry and therefore no harm is done when a synagogue is burned down. He even dares to challenge the authority by writing: ‘I declare that I personally set fire to the synagogue in order to destroy this place of godlessness and to fulfil the judgment of God.’¹³ It very much resembles Goebels appeal which caused the *Reichskristalnacht*.

Ambrose attempted to force the emperor to abandon the sense of justice for the sake of the *‘causa Dei’*. The ‘fear of the Lord’ must be the guiding principle for the imperial jurisdiction. Decisions in which justice is done to the Jews are deeds of apostasy which will be punished in eternity, he states in his fortieth and forty-first letters to Marcellina. In his *sermo contra Auxentium*, which was pronounced while the soldiers were surrounding his basilica, the theme of Christian humility and obedience are mentioned for the first time, to which even the highest worldly powers are subservient. This is the claim used later by Pope Gregory the Great of the ultimate power of the ‘servant of servants’.

Milan at the time Augustine spent the last of his formative years could be likened to Teheran during the eighties of the twentieth century. The natural sense of justice was forced to give way, as everything else, to faith, *fides*, Jews and pagans coming off quite badly. The somewhat melancholic but always mild third *Relatio* of Synmachus was ridiculed by Ambrose in his eighteenth letter and filled with fierce lashings out because of this ‘attachment to the ancient gods! Who actually saved the Capitol, your stupid gods or the cackling geese?’

This kind of fanaticism is in shrill contrast to the mild tone of Augustine in his masterpiece *De Civitate Dei*. There we find extensive quotations from the texts of Varro, and Augustine often gets carried away by his appreciation for what he, being a Catholic bishop, should actually brand as idolatry.

¹² Augustine: *Confessiones* III 10 and V 23, 13

¹³ Jerome: *Epistula* XL 10.

The revaluation of the truth, its reorientation from nature to *fides*, is also the background of the theological position of Augustine in his influential treatise on free will: *De libero arbitrio*. The human mind is in itself not dependent on nature but on the grace of God. Our intellectual knowledge of physical aspects, the '*ratio inferior*', is also extended owing to this grace, the contact with the '*rationes aeternae*', the eternal truths in the divine mind. The higher form of human consciousness, the '*ratio superior*', presupposes divine enlightenment as well. The influence of this position on the '*sola fides*' of the Reformation and the position of Luther – rather something that is against nature than against belief – is clear. Less clear is that only the words and not the thoughts of Augustine actually form the background to these discussions that took place a thousand years later. The remarkable reorientation of Augustine in his thinking about human feelings is obviously not the result of reading Kant and Nietzsche on this subject. When Augustine notes that feelings are not dependent on nature and the reality which surrounds us has nothing to do with the Kantian '*Ding an sich*' (thing-in-itself). When he says that feelings are 'states of the soul' and not interactions between mind and reality, but reciprocal connections between God and spirit, he is voicing the Neoplatonic foundation of philosophy – which has nothing to do with Nietzsche's point of view which seeks to detach subjective feelings from the objects.

d. The shift of truth

This 'shift of truth' was the cause of dramatic scenes and contradictions, but all the time we have to interpret them as Christian versus pagan and dying paganism, the last resistance against the rise of the new faith. There was a time that studies such as those of Gaston Boissier¹⁴ were popular, with Edward Gibbon very much in the background. But more recent scholars such as Peter Brown, Averil Cameron, Henry Chadwick or Garth Fowden rejected the basic concept of Gibbon and the '*Decline and Fall*', and considered Late Antiquity to be the time that the foundations were laid for European civilization. Certainly, it was a time of great change, but that essential took place between the main period antiquity itself and Late Antiquity. This was thought through by both pagan philosophers and Christian thinkers, such as Plotinus and Augustine, to name the most important. This is emphasized in this study, with the philosophy of time and temporality as its theme. Time as temporality, as finitude is

¹⁴ G. Boissier: *La fin du paganisme: étude sur les dernières luttes religieuses en Occident au quatrième siècle*. Paris 1891.

experienced and considered an encroachment on reality and that existence cannot uphold itself, that it breaks, breaks down, detracts from its value and reality.

This is a shift in both philosophy and reality, and a development in which the contrast between the views of Christians and the Neoplatonic pagan philosophers is not decisive. On the contrary, 'there is no difference' as Peter Brown dares to stipulate.

I would like to review the latter by reading texts in a different way, a manner derived from Nietzsche and especially from Foucault. Up to now we read them mainly in a dogmatic way, looking for philosophical or theological points of view. We observed how fiercely Symmachus and Ambrose oppose each other. Derision and contempt, intolerance and rejection is what strikes us. Ambrose ensured that Symmachus was not even admitted at court for an audience with the Emperor; he made sure that Symmachus had to remain a hundred miles from Milan and that the solemnly presented and reasonable request of the Senate conveyed by Symmachus was bluntly dismissed. At the same time these men were friends; they greatly appreciated each other and wrote each other letters full of respect and mutual understanding. The world in those days differed greatly from what the boring, fact-filled books that offer a general overview of that period want us to believe.

Take a look at the extensive correspondence of Jerome, an unprecedented document. His *patrona* was the wealthy Paula, belonging to the highest circles of Roman nobility. She renounced all her earthly possessions in order to follow Jerome to Bethlehem and live there in asceticism in a convent. But in Rome she was married to Julius Toxotius, a leading pagan, proud of his supposed descent from Aeneas. Their son Toxotius junior continued to worship the pagan gods, but he married Laeta, a Christian follower of Jerome. Laeta's parents themselves also constituted a mixed marriage – *imparia matrimonia*. Her mother had converted to the new faith but her father, Publius Caeonius Albinus, stuck faithfully to the old religion. Jerome respected him as a worthy and learned man.

In his letter to Laeta, written in the winter of AD 402/403, Jerome sketches a touching portrait of this old pagan priest Albinus, with his granddaughter on his lap who 'to his delight' is singing Christian songs and calling Hallelujah. 'Albinus, you may mock, call me stupid and crazy, but your children and grandchildren are Christian virgins. And look around you: the gold of the Capitol has become dull, all temples in Rome are covered with soot and cobwebs, the city trembles on its foundations, a crowd of people rush past the half-collapsed shrines to the graves of the

martyrs. If your mind is too feeble to come to the faith, let shame do it!’¹⁵ This ‘shameless’ man, who refused to repent, Albinus, was the friend and colleague of the pontifex Synmachus.

In Augustine’s correspondence we meet Laeta’s brother, Volusian. Unlike his sister, he remained faithful to the paganism of their father, the pontifex Albinus. He was educated in philosophy and clearly sees the absurdity of many Christian points of faith: how can a God come into the flesh and yet be universal ruler of the universe? In a letter full of respect for Augustine as a human being and especially for his erudition, Volusianus plied the bishop with this kind of question. Both were friends of Marcellinus, also a man who presented Augustine with numerous questions. Why is that god of the Jews so fickle with his people? Is what Jesus says in his Sermon on the Mount actually applicable when ruling the state? The tone of the letter is inquisitive and not at all biased.

Even in the correspondence between Augustine and the decidedly pagan-orientated philosopher Lampadius, who was briefly an urban prefect of Rome, Augustine shows remarkable understanding. Lampadius was a devoted adherent to astrology and predictions of the future. Augustine takes a lot of trouble in an attempt to change his mind. Why not a simple sneer, or merely point out the laws that forbade this ‘absurd pagan nonsense’? But in his youth, Augustine himself had looked for help in these *libris genethiacorum*, manuals to explain the omens.

In the above-mentioned letter from Jerome to Laeta, he triumphantly points out that ‘even in Rome’ the church is gaining the upper hand. ‘The sign of the cross decorates the banners of the soldiers, an image of the wooden cross adorns purple imperial cloaks (...)’ Then he proudly and mockingly mentions the destruction of the temple of Serapis in Alexandria and the – then the latest news – demolition of the great temple in Gaza by order of the emperor. After an inflammatory sermon by Augustine held around AD 400, temples are stormed and dozens of people die.¹⁶ The struggle for power is fiercely conducted, but that is a matter of ‘mob and monks’; philosophical conversations can be held at a higher level. Other forms of violence too are generally condemned by both parties of the correspondence. It is unclear, for example, who was responsible for the decree of AD 409 by which the ‘mathematicians’ were expelled from Rome and Italy. This was not aimed at who we consider mathematicians, but at people who pretended to be able to predict the future through calculations and omens. And the future was tricky, because a few months later Rome would be taken by the Goths. Ammianus Marcellinus derides

¹⁵ Jerome: *Epistula* CVII 1. Translation by the author.

¹⁶ Augustine: *Sermo* XXIV 6. See. R. Mac Mullen (1984) p. 95.

the decision: foreigners and scholars are driven out of the city because of a famine, but of course three thousand nude dancers from the circus and theatre are allowed to stay. Augustine also shows his irritation towards public amusement and admits that the churches become empty when the theatres fill up.

e. Wisdom and knowing

The brother of Laeta, Volusianus, himself a follower of the school of Epicurus seemingly unmoved by the fall of Rome in AD 410, sceptically wonders how a state is supposed to protect itself if it were to follow Christian morality: to turn the other cheek.¹⁷ Their mutual friend Marcellinus conveys this question to Augustine who gives a detailed answer in a letter. But he does not let it go; a few months later he starts his magisterial book on the same question: *The City of God*. From AD 413 to 426 he works on this attempt to shove aside all ancient philosophy and religion. When after one year and he is working on the fifth book, a fugitive Spaniard, Orosius comes to him.

Orosius had already experienced the horrors of the raids of the Vandals in his country of origin. As a kind of supplement to *De Civitate Dei*, Orosius wrote his *Historiarum adversum paganos libri VII*. It appeared in AD 418 and may possibly claim to be the first philosophy of history. Based on Augustine's philosophy, the history of antiquity is rewritten. Or rather, half of it, for the world of Orosius is only *Romanitas*. Greek history, its world and philosophy is hardly mentioned. The book had a lot of influence; in the seventh century King Alfred ordered it to be translated in Anglo-Saxon. The civilization of antiquity was done away with as being cruel and inhumane, one war following another until the moment that there was peace on earth during the reign of Augustus – just in time to reap the benefit of the coming of the redeemer.

For philosophy, this shift of truth had even greater consequences. Augustine believed he could connect it with the 'ascension of consciousness' – *paraklêtika tês dianoias* – as described by Plato.¹⁸ Probably he used that concept as it was explained by Plotinus in his *Enneads*.¹⁹ An explanation that Augustine came across in the texts of Plotinus' pupils which he had read himself, such as in Porphyry's. What, according to Plato is a form of education by an increasing understanding of reality, becomes with Plotinus

¹⁷ Aurelius Augustine: *Epistula* CXXXVI 2.

¹⁸ Plato: *Res publica* 524d, 521c.

¹⁹ Plotinus: *Enneads* I 3, 1.

and Augustine an *'exercitatio animi'* in which the soul escapes this unreal world by climbing up step by step to the real and eternal truth. The theme of the 'hierarchy of the barely being to the real being' entered philosophy. It would be developed further and further in scholasticism to the extent that it became clear at 'which stage of being' something like the virtue or beauty of an object could be situated.

What Plato saw as a sort of awakening of consciousness was turned by Augustine into a staircase that offered the soul a way out of this shadowy reality and a possibility of becoming free. What separates them is Platonic dualism, the two-world theory that Plato was not aware of and Augustine more or less took for granted. *'Ab inferioribus ad superiora'*, *'ab exterioribus ad interiora'*; we often encounter this kind of phrases in his work. *'To transcend from the corporeal to the incorporeal – a corporeis ad incorporalia transeamus'* he writes in *De Musica*.²⁰ Elsewhere he describes it as the transition from the visible to the invisible and from the temporal to eternal: *'progredi a visibilibus ad invisibilia et a temporalibus ad aeterna'*.²¹ What Augustine is looking for is a sustainable truth, *'stabilis Veritas'*²² or an eternal truth, *'aeterna Veritas'*. Reality seems to evaporate in this diligent search for something beyond the visible, temporal and corporeal. It also means, and certainly for the older Augustine, the Bishop of Hippo, that the riches of world and reality, nature and body, *kosmos* and *phusis* will disappear, the basic points of philosophical tradition of antiquity will be abandoned in the beginning of the Middle Ages. In *De Doctrina Christiana*, completed in AD 426, many things are rejected which were quite precious to Augustine in his youth: *'Music, the sound of the lute or other instruments? Mere toys! – Nugas. Paintings, sculpture? Unnecessary – Superflua'*.²³

Plato had divided the education to adulthood – *paideia* – between physical exercise and devotion to the Muses. – *gumnastikè kai mousikè*. Physical exercise had been already done away with by Augustine and was replaced by asceticism and exercises to remain chaste. And now also the muses were left behind. The elderly Augustine is becoming increasingly hostile to the diversions of his youth. *'Blessed is he who knows You, even if he does not know about anything else'* we already find in the *Confessiones*.²⁴ Inquisitiveness devaluated to curiosity, – *curiositas*. This

²⁰ Augustine: *De Musica* VI 2 (2)

²¹ Ibid: *De vera Religione* XXIX 52.

²² Ibid: *Confessiones* XI 8.

²³ Ibid: *De doctrina christiana* II 18 and II 25.

²⁴ Ibid: *Confessiones* V 3, 4.

word now received a pronounced negative connotation, the lustful consideration of the things of the flesh.²⁵

In *De Trinitate* Augustine elaborates the distinction between wisdom and knowing, '*sapientia*' and '*scientia*'. Repeatedly he gives a kind of definition: '*sapientia id est contemplatio veritatis*'; truly contemplating truth is true wisdom, giving peace and a likeness to God. This high ideal of wisdom as being deeply engaged in contemplation of the divine truth is not accessible in '*terra morientium*' on this earth of the dying. Contemplating God's truth is also quite different from being involved in '*rebus temporalibus et corporalibus*', in temporal and corporeal affairs. The changing, transient things, body and time are the subject of the '*scientia*'. That is not merely a lesser form of knowledge; it is often even being aware that this kind of wisdom is a hindrance and distracts the mind away from God and true wisdom. '*Scientia*' is '*cognitio historica*', to have knowledge of temporality and that is only useful if it does not lead to distraction from the real purpose of knowing, the '*sapientia*', which seeks God's eternal truth.

How far this distinction between wisdom and knowing has drifted away from the tradition of antiquity! The ten books of Plato's *Republic* teach neither neglect nor contempt of aspects of 'inferior knowledge.' Loving boys and manufacturing a table are not essential occupations during one's life, but they are sensible activities and they will stimulate the acquiring of further knowledge. Even though an archaic philosopher such as Heraclitus strongly appears to condemn the study of '*polumathiè* – many-things',²⁶ he does so only if it has to do with the accumulation, without insight, of incidental unconnected facts. In the very first fragment in which he uses the word 'philosophy', Heraclitus states that 'men who seek wisdom must inquire into many things.'²⁷

Instead of contemplating on worldly reality, Augustine emphasizes the authority of texts and, of course, especially the Holy Scripture. '*Auctoritas*' was also an important concept for Cicero and it would remain as such within the Latin philosophical tradition. But Cicero applies what he finds in the works of his Greek teachers in a remarkably original manner. Augustine, too, is a great and especially an original thinker, but he is limited in his thinking in a curious manner. In fact, he remained a '*grammaticus*' and teacher in rhetoric his entire life. This meant that he was dependent on texts and occupied with interpretations of these texts. Which is quite different from researching reality. Because of this his

²⁵ *Ibid.*: *Confessiones* X 34.

²⁶ D.K. 22 B 40.

²⁷ D.K. 22 B 35.

philosophy is based entirely on different premises than those of Aristotle or Seneca. A quick look at his texts indicate his predilection for definitions, divisions and subdivisions, enumerations and other procedures which are characteristic of a grammarian. It ensures that his texts are often quite clear and succinct, but it also turns them a bit schoolmasterly and they breathe the atmosphere of later medieval scholasticism.

The way in which Augustine read a text was totally different from the way in which we, for example, read a text by Sartre. His way of reading can be subdivided into four steps.

First of all there is the *'lectio'*. When Augustine observed for the first time how Ambrose of Milan read a text he was astonished: Ambrose did not have someone read out a text to him aloud; he read it himself, silently. During antiquity reading meant to have a slave or someone else recite a text aloud. In this way, when reading is more a form of recitation, it means that the text has to be understood and interpreted correctly in order to place the appropriate accents during the recitation. To start off with, this latter aspect was lacking for readers in antiquity, because in the text there were no punctuation marks at all. In most texts even each word had to be gathered individually and all words were strung together without any spacing between them. Reading in this manner entails making distinctions and pronouncing the differences.

The second step in his reading was the *'emendatio'*. We rarely realize that in antiquity reliable editions were lacking and that the reader had to decide himself which variant he preferred or which version he wanted to consider the original one. What in our scholarly texts is simply only referred to in the footnotes, was in antiquity a daily reality for a reader. In the library of his friend he would come across texts from Virgil or Plato that were different from his own. Time and again we read Cicero in his letters to Atticus and others asking for a more reliable text than the (for him) available editions.

The third step was the *'enarratio'*. That Augustine was approaching the Middle Ages is probably most obvious here.

His handling of texts in continuous comments shows an odd literal approach. In antiquity a free and even idiosyncratic way of dealing with exemplary texts was known. Augustine is constantly tinkering with his texts. 'The text is falling apart in his hands in isolated fragments,' according to Henri Marrou.²⁸ His grasp of the complete text seems to be missing and his search for the *'intentio scribentis'* disappears in a sort of

²⁸ H.I. Marrou: *Saint Augustin et la Fin de la Culture Antique*. Paris 1983, p. 25: *Le texte se dissocie entre ces mains en fragments isolés.*

word by word explanation. It is the method of his *De Magistro* and this would be the method copied in numerous commentaries and *Sententiae* during the Middle Ages.

Each word on its own— and here we come to the fourth step – gives rise to an ‘*explanatio*’, without any connection with the preceding or the following words. It reduces knowledge to an odd collection of facts. The coherence, the understanding and the grasp of the whole text falls apart into one isolated thing after another. This process mirrors the decay of the fundamental Greek ontological concepts of ordering, *kosmos*; coherence or connection, *logos* and balanced structure, *harmonia*. It is remarkably indicative that Augustine writes about our speaking and singing, of the words and sounds, that they ‘evaporate so rapidly; for when we speak, there is no place even for a second syllable, and when we sing, each note dies away in order to give room to the next.’²⁹ The nature of speech and melody, however, lay for more than a thousand years of ancient ontology, precisely in that context, the durability of the balanced order, the meaningful sense and the melody. But with Augustine, where the bond between nature and *kosmos* has disappeared, everything crumbles and the sustainable dissolves into a kind of atomism. His philosophy of time too has actually no sustainability, but the course of time rests on the point of one nail, just like a fakir. ‘*Praesentia*’ is only to be found in the extremely short-lived ‘now’: it is there for one brief and inanimate moment, a flash of reality ignited out of the nothingness of darkness coming over us and is immediately extinguished, forever, in all eternity, in the nothingness of what has gone by, the past. Being here, the presence, ‘*praesentia*’, passes us by. The philosophy of time as temporality and shortage is the basis of Augustine’s thinking.

f. Wisdom and wonder

The course of time, history, also crumbles in another way. Being a rhetorician Augustine uses all kinds of knowledge in the manner of ‘*exempla*’. Events are not recounted because of their own value or meaning and within the context in which they have ever taken place but are taken separately and used as precedents, examples and then as quotations. It is a fragmentation which becomes quite common in the medieval ‘*mirabilia*’, a sprinkling of miraculous facts. And of those amazing occurrences, Augustine had hardly seen any himself, coming, as they invariably did, from books. Augustine was certainly an erudite man,

²⁹ Augustine: *Epistula* CXXXVII 2

although his knowledge was of an exclusively literary interest; he knew many facts but had little scientific understanding. He had no knowledge of sciences such as geology, zoology, astronomy and other fields. He uses his awareness of facts, the *'exempla'* and *'mirabilia'* to point out the extraordinariness of reality. His knowledge approached that of the Middle Ages; it resembled that of Cassiodorus with his encyclopaedia.

What Augustine really lacked was a thorough philosophical education. With a great quantity of verbosity and unnecessary side-stepping he comes to technical definitions and details. Quite often these definitions are interpreted just a bit differently a few pages later in his works. Compared to Boethius, who was a far less original thinker, Augustine messes about insofar as logic is concerned. He frequently smuggles a statement into his text which he then attempts to prove circumstantially. He was and remained before anything else a grammarian and dialectician and is closer to medieval scholastics than to his Latin predecessors such as Cicero and Seneca or Greek contemporaries like the Cappadocians.

Together with Paul, Augustine is the one who shaped Western Christianity to an unparalleled extent. And yet, he was not a totally competent theologian either. Not until he was about forty years of age did he become a theologian by studying Plotinus and Porphyry in translation, the letters of Paul, also in translation, and through his contact with Ambrose of Milan. In the Latin West at that time the possibilities of a thorough schooling in theology were quite limited and when for the following forty years he was back in Africa as bishop in the harbour town of Hippo, he was mainly dependent on self-study. Just as Athens was the place for studying philosophy, Alexandria was, from the end of the second to the beginning of the fifth century, the main centre for theological study. In Edessa too flourished a *didaskaleion tōn hierōn logon* under Ephraim the Syrian. In the West there was practically nothing which could be compared with these schools.

For Nietzsche, Augustine was especially reprehensible because of his moralizing. He obviously did not read much of Augustine's work in order to arrive at such a judgment. The remarkable thing about Augustine, Plotinus and Porphyry and thus of the late Neoplatonics, is their lack of interest in morality. That was something that was not of any interest and lay outside philosophy. It was precisely one of the surprising changes within philosophical interest in Late Antiquity that the attention for morality which had been present since Socrates suddenly stopped. Augustine accepts some of Seneca's moral points of view, for example

and also the Emperor Marcus Aurelius, who were both concerned about morality and he states that they are important but leaves it at that. From Plotinus onwards morality disappeared and metaphysics arose.

There were many changes in Late Antiquity, and Augustine is a pre-eminent exponent of this process. Perhaps he and Nietzsche are similar in this respect. Both realized that they were at the end of a long tradition. Augustine knew that the foundations of the philosophy of antiquity had disappeared and that Christianity aspired to be a completely new philosophy. Both realized that the ice upon which the tradition rested was getting thin, that the capacity of the valid way of thinking was going to fail. 'Decadence' was the problem for both of them. Augustine realized that ancient philosophy was a thing of the past, that it had been abandoned and had nothing more to hope for. He was aware that he could no longer rely on the solid and durable foundation of *phusis* and *kosmos*, and that he no longer had his natural place within a certain order. He also realized that in nature not everything reached and aspired to completion, a meaningful maturity through preordained forces. And that even our own striving to perfection often goes wrong and falters.

'*Fac te ipse felicem* – reach for felicity,' Seneca wrote.³⁰ That was the tradition that foundered and would find its last representative in Pelagius and its passionate opponent in Augustine. Not by nature, nor by free will, nor by striving to perfection, but only through the grace of God can man achieve something. The original sin hinders the natural state of man, his potential for development. 'Free will has been lost – *Amissum est et liberum arbitrium*.'³¹

In the world of the elder Augustine, any light provided by the tradition of antiquity had gone out. 'But I have been divided amid times, the order of which I know not – *Ego in tempora dissilui, quorum ordinem nescio*'.³² The rationality of reality – the *Logos* according to the prologue of the Gospel of John – was Christ. But in the period between his resurrection and return the *Logos* did not reside here on earth. And his mercy too was unpredictable, his righteousness unfathomable, and his possible assistance 'not measurable according to our merits'. The elder Augustine actually merely clings to the hope that God's love, though completely undeserved, may even then ...

³⁰ Seneca: *Ad Lucilium Epistolae Morales* XXXI 5.

³¹ Augustine: *Enchiridion* XXX.

³² Augustine: *Confessiones* XI, 39.

g. Reality is shifting

The world had changed, reality had shifted and truth was defined differently. The anchors with which truth was secured differed in Greek philosophy from school to school and were now being lifted and secured elsewhere.

Socrates asks in Plato's *Republic*³³ for the criteria for a correct judgment. 'By experience – *empeiriai* – insight – *phronèsei* – and with arguments – *logōi* – we will come to it,' was the answer. For Epicurus and his followers there were three criteria for achieving truth: observations – *aisthèseis*, representations – *prolēpseis* – and feelings – *pathè*.

Aisthēsis and *prolēpsis* were also used by the Stoics, but their primary hallmark of truth – *kritèrion tēs alētheias* – was the *katalēptikè phantasia*. Cicero tries to translate this technical term with '*comprehensio facta sensibus* – concepts obtained through sensory impressions'.³⁴ In Posidonius, a fourth criterion applied by the Stoics appeared, the correct argumentation, *orthos logos*.

These criteria of truth had more to do with the facts according to the Stoics, and for the followers of Epicurus they were more a matter of opinion. But both schools were trying to determine in a reliable and even verifiable way what was true and what was false.

These philosophical attempts to establish criteria for the achievement of truth had a profound influence on other sciences. Medics such as Galen, the physician at the court of Hadrian, also tried to make the truth of their diagnoses dependent on criteria. A judgment can be made by '*inspectio*' – *autopsia* – by '*concordantia*' – *sumphōnia* – or by '*scientia et mos scriptoris*'. So, determining the truth of a judgment about a patient, a diagnosis, is personal research, the agreement with the opinion of others and the earlier acquired scientific insights written down in reliable descriptions. Only on the basis of these three '*signa*' can the truth be accepted, '*credendum est*'.

Once again things are turned around by Augustine. Firstly, '*credere*' believe, and only then the truth. Nothing is true without the truth, '*nihil verum sine veritate*'.³⁵ When he speaks about truth – *verum* – he invariably has the divine truth in mind – *ipsa Veritas*. And the only real truth is God himself, '*ipsa Veritas Deus est*.' True wisdom, '*sapientia*', is to merge or

³³ Plato: *Res publica* 583d 7-10.

³⁴ Cicero: *Academici libri* XI 42.

³⁵ Augustine: *Soliloquia* II 15-28.

to delve into the truth that is God himself, the highest good, '*summum bonum*'.

Truth cannot therefore be found in curiously observing this world, looking at the occurrences on this earth of. Truth in the proper sense can only be found by turning away from nature and *kosmos*, and look up to Him who truly is. True is only that which is, '*omnia vera sunt, in quantum sunt*'. And falsehood is to think that something is what it is not – '(...) *falsitas nisi (...) esse quod non est*'.³⁶

For Galen truth depended on temporary and accidental conditions, a fever or bowel movements. For Augustine truth is both implicit, unchanging and eternal. With this he laid the foundation for the well-known dictum of the scholastics: '*ens et verum convertuntur* – being and the truth are interchangeable'.

For Augustine, the truth almost literally vanishes from our lives and from the natural order. Only after the extreme, after death, does blissful life and enjoyment begin – *ipsa est beata vita, gaudere* – in the truth of God.³⁷ Truth for Augustine is to turn back to the source, the Divine source of all being and truth.

Truth – *alètheia* – for the Greeks was, perhaps, the unforgettable part of reality, the reality that had developed to full maturity. Not the germ but the bloom indicated the truth. Why, then, for Augustine was '*Veritas*' only reached when man entered once again into oblivion? Why was the truth no longer situated in the fruition? Why did the truth have to be found by this returning to the source instead of the emergence from the flowering?

'Truth' is still situated for Augustine in what is: 'True is, in my view, what is – *nam verum mihi videtur esse id quod est*'.³⁸

Every now and then, especially under the influence of Nietzsche, clear constructions of something like the history of truth are being made up. According to these constructions the 'original' truth, *alètheia*, would, shortly after it had been formulated by the Presocratics – of which only tiny fragments remain – be subjected by Plato 'under the yoke of the *idea*'. Because of this, the search for the essential, the question 'what is it? – *ti estin*;' is given priority. Subsequently a number of definitions were given which would largely be in line with each other: '*rectitudo*' at Anselmus, '*adaequatio*' for Thomas, '*certitudo*' for Descartes and '*Gewissheit*' for many nineteenth and twentieth century philosophers. In this sequence Augustine, situated between the philosophy of antiquity and scholasticism,

³⁶ Augustine: *Confessiones* VII 15-21.

³⁷ *Ibid*: X 22, 32.

³⁸ Augustine: *Soliloquia* II 5.

with his ideas concerning truth as an approach to and correspondence with the divine truth, is supposed to have fulfilled an important bridging role. However, the history of the truth knew too many pitfalls and faulty areas to be clearly displayed in such a simplified bird's eye view.

Whether or not the earliest Greek word for 'truth' *alètheia* denotes a kind of intensification, discernment, of reality remains, in the absence of sufficient data, rather debatable. Whether truth was originally the expression for the unfolding of the perfection of reality, or whether we are merely restricted to etymological connections which are of no relevance to philosophy, is also very unclear. The French word '*vrai*' is related to Dutch '*fraai*' meaning beautiful and in early Flemish texts meant both 'beautiful' and 'true'. 'Beauty is truth; truth beauty. That is all ye know on earth and all Ye need to know.'³⁹

In the works of Plato there are many instances where 'reality' – *ontōs on* – and 'truth' – *alèthōs on* – are used as being synonymous. Aristotle, in the sixth book of his *Metaphysica*,⁴⁰ on the other hand, says that the truth is not within objects and can therefore not be treated in the science of 'being'. According to him truth is a quality of knowledge; it is reached in true statements and understood by the spirit.

The result is that the tradition of antiquity gives us hints for what would later be called the ambiguity of the truth. Truth can be either truth-of-being or truth-of-knowledge. In other words, truth-of-object or truth-of-reason.

Most interesting of the *Quaestiones disputatae de veritate* by Thomas Aquinas is possibly that when he is discussing the well-known formula '*veritas adaequatio rei et intellectus*' he tries to bring together the truth-of-object and the truth-of-being. The real tension of this Thomist definition does not lie in our present-day matter of fact explanation that something is true if the idea we have formed in our mind of it corresponds to the thing as it really is. The tension arises from the philosophical background, the tension between the two inherited definitions: the old ones of Plato and Augustine and the renewed ones of Aristotle. Thomas seldom connects seamlessly with Aristotle, but he is an extremely original reader and thinker. After him, Hegel and others thought about the truth-of-being again in quite a different way, which makes the tracing of the history of this important concept is practically impossible as the various basic premise is rarely consistent. According to Thomas, 'being' can be understood in two ways. On the one hand 'being' can be restricted to a specific being. This

³⁹Keats: *Ode to a Grecian Urn*.

⁴⁰Aristotle: *Metaphysica* 1027b 25.

restriction occurs when one attempts to place 'being' within the grid of the ten categories of Aristotle. Here, therefore, within a tradition based on the ideas of Plato, the ten categories of Aristotle appear suddenly. The same categories which confused Augustine. On the other hand, Thomas also knows the general mode of being that comes to every being as being in itself, the *'modus generalis consequens omne ens'*. This mode of being evades, transcends even the restriction of the categories. This transcendence, would later in the philosophic tradition be indicated by the Spaniard Suarez, with the concept *'transcendentalia'*. Thomas, in *De veritate I 1*, explains that truth is one of the five *transcendentalia*, a transcendental determination of being. The word 'determination' is rather confusing because the strange thing about Thomas' line of thought is the break with both the old and the new tradition. When one has been educated in the tradition of Immanuel Kant it is very hard to understand what Thomas means by contrasting transcendental and categorical. According to Thomas, what transcends are precisely the determinations and limitations, the categories. Within the Kantian philosophical tradition this is impossible; it is like talking about a wooden piece of iron.

But also within the scholastic tradition in which Thomas belonged, is something he claims is totally original. For those who, for the sake of convenience, assume that all metaphysics speaks the language of Plato and that its characteristic is the *chōrismos*, the theory of two worlds that Plato is supposed to have created, this *'Zerkluftung'* as Heidegger calls it, will automatically hear the same thing all down the centuries. But is it true that dualism in this form was already shared by Plato? Is it not more likely that Plato merely knew one *kosmos*, one *physis*, and if there is any dichotomy at all, did this dichotomy not rather exist primarily in the idea that thinking goes beyond observation and that thinking transcends visible reality? Does not thoughtful contemplation lead to better insight and understanding than mere looking?

Is it not rather the case that this theory of two worlds which is supposed to have originated with Plato, in fact took shape with the very last of the Neoplatonics, with Porphyry, with Augustine? Was Augustine's pursuit of truth really transcendence, a going beyond all reality?

Wasn't it rather the power of attraction exerted on all souls to return *'ad Te'* to Him who *is* in truth? Do Augustine and Thomas actually believe in the same God when, according to Augustine the essence of God can be expressed within the first category – *ousia* – of Aristotle, whereas for Thomas God's essence precisely transcends the categorical limitation?

In the history of truth, in which truth and error are hopelessly intertwined, and where the definitions light up and fade in such a

confusing manner, is there any room at all for the '*stabilis Veritas*' or '*aeterna Veritas*' of Augustine? To what extent did the 'longing of the souls for the eternal truth', his drinking at the well of God's truth contribute to the drying up of this, our earthly reality? If this yearning for truth really is the bridge of time to eternity, what then is that eternity?

CHAPTER SIX

AUGUSTINE AND ETERNITY

a. Nature as itself

‘So in ancient times, when these words were not yet in use, they said ‘nature’ instead of ‘essence’ or ‘substance’ – *ita veteres qui haec nomina non habebant, pro essentia et substantia naturam vocabant.*¹ That is a sentence which I have quoted before. The phrase is quite remarkable because here the word ‘nature’, which from the earliest beginnings of Greek philosophy when the Ionians wrote tracts, right up to the Enneads of Plotinus, was the key concept – *Peri phuseōs*, is now in an almost careless way being pushed aside by Augustine.

The context of the sentence of Augustine is as follows: *‘Nam et ipsa natura nil est aliud, quam id quod intelligitur in suo generere aliquid esse.* – “Nature” means nothing else but that which is understood as ‘being’ that is in its own way.’ *Itaque ut nos jam novo nomine ab eo quod est esse, vocamus essentiam, quam plurimumque substantiam etiam nominamus: ita veteres* (etc.). From this originates the new word that we use now, from ‘esse’ namely derives the word for being – *essentia* – or, as we usually say, ‘*substantia*’, but in ancient times when these words were not yet in use, they said ‘nature’ instead of ‘essence’ or ‘substance’.

Here, tucked away in a seldom read diatribe read against the ethics of a North African heretical sect, something quite remarkable occurs. The lamps of the philosophy of antiquity burn out. Here, in a few sentences enough happens to elicit quite a few chapters of comments. But I must limit myself. In the first place, it is clear why it is so easy for Augustine to shove aside the core concept of the ontological tradition of antiquity: for him it had become an empty shell. Even a superficial orientation in the unfolding of a concept such as is given in the overview by André Lalande in his excellent *Vocabulaire technique et critique de la philosophie* comes up with eleven different meanings of the word ‘nature’. In his *Physica B*, Aristotle gives a (by no means simple) reflection of the concept *phusis*.

¹ Augustine: *De Moribus Ecclesiae* (...) *Manichaeorum* II 2.

Fragments of this still echo, bearing in mind the views of Augustine seven centuries later. Aristotle states that the being of the *phusis* does not need to be shown as it will always shows itself.²

It is as if, centuries later, we hear a vague whispering in the far distance: ‘... *in suo genere*’. But it is not the too faint rustling in the background that indicates the last links of a tradition; above all it is the resolute manner in which Augustine is tearing something apart. The richness of the *phusis*, the thought and interpretation by Aristotle at length, is dismissed here in a definition that merely leaves the empty shell and in which it is easy to miss its disappearance in favour of a new concept, ‘*novo nomine*’. Is this a necessary change and does it provide a better method of gaining insight into the secrets of birth and growth?

An attempt to summarize in a few words what Aristotle wants to bring to fruition in his analysis of the *phusis* runs the same risk of juggling with empty concepts, mere words. The all too meagre description that I will offer does not pretend to provide an overview of the problem; it is more an attempt to indicate that somewhere, far away, in the landscape of philosophy everything is in motion and shifts fundamentally. An attempt to understand the history of thought is as difficult as trying to be in charge of an ancient battle. Noises coming from all sides, contradictory reports and sudden attacks and even afterwards there is no agreement concerning the where, why, when, what and how. The ‘great warlords’ in philosophy, such as Spengler with his *Untergang des Abendlandes*; philosophers like Georg Steiner, are often more concerned with their own kind of model railway than with any understanding of broken reality. The way in which Stendhal describes the confusing course of the battle at Waterloo is more instructive for someone who wants to write a ‘conceptual history’.

b. From rough nature to individuality

Contrary to what is customary today, the congregation would have remained standing, full of reverence and Augustine would have sat down to address the faithful. Sometimes, as in his sermons held in Carthage, this led to loud acclamations of joy and support, or the basilica became empty because the games in the circus had started. His sermons were samples of rhetorical ability, with gripping images and stories. All the time Augustine seeks support in the word of God and in his sermons he explains what he means and what his intention is. Here Mary and Martha are taken as the starting point.³ Who has chosen the best role? The one who works or the

² Aristotle: *Physica* 193a 3.

³ Luke 10, 38-42. Augustine: *Sermones ad Populum* CIV.

one who prays? Augustine really does not want to make a choice and holds to the *ora et labora*. Finally, he explains that it is not our endeavours that count, but the grace of God. Paul writes: ‘So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.’⁴ An indicative text, not the toil and labour of man, nor the *phusis* either, birth and growth, but *ho auxanōn theos*: ‘it is God who gives growth’. Nothing grows of its own accord; it is the divine force that permits growth and prosperity. This growing, this giving growth is, in Paul’s text, not related to nature or natural growth, but in missionary work and in the organization of the congregations of the faithful. That too is not a product, a work of art through human skills, nor a result of the vigour of the force of growth hidden in nature – but is exclusively due to the grace of God.

To Aristotle *phusis* may, in the first place, have meant something like ‘growth’. Just as the word ‘*phusis*’ is related to *phuaō*, to grow, to flourish, ‘*natura*’ is related to ‘*natus*’, being born. *Phusis* in this sense mainly indicates something that has the potential to appear, to give birth and to grow up, to flourish. *Phusis* is the growing force – *vis medicatrix naturae*. It is only after this primary meaning that the product of that potential, that which is produced, is also contained within this word. The word solidified, as it were, from the power to produce to what has been produced. But even in the latter sense the first meaning continues to vibrate: *phusis* is not nature as such, but *living* nature, the labouring and sprouting nature.

At times it is as if the Presocratic Heraclitus is especially surprised about the fallow field in winter that appears dead and deserted but of which he realizes that life and the vigour is vibrating in it and will soon, with the first days of spring, will germinate with miraculous rapidity. sprouting and waxing and will then reach its full maturity. Aristotle seems to have less interest in that hidden power, but concentrates much more on the observable active power. Later on, within the course of philosophy, philosophers – meditating on ‘*natura*’ and ‘*creatura*’ – observe especially the crops in the field, and finally, in the autumn of the philosophy of antiquity, does Augustine merely direct his attention to the withered leaves. Growing has been halted and the power to come to maturity has been lost and therefore little else remains but to cut off the dead branches and to graft on new shoots which are known to us as ‘*substantia*’ and ‘*essentia*’.

The transition which is made here, from ‘nature’, ‘*natura*’ to individuality ‘*substantia*’ is a confirmation of something that is actually already a fait accompli. This is because the definition that Augustine gives in the above-mentioned sentence of ‘*natura*’ is insurmountably remote

⁴ *I Corinthians* 3, 7.

from the exposition given by Aristotle in his *Physica B* about *phusis*. It is actually much closer to the definition given by Spinoza in his *Ethics* of ‘*substantia*’: ‘that which is in itself and is understood by itself – *quod in se est, et per se concipitur*.’⁵

The ease with which Augustine subsequently passes from ‘being’ – ‘*esse*’ to ‘essence’ – ‘*essentia*’, obscures the fact that the original verbal character of ‘being’ was lost during this transition.

Anyone who has studied the eight-hundred-year old struggle of thinking through the concepts ‘*phusis*’, ‘*ousia*’ and ‘*hypostasis*’ and the relationships between them, will have been stunned by the laconic statement that ‘those words were not yet in use in ancient times’. The way in which core concepts such as ‘*natura*’, ‘*essentia*’ and ‘*substantia*’ are declared to have all more or less the same meaning is equally baffling.

Living nature is not being replaced by man, machine, consciousness or anything else that is topical in present day philosophy. What does shift is made quite clear through the following phrase: ‘What is a grander and more beautiful spectacle, where in a way human reason can converse better with the nature of all that exists, than that place where the seeds have been strewn, the twigs stuck in the ground, the saplings and cuttings planted, and where man questions nature about the power of root and seed, and what that power can and cannot do and from where it derives this ability, that enables the invisible, inner geometrical structure to form and what human endeavour adds to it. And that man may learn through these reflections that neither he who plants, nor he who looks after them means anything, but that it is God who gives growth. For also that extra working care that comes with it is done by a being that God created and who is guided and directed by Him invisibly.’⁶

Neither man, nor his mind nor his hand, let alone his machinery, lends growth to what is flourishing but neither does nature; only the grace of God imparts growth. Everything has been done for the sake of the One.

Augustine’s sentence about growth given by God is an almost literal quotation from Paul. But the shift in meaning is quite remarkable. Paul is here writing about his work and that of other apostles and characterizes it by saying that they are all co-workers of God. This is a well-known expression of the Stoics. Marcus Aurelius speaks about ‘workers and co-workers in the cosmic ordering’. The meaning then lies in the idea that the work by human hands is only done and has value and meaning because our activities conform to and fit within the cosmic harmony. Without this coherence, our actions would be in vain and actually impossible. Although

⁵ Spinoza: *Ethica* I def. III.

⁶ Augustine: *De Genesi ad litteram* VIII 8, 15-16.

Paul and Augustine use the same words, they mean the opposite. For Paul, just as for the Marcus Aurelius, man is involved within a cosmic collaboration. For Augustine, both man and nature are cut off and it is only God who gives growth. The collaboration has disappeared. God is the only creator, man and world are merely creations by His hand. The cooperation is broken because the *kosmos* is broken. God, man, world and nature are no longer interconnected and intertwined in a reciprocal and ever-recurring ordering. The cycle has been broken and all that is, is merely temporary. And time, other than is the case within the cycle of durability, has a beginning and an end, creation and judgment. Time is like a thread, held at both ends by Him who himself is outside of time.

The disconnection that was accomplished by Augustine between the abandoned foundations of ancient ontology and his new vision of philosophy, based on Plotinus and Porphyry, comes to light when, with this in mind, we look at his book on order, the ordered, or, as the expression later on became, the ordained reality: *De Ordine*. As a true rhetorician, Augustine says he did not pay attention to what Ambrose said when he first heard him in Milan, but payed attention to how he formulated what he wanted to say. It is one of the many comments that Nietzsche would later on repeat and which we will use in order to get a better hold on the philosopher's intentions. After all, how much effort do philosophers put into formulating their conclusions or derived truths and how little do they speak about their starting points and the unspoken presumptions on which so many of their ideas are dependent!

In the second book of *De Ordine* the question is raised as to whether there is any order and regularity in this world or – as this did become the key question since Seneca – whether the '*providenta Dei*', the divine providence, is demonstrable in the muddled affairs of the world and in the capricious fate of man. The virtue of caution – *prudentia* – is connected with this *providentia*, the ability to foretell. It is the question that was raised of old concerning the *kosmos*. The question was formulated correctly in the first paragraphs, but here in this second book hardly any progress is made on reaching an answer. When one counts carefully, it will be noted that the question was raised four times in succession and that all four of these attempts to demonstrate an order in the world – which Seneca in his *De providentia* was still able to do with ease and providing many examples – failed each time. The conversation seems to run to a dead end and Augustine does not offer a way out.

When Augustine finally intervenes, it is to say that all these attempts are doomed to lead nowhere. It is, he says, like trying to read without

understanding the letters of the alphabet.⁷ One has to start right at the beginning and that cannot be done by wandering around in the confusing affairs of this world and by observing the actions of people. The unity and meaningfulness cannot be discovered there unless one first looks at the only real unity, Providence itself.

Order and method cannot be found in *'distentio anima'*, in the scatterings and whirling of our minds, without any guidance in 'our years, which are but fragments'. 'Ordo' or *'providentia'* is not to be found in the world, nor in the progress of time, nor in nature and neither in mankind until the confusion of the times have been cleared away and the clearness of the Eternal can be seen. 'Ordo' cannot be identified in *phusis* or *kosmos*, and providence can only be seen from a position beyond the here and now from a metaphysical point of view. The sense, meaning and purpose of everything that takes place in daily reality we are unable to fathom. Only He who oversees everything and has created and arranged it Himself understands all. The Eternal knows the meaning of time; our wandering in time is being lost in time. The times are obscure; transparency and clarity can only be given in the fullness of eternity.

What is eternity? the philosopher will ask. Who is the Eternal? the Christian will ask.

At first glance it may seem that Augustine in his *Soliloquia* and *De immortalitate animae* in dealing with eternity and the immortality of the soul uses the same arguments that Plato used in his *Phaedo*. However, both these writings by Augustine are juvenile works, probably dating from the winter of AD 386. What is decisive, however, is that Augustine, after his conversion, first to late Neoplatonism and later on to Christian Neoplatonism, no longer uses Plato's arguments. 'Time', as we saw in an earlier chapter, was for Augustine, as was the case with Jamblichus and Plotinus, something completely different than it was for Plato, and because of this, eternity was essentially different as well. That is evident from the conversation with his mother Monica about eternity. A marvellous dialogue.

c. Reaching immortality through death

In the account given by Plato of the last dialogues of Socrates before his death mention is made about the survival of the soul. As early as in his *Meno*, Plato had attempted to bring up this subject. In that early dialogue, however, he restricts himself to vaguely mysterious allusions. In the

⁷ Augustine: *De Ordine* II 7 (24).

Phaedrus he then tries to raise this subject based on myths. Not until the *Phaedo* – one of the greatest texts of philosophy – is he able to approach the problem of the immortality of the soul with philosophical arguments.

The first line of reasoning in this dialogue undoubtedly has its roots deep in Presocratic thinking and probably even in the preceding silent millennia. Socrates presents numerous contradictions: sleeping and waking, day and night, winter and summer, life and death. Then he observes how each counterpart arises from its counterpart. Through sleeping we wake up again and by being awake, we become sleepy again. The tides of the sea follow each other like the days and the nights. There seems to be only one exception in this series, says Socrates. The fact that death results from being alive is evident, but would it then not be the case that the opposite is also true, that death resurrects life? ‘Would nature fail at this point?’⁸ That is completely unacceptable for Socrates, and therefore he decides that the soul will also revive after dying.

This philosophical proof is of course based on the idea that all natural things come alive again in order to complete their cycle. Plato admits this himself by taking away the ‘additional’ proofs as derived from the first ‘proof’.

Added to this is the proof that souls are eternal and already existed elsewhere before the existence in our body, as they also go elsewhere after our death. The flesh dies, the souls remain. As the soul had existed previously, it brings the knowledge of this existence with it and we can share this knowledge through memory. The highest knowledge, that of the *idea*, can only be attained by means of *anamnèse*, by bringing to mind what the soul provides us with from elsewhere. All these thoughts, which for Plato are fundamental, are based on the reciprocity, the cycle, of counterparts and are explicitly referred to in the dialogue.⁹

In the dialogue, Socrates does not only trace the idea of the remembering of the truth back to that of the cycle of the opposites, he also ironically takes some distance from the doctrine of *anamnèse* while at the same time emphasizing the fundamental importance of its basis, the *kosmos*, the balanced coherence of the opposites. In the following philosophical tradition, the opposite can be shown. The *kosmos* disappeared with the later Neoplatonics; even the word disappeared. Beginning with Proclus, the smooth and nondescript word ‘*taxis*’ ‘regularity’ was used. Not until the Florentine Renaissance was the idea that knowledge is remembering voiced again.

⁸ Plato: *Phaedo* 71e.

⁹ *Ibid*: 77a.

Also the second addition, in which the agreement between soul and idea is discussed, is based on the fundamental belief in orderly reality. Socrates then tries to counter the criticism of Cebes and Simmias of this presupposed coherence by once again referring to the idea on which it is based, the reciprocity of counterparts.¹⁰ According to Plato, the eternity of souls rests on ‘the whole of nature – *tēs tou holou phuseōs*.’¹¹

This durability or eternity is also pointed out again and again by Aristotle. The *kosmos*, this world order, has neither beginning nor end, and is durable or eternal. Man has, like everything else, a natural place, a place where he belongs within this organization. Man also has natural durability and sustainability precisely because he dies. As a *microkosmos* he is included in the great cycle. Births are counterbalanced by dying, death provides space for new life. The world order of all alternating things, whereby the one prevalence gives rise to its own counterpart and because of this the equilibrium of the whole is maintained, is ‘unperishable, permanently enduring – *sumpan aphtharton di’ aiōnos*’.¹² This foundation of the ontology of antiquity, in whatever form, remained valid until the second century of our era. Marcus Aurelius cherished the certainty that ‘nobody will fall out of the *kosmos* even when he dies – *exo tou kosmou to apothanon ou piptei*’.¹³

The meanings of the words change faster than the users usually realized, but the fundamental beliefs are more sustainable. In the oldest philosophical text the durability or eternity of the order of the world is mentioned. The expression used by Anaximander, ‘all heavens and the worlds therein – *kai tous en autois kosmous*’¹⁴ was, to Aristotle, already an incomprehensible phrase. Heraclitus mentions ‘this world order – *kosmon tonde* – the same of all (...), an ever living fire, kindling in measures and going out in the same measures.’¹⁵ Aristotle repeatedly refers to the eternity of the world’. In Paul’s letters the same words appear, but the meaning has become almost completely different. The Greek philosopher would not have understood Paul’s letters correctly. They used the same word, but its fundamental meaning had changed. The meaning of the concept *kosmos* shifted in a threefold way. In the first place it shifted more into being a time-related concept instead of a spatial one. Aristotle would

¹⁰ Ibid: 105b ff.

¹¹ Plato: *Phaedrus* 270c.

¹² (Pseudo) Aristotle: *De mundo* 397b 2.

¹³ Marcus Aurelius: *Ad se ipsum* VIII 18.

¹⁴ D.K. 12 A 9 and B 1.

¹⁵ D.K. 22 B 30-31.

have pointed to the firmament, but Paul explains *to schema tou kosmou toutou*¹⁶ as ‘the present-day evil world’, *aiōn ho enestōs ponēros*.

Secondly – from the point of view of Aristotle (but for Paul it would take first place) the *kosmos* came to be conceived as creation, *ktisis*, fabricated by God’s hand.

The third change follows from the second: *kosmos* and *theos* become opposites. For (pseudo) Aristotle, in his letter to Alexander known as *Peri kosmou*, the divine is the keystone of the ordering of reality.¹⁷ In the *Letter to the Romans* – of the equally ‘pseudo’ – Paul, God and the world come to face each other and God will judge this *kosmos*.¹⁸

For Paul, the meaning of one of the most fundamental notions of Greek ontology shifts almost to its opposite when he emphatically states: ‘For the present form of this world is passing away – *paragei (...) to schema tou kosmou toutou*.’¹⁹

The fundamental ontology that prevailed in the philosophy of antiquity right from the Presocratics, Plato and Aristotle, the Stoics and for Marcus Aurelius began to fade during the fourth century AD and then disappeared altogether soon afterwards. Porphyry, Augustine and other late Neoplatonics also remained adamant about the immortality of the soul. Indeed, immortality and eternity at no other period dominated the thoughts to the extent as it did during the fourth and fifth centuries. But the foundation on which it was based had gone. Eternity seems to be afloat. To put it in a more philosophical terminology: eternity, the eternity of God, God himself, the immortality of the soul are becoming ‘transcendental’ concepts, transcending the foundations from which they themselves ones originated.

In AD 380 – when Augustine is still a rhetor in Carthage – Gregory of Nyssa returns to his dying sister Macrina. They have their first conversation the day before she dies, and Macrina is enraptured by the subject. They talk about the soul and ‘why it lives in the flesh, why man must die and from where death comes, and about the restoration of it to life – *kai tis hē apo toutou pros tēn zōēn palin analysis*.’

This conversation was later on published separately by Gregory, it is the well-known Conversation about soul and resurrection – *Peri psychēs kai anastaseōs*. Its train of thought, the format and content are just like the works of the young Augustine, *Soliloquia* and *De immortalitate animae*, written six or seven years afterwards, entirely based on the model of

¹⁶ *Galatians* 1,4.

¹⁷ (Pseudo)Aristotle: *Demostilo* 399b30.

¹⁸ *Romans* 3, 6.

¹⁹ *I Corinthians* 7,31b.

Plato's *Phaedo*. But Macrina uses – possibly the first one to do so – definite and decisively different arguments than Plato did.

For Macrina the 'natural' reasons are no longer valid and neither does the cycle – of the times and the order of reality – have any evidential value. On the contrary, for her, even *kosmos* and *phusis* have lost their coherence and have split into two spheres: the divine and the human, heaven and earth. The soul is immaterial and reasoning. That is why it participates in God's eternity and is therefore immortal. Just for a short period, however, the soul inhabits the flesh. It is temporarily obliged to live 'through the flesh – *dia sarkos*'. Upon the death of the flesh, the soul comes back to life again – *pros tèn zōèn* – and returns – *palin*, free from its burden – *analuō*.

In doing so, she is convinced, in the same way as her indirect teacher Origen believed, to follow Plato. But in this line of thought, nature and the cycle of time and forms as well as the ordering of reality instead of being a foundation, merely a burden and hindrance. It is a temporary delay from which we must be released. Eternity and immortality of the soul are not natural, nor 'in order'; they depend solely and entirely on the Eternal self. For the tradition of antiquity, the cycle of birth and death on earth offered sufficient grounds for the realization of the permanence and sustainability of the mortals. The generations of men are like leaves on an evergreen tree. The tree remains alive precisely because the leaves wither and let go in order to let the buds sprout anew. Heraclitus says: 'Once they are born they want to live and have their share of death, to regain strength and to conceive children, so death does not die out.' Seven centuries later, Clement Alexandrinus, who preserved this fragment for us, no longer understood what Heraclitus meant with this natural round dance of life and death and coming to life again. He comments: 'Heraclitus seems to regard birth as a misfortune, for he says (...)'. But how could Clement possibly have understood Heraclitus' meaning? He was already thinking in the same tradition as Macrina and Origen: 'To be born on this earth is the principle of death. – *Hè epi gès genesis archè thanatos estin.*'

These fractures in the history of thought are irreparable and yet, they are seldom observed. Sometimes the fracture surfaces may seem deceptively similar. It is the words that lead to that impression. After all, we can come across opinions through the centuries that seem to express the same thoughts in almost the same phrases. In Cicero's *Cato maior de senectute*, for example, also mention is made about 'the soul that is imprisoned in the body' and 'wants to escape' to 'the real life that will be only after death'.²⁰ In the same passage we read that the soul is 'of

²⁰ Cicero: *Cato maior de senectute* XXI 77.

heavenly origin – *est enim animus caelestis ex altissimo domicilio depressus*. The soul, however, is of heavenly origin but was taken down from that high dwelling and brought down to earth, to a place which is almost the opposite of its divine and sustainable nature.’ Macrina would also have read with assent a bit further about life that ‘knows no home but only a place to spend the night – *ex hospitio, non tanquam domo*’ – for ‘nature gave us no abode in this life – *natura (...) non habitandi dedit*.²¹ It is in this conversation too that Cicero puts in the mouth of Cato, Plato’s *Phaedo* is constantly present.

Right at the first argument to prove the eternity and immortality of the soul, Cato even explicitly refers to Socrates, who after all believed that the souls originated ‘from the divine All-soul – *ex universa mente divina*.²² His second argument is more typical of Cicero himself: the value of man is too high to assume that all this will ultimately come to nothing. This opinion of ‘*humanitas*’ did not yet exist at all for Plato.

The third argument is derived from Aristotle. Everything is in motion and the souls are the divine sparks that ignite this fervour.

A fourth argument originates again from natural philosophy. The soul is indivisible, a homogeneous unit. Therefore it cannot dissolve into parts like the body does and it is thus immortal.

In the fifth argument Plato is mentioned again. Here the idea from the *Phaedo* comes forward about the knowledge which the soul is supposed to have brought with it from before being born into this life. Eternal fame is mentioned as the sixth and final argument, a kind of political afterthought: why else would one make an effort for the public cause?

This is a decisively different way of thinking than in the conversation conducted by Macrina and Gregory of Nyssa, though the *Phaedo* echoes in both conversations. Cicero begins by pointing out that everything knows its natural place and time. To resist the natural order is as absurd for him as to revolt against the gods.²³ All views on the course of life, voiced here by Cato in this work, are based on nature. In old age, the desires have to die off in a natural way. As life naturally gives shape to the body, so it also gradually disintegrates again in a natural manner. When Cato talks about his life in the country, about agriculture, planting and taking care of trees, it is no elaborate digression, but rather an essential part of the conversation. Also the quotations from Xenophon, about the aged king Cyrus, provide parallels between Cyrus’ life and Cato’s personal planting, pruning and grafting in his tree nursery. The cycle of life and death, birth,

²¹ *Ibid.*: XXIII 82.

²² *Ibid.*: XXI 78.

²³ *Ibid.*: II 5.

decline and the certainty ‘that I will see the highly esteemed fathers again’ find their basis in the natural order and the cycle of the tides of flowering and decaying, in blossoming and withering. But Macrina no longer mentions precisely those natural grounds for permanence, sustainability or eternity. Her eternity is not of this world, it does not depend on time and tide, nature or the noble deeds of people, or fame or whatever; it only depends on one thread: the eternity of the Eternal.

d. The last conversation

In the conversation between Augustine and his mother Monica, staring out of the window in a tavern in Ostia, the dialogue between Socrates and Phaedo, the old Cato and his audience, Macrina and her brother, was continuing. But more than that, that conversation was concluded, as it were, because the old arguments concerning the eternity or immortality of the soul are contradicted and silenced. The basic points of Augustine’s philosophy are taken to their full extent here by his mother.

Her son shoved aside the concept and even the word ‘*natura*’. As far as the cycle of the kosmos is concerned he derides it by using a quotation from the psalms ‘the heathens walk around in circles – *in circuitu impii ambulant*’. The interaction between life and death, the tension between rise and decline leads only to exhaustion and death for Augustine. The only hope of redemption from this hopeless circle rests in the ‘*novum*’ of the resurrection from the dead. Everything else does not apply to him. ‘You made us for yourself – *fecisti nos ad Te*’, as can be read in the first lines of his *Confessiones*.

In this last conversation with his mother, with her from whom he was born, the merging of the soul with God is described. In most editions one will find in the footnotes meticulous references to texts from the Bible. However, in this conversation with Monica references to the *Enneads* of Plotinus would be more apposite. For what is described here is an entanglement of prayer, philosophical conversation and a form of ecstasy. At its culmination words fail, and yet the words in this conversation are so poignant that the Latin text must resound.

‘We would then, speak together, gently, forgetting all that lay behind us,’ says Augustine. Perhaps this poignant conversation really did take place in the autumn of AD 387 in Ostia near the spot close to the theatre where nowadays the text is fixed to the wall of the remains of a Roman inn. But as far as the figure of Monica with whom Augustine enters into the conversation is concerned, it is not clear whether she is only based on his mother or whether she was given traits of the ‘*Mater ecclesia*’. It will

always remain impossible to know whether the setting of the conversation – leaning out of a window and looking down on a courtyard – is based on facts or whether it is purely symbolic. For present day readers, these details, the window frame and courtyard, may seem to refer to a real place and add to the reliability of the communication. For Augustine a communication only becomes meaningful when the everyday reality can be enriched by symbolic resonance. It is also the way in which the rhetorician captivates his readers. And a truly enchanted reader will feel brought back to that other garden, in Milan, where Augustine's conversion took place. The conversion which began there reaches its completion here.

The text at the beginning of the conversation, 'forgetting all that lay behind us' is a quotation from one of Saint Paul's letters. But that is not important here. The texts of Augustine are overflowing with quotations from the Bible, frequently ignoring the contexts. The interspersed Bible quotations contribute to a more mellifluous, religious atmosphere of the text. The content of the conversation is more comprehensible if compared with the way in which Plotinus describes the ecstasy of the soul. For what Monica and Augustine are expressing here is that they both have a life-long yearning: the rapture of the soul, going up to God. The conversation is about 'what no eye ever saw nor the ear ever heard and what never occurred in any human heart': the Eternal.

In his description of the rapture of the soul in *The Republic* Plato first mentions the enjoyment of boys' bodies, and this in a way is also in the atmosphere of the conversation at the inn in Ostia. But, in this conversation 'the enjoyment of carnal lust' is rapidly dismissed as unworthy. What is the flesh, desire, worth in comparison to the real, un-bodied life and the true fulfilment of desire?

From that point on 'we raised our hearts in ascending rapture' and reached an ever uplifting intensity. Our bodies and all other things, the earth, the sun, the moon and the stars and the light in the sky, we left it all behind us. We admired all and regarded it as the work of God's hands. But we even ascended higher' and 'And we came at last to our own minds and went beyond them – *et venimus in mentes nostras et transcendimus eas*.²⁴ Transcending then they reach there, where there is truth, wisdom and eternity. 'Panting', they then 'return to the sound of our mouth, where the word has beginning and end'.

The words in which Augustine describes this vision: 'we gradually passed through all physical things and even the heavenly – *perambulavimus gradatim cuncta corporalia et ipsum caelum*' echoed for well over a millennium. In that gentle conversing with his mother near the window

²⁴ Augustine: *Confessiones* IX 10, 25.

overlooking an inner garden, a much wider view opened up. This became a significant text, both for mystics as well as for the system analysts who wanted to map ‘the gradations of being’ and the hierarchy of ‘all that is created and uncreated’.

Augustine, the rhetorician, will have considered his concluding sentence to be important. Although this sentence over the years attracted little attention, it is indeed the summary of this ecstatic event about which I want to make several observations.

‘Sighing’ they then ‘return to the sound of our mouth, where the word has beginning and end – *oris nostri, ubi verbum et incipitur et finitur.*’ ‘But how can that be compared to Your Word, our Lord, steadfast in itself, not aging and renewing all – *et quid simile verbo tuo, domino nostro, in se permanenti sine vetustate atque innovanti omnia?*’ The rhetorical contrapositions: our mouth – our Lord; the word – Your Word; beginning and end, permanent and transitory – are obvious, so that the closing words, which have no component in the foregoing, have the full emphasis: *atque innovanti omnia.*

It is a coming together of philosophy, theology and rhetoric. We can observe the strict opposition made between our and the divine reality: our (earthly) words are unable to express the latter. At the climax of the vision, when truth, wisdom and eternity seem to come together, Augustine says ‘we spoke and we yearned’. Our speaking invariably reaches no further than desire. It is the expression of our longing. If we were able to reach the fulfilment at all, we could only remain silent. Words are wanting because they are finite; they have a beginning and an end. All of our reality is wanting. After all, it was created out of nothing and will once turn to nothing again. That which hovers between beginning and end, existing between creation and judgment, is only a brief interlude. Time is essentially only an ‘in between’. Time is temporary. Time and reality are finite. Everything that will come to an end is too short.

e. All that will end is too short

Here a theme enters Western thinking that has never left it since: the human deficit and the inadequacy of reality. Reality is finiteness; all existence is merely temporary and will perish.

In the world of antiquity finiteness was a form of completion. Pindar writes that ‘in limitation appears the meaningful completion – *en de peirai telos diaphainetai.*’²⁵

²⁵ Pindar: *Nemean Ode* III 70.

For Augustine this fundamental ontology has come to an end. Finiteness and limitation for Augustine are shortcomings and prevent the meaningfulness of our existence. As time comes out of ‘nothing yet’, ‘is’ hardly anything at all and then disappears right away into something never again, so is whole reality. The concept of creation obtains a threatening dimension seen in this way. After all, all of reality is created out of nothing. That ‘nothing’ remains attached to her and affects existence itself. The world and reality are not real, it *is* only something that passes by, temporal like time, a road leading from nothing, to hardly anything and then to nothing again.

‘All that is made is made out of nothing and changes *Omnia quae fecit, quia ex nihilo fecit, mutabilia sunt*²⁶ because: ‘That which both ‘is’ and ‘is not’, is not *non enim est ibi verum esse ubi est et non esse.*’²⁷

What was a condition in archaic thinking for the rise of existence, the shape of reality, time and tides, became Augustine the reason for its demise.

All that will come to an end is too short. The finitude of our existence is its defect. This theme was still evident in Hegel: ‘the “being” of finite things has the germ of perishing as being-in-itself; the hour of its birth is the hour of its death.’²⁸

However, opposite our deficiency is the permanent, sustainable and eternal. Only God *is*, sustainable because of Himself, without time ever affecting Him – *In se permanenti, sine vetustati*. Augustine uses the technical term ‘*idipsum*’, ‘it-itself’. Here too he reaches back to the *Phaedo*, in which Plato says that ‘invariably being the same is real being – *autè hè ousia (...) tou einai.*’²⁹ Real ‘being’ means ‘remaining the same’ – *auto kath’hauto*. To remain unaltered it-itself, is the hallmark of true being. The independently remaining the same is real existence. Thomas Aquinas would here use the technical description ‘*ipsum esse per se subsistens*’.

For Augustine the immutable is the imperishable. Well known is the passage in the *Confessiones*: ‘*inspexi caetera infra te (...)* – I looked at all things under You and saw that they are neither complete nor quite nothing – *et vidi nec omnino esse, nec omnino non esse.* They are as far as they are

²⁶ Augustine: *De Natura Boni* I.

²⁷ *Ibid.*: *In Ioannis Evangelium Tractatus* 38, 10.

²⁸ G.W.F. Hegel: *Wissenschaft der Logik* I, Werke in zwanzig Bänden, V 140. ‘*das Sein der endlichen Dinge hat den Keim des Vergehens als ihr Insichsein; die Stunde ihrer Geburt ist die Stunde ihres Todes.*’

²⁹ Plato: *Phaedo* 78d.

from You. – *esse quidem, quoniam abs te sunt*. They are not as they are not like You are. For being truly, means remaining unchanging the same – *Id enim vere est, quod incommutabiliter manet*.³⁰

The moving and passing things are perishable; they hardly exist. Identity belongs only to what remains the same, ‘durability or eternal is the essence of God – *Aeternitas ipsa Dei substantia est*.’³¹ Augustine uses here ‘*substantia*’ where from the Middle Ages onwards ‘*essentia*’ would be used.

‘That is truly eternity (the eternity of God) where He is unchanging, without beginning, without end – *Ipsa est vera aeternitas quia est immutabilis, sine initio, sine fine*.’³² Augustine believed he was following in Plato’s footsteps with this definition, but he was very far removed from Plato’s ideas. For ‘eternity’, Augustine uses the word ‘*aeternitas*’ and to it he attaches the meaning of ‘always remaining the same’. That is another eternity than ‘*sempiternitas*’. The latter still contains the meaning of beginning over and over again. Sustainability continued owing to the constant recommencement. But for Augustine the beginning and the end disappear, there is no beginning and there is no ending and ‘eternity’ becomes endless.

Plato used the term ‘*palingenesia*’, understood by Augustine as ‘*regeneratio*’. The circling movement is lost in ‘*re-*’. ‘*Palin*’ indicates the return, beginning anew, at the end being at the starting line again. The Latin ‘*re*’ is more an indication that a rectilinear development has been cut off and is being restarted after that break. With Plato, such as in the myth of Er, the culmination of the course of human life as depicted in *The Republic*, everything repeats itself and everything returns from its completion to its beginnings. For Augustine, the eternity of God is always immutable, the same.

My next observation has to do with the contrast between our inadequate words and Your Word. With the Word here the Son of God is meant as written in the beginning of the Gospel of John. Just like ‘eternity’ and ‘the Eternal’ mean something different to Augustine than in the tradition of antiquity, his sharing of the soul with eternity, the immortality of the soul is also quite different from the concept in antiquity. Not only during the first centuries AD, but also in the centuries followed and even now, Christianity is inclined to resort to the simple opposites of a perishable body and an immortal soul. At first glance it may seem that Paul’s

³⁰ Augustine: *Confessiones* VII 11, 17.

³¹ *Ibid*: *Enarrationes in Psalmos* CI; and *Sermones* II 10.

³² Augustine: *De Trinitate* XV 5, 7.

contraposition of the flesh – *sarx*, and the spirit – *pneuma* seamlessly echoes this contraposition. Yet this representation is pure Greek and, if there is such a thing at all as ‘the essence of the Christian faith’, it is at odds with it.

The word ‘immortality’ only occurs twice in the New Testament. Only once is it used in connection with humans, the other time it has to do with God.³³ The latter text clearly and distinctly formulates the point of view of Christian faith: Only God is immortal. He gave mankind the promise of the resurrection. Heaven and earth will pass away and perish, while only the Word of God will exist in eternity.

f. Nothing remains apart from ...

In the antique world surrounding the Mediterranean it was believed that people would die, but that something would continue and remain alive, whether it was called *Ka*, *pneuma* or *psuchè*. It is the unseen but real living part, whereas at the same time anyone is able to observe that the body will decay and will never come to life again.

Christians on the other hand, believe that everything will perish entirely unless the Eternal, the Only abiding One, just like He has once created us ‘out of nothing’, lifts us up again ‘out of nothing’: with body and soul, as a totally renewed human being.

Nothing of us will remain; we will perish irrevocably. Only His promise can renew everything: ‘*atque innovanti omnia*’.

The conversation between Augustine and Monica concerning this complete downfall continues. Monica will die five days after she has become acquainted with the rapture of the soul in this conversation, in which she leaves everything behind. After this vision all else has lost any importance.

As a result of the radiant brightness of the vision, everything else seems to have faded and decayed. The light she has seen while gently speaking has submerged all else in deepest darkness for her. ‘My son, as far as I am concerned, nothing in this life pleases me any more. What I have to do here and why I am here, I do not know and I expect nothing else from this world – *Fili, quantum ad me adinet, nulla re iam delector in hac vita. Quid hic faciam adhuc et cur hic sim, nescio, iam consumpta spe huius saeculi*. What am I doing here? – *Quid hic facio?*’³⁴ Forty-two years later, when Augustine finds himself at death’s door, he will say the same. ‘He comforted himself with the words of a wise man,’ according to

³³ *I Corinthians* 15, 53 and *I Timothy* 6, 16.

³⁴ Augustine: *Confessiones* IX 10, 26.

his first biographer Possidius.³⁵ ‘Who once said, “Not truly great is he who still attaches importance to the collapse of beams and bricks and the death of mortals.” The wise man meant here was Plotinus. Just like Erasmus, who spoke and wrote Latin most of his life, and spoke his last words not in Latin but in Dutch, Augustine did not die with a biblical text on his lips but with the words of the love of his youth, the writings of the Neoplatonics.

The next point is that this conversation takes the form of an ecstatic experience as described by Plotinus and Porphyry. The two opposing central points of Augustine’s thinking, God and the soul, touch each other in this rapture. The soul exalts and rises up to God.

Much has been said about the nature of this ascent in the Eternal of Augustine. In one of the first interpretations the ‘*vere esse*’ of Augustine was compared with Plato’s ‘true being – *ontōs on*’. Nietzsche places both concepts on the list of illusions of man’s aspirations over the centuries: ‘*die wahre Welt* – the true world’. Nietzsche’s well-known aphorism – a text in his *Götzendämmerung* from 1888 – refers back to a remark made by a bishop, Synesius of Cyrene. In a letter from about 410 AD Synesius wrote for the first time about the Christian faith as the secret, elite doctrine of Plato made suitable and useful for the *plēthos*, the crowd.³⁶ Augustine too repeatedly states that Plato’s philosophy – which he, unlike his colleague, bishop Synesius, actually hardly knew in its original form – corresponds to the ‘*philosophia Christiana*’. In his *Confessiones* as well as in *De Civitate Dei* he points out the similarities: ‘Already these philosophers (the followers of Plato) saw – *viderunt isti philosophi* – that God is incorporeal, that He transcends all things, both bodies and spirits. That He is unmoved and exceeds all movable.’³⁷ Here Augustine refers, however, to his academic years in Milan when he read the books of the Neoplatonists. But the distance between Plato and them is huge. The God of Augustine has hardly anything to do with Plato’s ‘real’ being – *ontōs on*, but it has everything to do with the determination of the **One** – *to hen* – by Plotinus.

‘Above all is the **One** that transcends all things.’³⁸ This ‘**One**’ is the only thing that is beyond all reality. The spirit – *nous* – and the being – *to on* – and the soul – *psychè* – are all far, incomparably far, from the **One** – *to hen*. The yearning of the soul is directed towards the **One**. The **One** is not a being for Plotinus, neither is it real: it is beyond all reality and

³⁵ Possidius: *Vita* 28.

³⁶ Synesius of Cyrene: *Epistulae* 105.

³⁷ Augustine: *De Civitate Dei* VIII 6.

³⁸ Plotinus: *Enneads* V 1, 10.

transcends all being.³⁹ The fundamental poles between which the captivating of Augustine's thinking takes place, '*de Deo, de anima*' are identical to the One and the 'soul' in the works of Plotinus.

The reproaches that Nietzsche directed against Christianity were directed against a misinterpretation of Augustine's views. Nietzsche directs his arrows at the figure of Plato which he believes to be behind the thinking of Augustine. But was actually Plotinus, and not even this master of thought, but his later followers and the Latin representatives in particular.

Even more complicated is Augustine's concept of God. John M. Rist refers to it as 'the problems, obscurities, unresolved tensions and inconsistencies in Augustine's thought'.⁴⁰ Time and again, Augustine defines God as He who is being essential – *est per essentiam suam*.⁴¹ 'He who is *being* – *est enim est*.' 'God does not exist in a certain way; he *is* '*being*' – *non aliquo modo est, sed est est*.⁴² That sounds very self-assured, but it is not easy to understand what he means. What does he mean by 'does not exist in a certain way'? Plotinus is invariably consistent in this matter, denying that the One is essential or is a being. A being – *ousia* – would imply a restriction of the One.⁴³

Augustine, however, despite his '*non aliquo modo est*', does apply Plotinus' first category of reality, being – *ousia* – to God. As I quoted earlier: 'Eternity is the essence of God – *aeternitas ipsa Dei substantia est*.' Here the coming together of Greek philosophy and Christian faith leads to a strange collision.

g. He who is

But Augustine also clashes with the biblical faith, i.e. with its Jewish principles. His provision 'He who is' refers to the voice from the burning bush who said to Moses: '*Ego sum qui sum*'.⁴⁴

Augustine did not know any Hebrew, neither did he read the Greek translation of the Bible, the *Septuagint*. He read the old Latin translation of the Septuagint, the *Itala*. During Augustine's lifetime, Jerome was working on a new translation, directly from Hebrew, the *Vulgate*. But

³⁹ *Ibid.*: V 1, 7 and V 3, 13.

⁴⁰ J.M. Rist: *Augustine: Ancient thought baptized*. Cambridge 1994.

⁴¹ Augustine: *Confessiones* XIII 3, 4

⁴² *Ibid.*: *Conf.* XIII 31, 46.

⁴³ Plotinus: *Enneads* V 1, 7.

⁴⁴ *Exodus* 3, 14.

about his beloved and daily read psalms, he complained that *'psalterium a sancto Hieronymo translatum ex hebraeo non habeo.'*⁴⁵

The translation of the Name as it appears in the book Exodus is solid in Latin: *'Qui sum'*. In Hebrew, however, the Name *YHWH* is a *'quere perpetuum'*, that is to say that it must always be read, seen or heard differently. The Name is derived from the verb *hajah* or *hawawh*. The earliest meaning of *hawawh* is probably 'to fall' and 'to go between something'. The later Hebrew *hajah* means 'to happen' or 'to become', in Latin *'feri'*. The use of the word 'being', *'esse'* is a derived meaning.

Augustine was not aware of what Yahweh says about himself to Moses is only the conjugation of his Name, *is*. Hebrew uses a difference between active and passive verbs depending on whether they express a (trans missive or non-trans missive) action or a state. The latter we would call conjugated adjectives. *Hajah* has both possibilities. Hence, a double meaning should be attributed in each tense. For example the perfect tense active would be 'it has happened' and passive 'it has been'. And the imperfect tense active would be 'it will happen' and passive 'it will be'.

Grammatically, therefore, the form *ehjeh*, 'I am' – of which the word *'Yahweh'* is the third person singular – could, because of the imperfect used express both a future and a present tense.

The King James Bible translates 'I am that I am'; the ESV gives 'I am what I am'. The Dutch translation in English would translate as: 'I will be who I shall be'. Strictly speaking, the Dutch translation places the emphasis on the future, whereas the Hebrew text also indicates the imperfect of the action. In Latin Augustine would have read a kind of combination of *'fit'*, *'fiet'* and *'erit'*. I will be there as I will be there.

The full meaning of the Hebrew Name is divided into fragments in Greek and Latin translation. Sometimes the emphasis is on promise and loyalty, sometimes on the reliability that has already been shown in the past and or on the promise of support for the future. In the translation 'He who is doing', the emphasis is placed on the Creator of heaven and earth. In the New Testament the always loyal appears: 'I will be the one I have been.'⁴⁶ And then there is the meaning chosen by Augustine: 'I am the one who is.' This translation is more in accordance with Greek ontology than with the Hebrew faith.

His choice clashes with the active and imperfect as expressed in *hajah* which contradicts the formula *'Ego sum qui sum'* which for Augustine expressed the immutability of God's being, the *'incommutabilitas Dei'*.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Jerome: *Epistula* CCLXI 5.

⁴⁶ *Exodus* 3, 6 en 3, 14: *Revelations* 1, 8

⁴⁷ Augustine: *Sermones* VI 3, 4.

In the philosophy of Augustine and in the ecstasy of the soul in the conversation with his mother Monica, world and reality, life and suffering, the stones and the dust disappear. Even the soul disappears into eternity, the immutability of God. As with the One of Plotinus, unreachably far beyond existence and reality, of Augustine's God only his 'esse' can be reached. The concept '*est Deus est*' does not allow proof of God's existence.

Many centuries later, around 1260, Bonaventura, an Augustine monk, would believe that on the basis of Augustine's thought the existence of God could be proven by saying: 'If God is God, God *is*. – *Si Deus est Deus, Deus est.*' Although Bonaventura claims to refer to Augustine, their way of thinking is radically different. Bonaventura comes to God because he has a representation of the Supreme Being, '*ens perfectissimum*'. This all-perfect being is a concept that is lacking in nothing and where nothing else can be thought of, '*ens, quo majus nihil cogitari potest*'. Therefore it must exist.

Kant claimed that this is an inadmissible leap from understanding to existence. Bonaventura would not have understood this criticism, because for him understanding the concept is the way of being of what is in reasoning. And Augustine, in his turn, would not have been able to understand his follower Bonaventura. For him it would be unthinkable and inconceivable to prove the existence of God. And Plotinus? He would keep the One away from trivialities such as 'existence', 'being' and 'reality'.

Finally, it should be noted that the boundaries of reason and reasoning are repeatedly shifting. In his *Vorrede* at the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant wrote the well-known phrase: 'Therefore I had to let go of knowledge in order to make room for faith.'⁴⁸ Since then, it has been taken for granted that intelligence is limited to certain boundaries and that believing goes beyond them. For sensible and enlightened people this is again a self-evident reason to let go of believing.

Since the Renaissance the story is told about Augustine that when he was lost in thought walking along the beach he saw a little boy who was busy ladling water from the sea with a sea shell. 'But you will never manage to empty it!' the church father smiled. 'No more than your attempts to fathom the mystery of the Eternal, the Trinity,' the child – an angel obviously – retorted.

⁴⁸ I. Kant: *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* B, XXX. 'Ich musste also das Wissen aufheben, um zum Glauben Platz zu bekommen.'

Through the work of Henri Marrou we know that the story originates in the thirteenth century, that the water was that of the Seine and that the original story was about Lanfranc, Alanus ab Insulis or an anonymous scholastic. The image conveyed is also significant for medieval scholastic thinking and completely foreign to the thinking of Late Antiquity of Augustine. After all, his main theological work is *De Trinitate*. He would never claim that reason is restricted to boundaries that are by-passed by faith. On the contrary, quite often he explicitly states that thinking and believing overtake each other in a kind of race.⁴⁹ It is in his *De Trinitate* that he uses the formula: 'faith is searching, reason finds – *fides quaerit, intellectus invenit*.'⁵⁰

In the gentle and almost silent conversation with his mother, they are almost in touch with wisdom and eternity. '(...) we nearly reached them with all the elation of our heart, and we held our breath (...).'⁵¹ Believing – *credere* – and the rapture of the soul 'does not come through your feet, moving of the soul occurs because of feelings. – *Non movetur anima pedibus sed affectibus*.'⁵²

In the elation of the soul everything vanishes, world and reality, life and body, stones and dust: '*Dieses Schwindende das seltsam uns angeht*.' (Goethe)

'*Quid hic facio?*' What should I do with it? Monica asks. It is nothing.

When the foundation of the ontology of antiquity vanishes, she even accepts even the ultimate consequence. Most of her life she had yearned to be able to return to Africa and to be buried there next to her beloved husband. Just before this longed-for home journey, she also renounces this last loving and natural desire. Nothing is of importance any longer: love, time, nature and natural order. Only the One holds.

The last words she spoke were: 'Nothing is far from God. I do not fear that He when all times have come to an end, would not know the place where He will raise me up again.'

'*Nihil longe est deo, neque timendum est, ne ille non agnoscat in fine saeculi, unde me resuscitet*.'⁵³

⁴⁹ Augustine: *Epistulae* 120, 1.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*: *De Trinitate* XV 2.

⁵¹ *Ibid*: *Confessiones* IX 10, 25.

⁵² *Ibid*: *In Ioannis Evangelium Tractatus* XLVIII 3.

⁵³ *Ibid*: *Confessiones* IX 11, 28.

CHAPTER SEVEN

SIMPLICIUS ABOUT TIME

a. The language of thought

With some scathing remarks about the increasing decline of the sciences, Edward Gibbon closes the thirteenth chapter of his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. For Gibbon the symbol of this decline is the rise and triumph of Neoplatonic philosophy. The earliest Greek philosophers had tried to redeem humanity from fables and fantastic nonsense and had shown the way from myth to logic, but the philosophers of Late Antiquity – if they deserved that title at all! – fell back on worthless and absurd gossip and changed ‘the study of philosophy into that of magic.’ They rejected the natural sciences and were only concerned with nonsensical metaphysical speculations ‘consuming their reason in these deep but unsubstantial meditations, their minds where exposed to illusions or fancy’.

This judgment, more a condemnation, by the enlightenment would resonate again and again during the nineteenth century. The German standard work on the history of Greek philosophy of antiquity was written by Edward Zeller. He was willing to admit that Simplicius was ‘a scholar worthy of respect’,¹ but by no means an original thinker. For how could that have been possible? After all, thinking had already lost its blossoms, philosophy had more or less come to an end and had turned to theological quibbles. All that conscientiously learned and thought-through philosophizing – what was it but the rustling of withered leaves which would soon be swept away by the rising storm of the young new faith?

It is an illustration of a preconception of history how easily the jump was made from ‘*Sein*’ to ‘*Sollen*’, from what it really is, to how it should have been in someone’s opinion. The later Academy of Plato, which was opposed to Christianity, came through the interdiction of Emperor Justinian, but Neoplatonic philosophy would continue for another thousand years. Just

¹ E. Zeller: *Die Philosophie der Griechen in ihrer geschichtlichen Entwicklung*. Tübingen 1844, III 2, p. 914. ‘Ein höchst achtungswerther Gelehrter.’

how porous the dividing wall was between the pagan and the Christian forms of Neoplatonic philosophy is apparent at a superficial glance at persons and problems. Synesius of Cyrene had been educated in a pagan tradition; he was taught Neoplatonic philosophy at the school of Alexandria. He studied with the gifted female philosopher Hypatia. In AD 415 she was lynched in the streets of Alexandria by a mob aroused by the bishop and his monks. Synesius himself later on converted to Christianity and was elected bishop in Cyrene, a colleague of Augustine, with whom he corresponded. Before he accepted the bishop's office, he demanded to be assured that he would be able to retain his cherished books by Plato and other pagan philosophers. From him originates the statement repeated by Nietzsche that Christianity is a doctrine of Plato, made accessible to the mob.

During Late Antiquity the tidal wave of Greek philosophy which once overflowed the Hellenistic and Roman world appears to flow back to the Orient. Plotinus and Porphyry were still teaching in Rome. After their death the Greek philosophers stayed in Athens, Alexandria, Antioch or Constantinople. It is as if by doing so they disappear from history. In the West philosophy takes on a different course after Porphyry, and removes itself from both the sources and the current discussions in Greek philosophy. Was Augustine familiar with the actual works of his Greek predecessors? He extracted all quotations from Latin works by Cicero and Varro, where he found references to philosophers such as Heraclitus, Democritus, Epicure or Parmenides, whose texts were unfamiliar to him.

As a student in his twenties he had read *De categoriae* van Aristoteles in the Latin translation, or rather version, of Marius Victorinus. He read and knew no other text by Aristotle. Of the dialogues of Plato he only read the *Timaeus* translated by Cicero. When Augustine quoted phrases by Plato, it was not because he had read the text himself, but he had come across a Latin quotation in Cicero or other authors. When he writes about the '*libri Platoniorum*', he means the treatises of Plotinus and Porphyry's *De regressu animae* in the Latin translation of Marius Victorinus. He did not know of Porphyry's fierce attack on Christianity – *Kata Christianōn* – and it remains unclear what he had actually read of him and his master Plotinus. And what did he actually know of the Greek texts on which Christianity was based? In a letter from AD 387 to Jerome, he comments on the latter's explanation of the texts of Paul and Origen and adds at the end that 'owing to the foreign language I was not able to read and understand all that much – *non valent propter alienam linguam tam multa*

legere atque cognoscere'.² So it was not quite possible even for Augustine to study the works of Origen in Greek. He was only familiar with the works of great Greek fathers of the church such as Gregory of Nazianza or Basil the Great in the – somewhat free-style – translations in Latin by Rufinus.

Only through a convoluted detour, via Arabic philosophy and Hebrew translations which were then translated back into Latin, were the works of Greek philosophy returned to the west in the thirteenth century. By that time it was too late for the Neoplatonic philosophy of Late Antiquity. The texts had become food for philologists, whereas philosophers passed them by on their way to the sources themselves, Plato and Aristotle. It is only in the last few decades that attention is once again being paid to the later and last philosophers of the antique world. When Eric Dodds published the *Stoicheiōsis theologikē* of Proclus in 1933, this was deemed a rather bizarre predilection. Usually there are no modern editions of this text from Late Antiquity. It is not uncommon in my experience in Holland that volumes of the nineteenth century edition of the *Commentaria in Aristoteles Graeca* have to be dug up from somewhere in the vaults of a university library. These volumes were mainly published by German scholars at the time because they proved to be rich sources for fragments of classical and even Presocratic philosophical texts. Simplicius, for example, still owned Parmenides' book and was able in his personal library to leaf through texts by Aristotle which have since been lost. These comments were also important because they were commentaries on difficult but for us still important classical texts. Anyone who did not understand an unclear passage from the *Physica* of Aristotle – despite learned notes in English or German – was able to check what had been thought and said about these texts in ancient times. Usually the passage in question became even more difficult and unclear.

This eventually led to attention being paid to the independent importance of these texts. Contrary to the opinions of Zeller and Gibbon, Simplicius is by no means a transcriber of old texts and a non-independent commentator; he is a remarkable philosopher who thinks further than his examples. Whereas in the Latin West the level of philosophy declined – while its influence on later philosophy increased – philosophy in the Greek East remained on a very high level – and its influence on Western philosophy fell dramatically. The way in which Simplicius rethinks the enigmas of time and being, temporality and eternity, is not only a philosophical top performance; he is a thinker that essentially goes beyond the philosophy of Aristotle and Porphyry on 'time'. Against the richness

² Augustine: *Epist. ad Hieron.* XL 6.

of this profound thinking, the liber XI of the *Confessiones* of Augustine stands out as being meagre.

b. Life and teaching

It is not known when and where exactly Simplicius lived. His writings indicate that he was a disciple of the successor of Proclus, Damascius in Athens, the head of the Academy. In AD 529, the same year that Benedict of Nursia founded the abbey of Monte Cassino and gave Latin monasticism its Rule, in Constantinople Emperor Justinian took a number of measures to eradicate paganism, which turned out to be bloody measures. One of them was the decree ordering that 'in Athens no one should ever teach anyone else philosophy – *en Athènaïs keleusas mèdena didaskein philosophian*'. Ominous words. As inevitable result of this decree, the nearly nine hundred year old Academy of Plato was closed. The last philosophers fled to the Persian court, where they were more than welcome.

Regarding Simplicius it is assumed that he originated from Sicily and studied and taught in Athens. It is certain that after the issue of the imperial decree he fled to Persia together with Damascius. He must have been quite young at the time, because he did not write his more important works until after the death of Damascius. Where he wrote them is not known either. Possibly in Alexandria, where Olympiodorus gathered the last remains of the Neoplatonic school, or possibly in his homeland, on Sicily. It is also difficult to establish when he wrote those masterpieces: somewhere between AD 535 and 555. Influenced by the works of Aristotle he wrote about heaven, the soul, and about nature. In addition he wrote about Aristotle's theory of categories. The handbook of Epictetus was also the occasion for a learned book on morality. Much was lost as well, such as his books on the metaphysics of Aristotle, the physics of Theophrastus and a book on rhetoric.

The preserved texts of Simplicius are unusually difficult for us to understand. In the later years of the Academy a philosophical jargon and technique had been developed that can be compared with the technical language used by the students of Husserl in the study of phenomenology. That language, Greek dating from the beginning of the Byzantine period, is unfamiliar to many. But above all, we are actually facing a wall of incomprehension when studying these texts. We understand the terms used by him, owing to the philosophical terminology we already know. *Proōdos dia mesotētos* will then be understood as 'progress through the dialectical method of thinking'. But Simplicius did not know our concept

‘progress’ and he was not aware of Hegel’s dialectics either. He obviously did not know what was in store in the future, but he did have a great past to work with. A past that we hardly know anymore. The works of Plato and Aristotle daily at hand and constantly buzzing in his head like the psalms were present every day and night in the thinking and writing of Augustine. All impossible for us nowadays. But apart from Plato and Aristotle, there were Plotinus, Porphyry, Proclus, Jamblichus, Ammonius, Damascius and many others, philosophers virtually unknown and grossly neglected by us. The world of Simplicius is primarily the philosophical universe of Plotinus.

In the comments of Simplicius on the *Physica* of Aristotle, a number of separate treatises were included. One is the *Corollarium de tempore*, a treatise on ‘time’. In the opening sentence Simplicius explains that he does not merely want to know what Aristotle thought about time, ‘but rather (personally) wants to penetrate (the question) what time is – *alla mallon ti pote esti ho chronos katamathein*’.³ He intends to examine this concisely and carefully. A difficult undertaking. We will not follow him closely – this chapter would otherwise contain twice as much as the rest of this book – but we will try to find out how he came to these analyses of the concept of time. Not with the intention of being able to construct them personally and to follow his thinking, but to be able to deconstruct them, to disassemble them and to uncover his original intentions and guiding rules. I will not attempt to follow Simplicius in his sometimes inevitably high flight, but to ask him a question.

c. The time passed

The constant rejection by Martin Heidegger of the analysis of time in the fourth book of Aristotle’s *Physica* is quite remarkable. In the introduction & chapter 6 of his *Sein und Zeit*, Heidegger points out that the ‘*griechische Seinsauslegung* – Greek explanation of being’ is based on *ousia*. This word, taken from the colloquial language by Plato where it referred to something like ‘possessions’ and ‘goods’, has since become a technical philosophical term with which the ‘presence’, the involvement with the present, has been indicated. The present is ambiguous as it can indicate both a mode of being ‘presence’, and a time mode, ‘now’, ‘the present’. In doing so, a link was made right from the beginning of Western philosophy between ‘being’ and ‘time’: being in the present. ‘This Greek interpretation of being, however, is given without any explicit knowledge of the

³ Simplicius: *Corollarium de tempore* 773, 10.

guidelines which are applied without awareness let alone understanding of the fundamental ontological function of time (...). ● On the contrary: time itself is taken as a “being” among other beings (...).⁴ It is a reproach that is mainly directed at Aristotle. The most essential, *hè ousia*, is understood as *parousia*, presence. ‘Being’ is thought of as a form of presence, presence in time, being present, being present in the present.

The way in which Aristotle thinks about time became decisive for the history of philosophy. All major analyses of time, by Augustine, Kant, Hegel or Bergson were dependent on his analysis. Aristotle dominated the philosophical tradition of thinking about time; his definition became the usual, ‘*das vulgäre Zeitverständnis* – the run-of-the-mill understanding of time’.

The manner in which Aristotle thought through the ontologically unfounded Greek thinking about time – on the one hand determining ‘being’ as presence and on the other hand the acceptance of time as something natural, something that just exists – has cast a spell over the Western tradition and made any real reflection on ‘time’ impossible. The attempt undertaken by Heidegger in *Sein und Zeit* to make an analysis of our being as temporary, being in time right up to death to thinking about ‘being’ itself, failed. It ran to ground on the most obstinate form of the ‘*vulgäre*’ concept of time, the schematics of time of Kant. As late as 1969, in France, Heidegger pronounced as his conviction: ‘In metaphysics, beginning with Aristotle, there is thus a real short-circuit of contemplation about time, in which is manifested what *Sein und Zeit* calls the concealment of the meaning of being.’⁵

Metaphysical thinking about time causes a kind of short-circuit between time and reality. Aristotle understood the being of time by looking at the only aspect of time that, although for the smallest moment, *is*, the present tense, the ‘now’. In doing so, right from the beginning, the question was avoided as to what time actually ‘is’ and attention was diverted to the only aspect of time that is there for a moment, ‘now’. That road taken by Aristotle from the *to nun*, to the analyses of Augustine

⁴ M. Heidegger: *Sein und Zeit* § 6. ‘Diese griechische Seinsauslegung volsieht sich jedoch ohne jedes ausdrückliche Wissen um den dabei fungierenden Leitfaden, ohne Kenntnis oder gar Verständnis der fundamentalen ontologischen Funktion der Zeit (...) in Gegenteil: die Zeit selbst wird als ein Seiendes unter anderen Seienden genommen.’

⁵ *Ibid.*: *Vier Seminare* (Le Thor, 199) p. 76 (Now in *Gesamtausgabe* 15, 338). ‘In der Metaphysik, zuerst bei Aristoteles, gibt es also einen echten Kurzschluss der Besinnung auf der Zeit, worin sich das abzeichnet, was *Sein und Zeit* die *Verdeckung des Sinnes von Sein* nennt.’

starting from the *nunc*, on to ‘*das Jetzt-Punkt*’ by Hegel or the experienced time of Henri Bergson, is, all in all, quite superficial and in reality a way to avoid ‘time’. The second part announced in the introduction to the first part of *Sein und Zeit* was never published because Heidegger was not able to think through ‘*einer phänomenologischen Destruktion der Geschichte der Ontologie am Leitfaden der Problematik der Temporalität*’. It was, according to him, not possible to break through the traditional, metaphysical way of thinking about ‘being’ as temporary, really ‘being here’ for only a short time in the present. That attempt, the fully accomplished text of *Sein und Zeit*, would in that case have culminated in a commentary on the analysis of time by Aristotle ‘as a visible dividing line of the phenomenological foundation and the limitations of the ontology of antiquity’ The boundaries of being, the walls of reality, and its foundation of it was constructed in that analysis of Aristotle about ‘time’.⁶

Questions could and should be raised over all these steps. Those questions were raised by Heidegger himself and became reasons for not publishing the rest of his most important work. He remained stuck in the analysis of time of Aristotle. It is possible that the earlier attempt by Simplicius led to better results. Possibly he found an alternative way instead of the dark passage of time that leads only to the blind wall of death.

Is it true that the Greeks already had something like an ‘ontology’, an ‘explanation of being’? Is the content of what Plato raised in his last major dialogues, the *Theaetetus* and the *Sophist* concerning ‘being’, comparable with what we understand as being ontology? And when Aristotle asks the question *ti to on* is he then asking the same question that Heidegger poses as the question about ‘being’?

And, is it really true that something like a ‘*Seinsauslegung* – explanation of being’ can suffice with indicating a single word: being = *ousia*? Could not the words *phusis*, *kosmos*, *idea* or *energeia* qualify as well for being basic words for the traditional way of approaching ‘being’?

And if we were to opt for the translation of *hè ousia* – as ‘being’, what does that mean exactly? In his dissertation on *ousia* in the dialogues of Plato,⁷ Herman Berger enumerates numerous meanings for this word, meanings which can vary greatly. Whatever *ousia* meant for Plato and Aristotle, it certainly did not mean ‘being present’. The word is still considered a verb and only centuries later, in the Neoplatonic philosophy,

⁶ Ibid.: *Sein und Zeit* § 8. ‘(...) als Diskrimin der phänomenalen Basis und der Grenzen der antiken Ontologie.’

⁷ H. Berger: *Ousia in de dialogen van Plato*. Leiden 1961.

did the shift occur from *ousia* to *parousia*, from the verb ‘to be’ to being and presence.

The step to standing on its own, from ‘being’ to ‘presence’ – why was that taken and why is that possible only when ‘being’ is perceived as ‘being present’? What does ‘being present’ actually mean if it is not something attached to something as ‘being’? And if the word then takes on to mean presence, why is the temporal meaning suddenly added? In the Latin form ‘*praesentia*’, both being present – a presence – the *presens*, the present tense are expressed.

And this strange series of steps from ‘being’ to ‘time’ – where did they exactly lead to in Greek thinking, in which as yet ‘time’ had not been discovered as temporality? When Aristotle is reflecting on ‘*ho chronos*’ did he give us an analysis of ‘time’, or had it more to do with ‘duration’? Does ‘time’ as temporality not actually appear seven centuries after Aristotle, in the late Neoplatonic philosophical schools? Is it possible at all to translate so easily ‘*to nun*’ into ‘*nunc*’ and German ‘*Jetzt*’, ‘now’? And is it acceptable to go from *horos* to ‘Grenze’, ‘limit’; from *stigmè* to ‘*Punkt*’, point; from *sphaira* to ‘*Kreislauf*’, ‘cycle’: and from Aristotle to Hegel? Does something really exist such as ‘*das vulgäre Begriff der Zeit* – the vulgar concept of time’ that connects these two philosophers across a time-span of more than two millennia? Is the history of philosophy really Hegel’s smooth, icy plain on which it is so easy to move back and forth from one extreme to the other? Is that history not rather filled with of ice floes and crevices, crooked and with piled up blocks of ice in between? Does not every attempt at deconstruction first require a basic sense of discontinuity?

Where, then, is the ontological differentiation in the philosophical tradition if it was apparently possible to glide effortlessly from ‘to be’ to ‘being’, then ‘to be present’ and then to presence and time? Might it be possible that the analyses of Simplicius could help us find an answer to all these difficult questions? Or would it, on the contrary, become an even more inextricable tangle, just as Simplicius had already concluded that Aristotle and Parmenides meant something different by *to on*?⁸ And what did Simplicius mean with his separation between ‘time’ – *chronos* – and the actual time – *prōtos chronos*?

⁸ Simplicius: *Physica* 147-148 l.

d. A flurry of questions

A flurry of questions and answers remain absent for the time being. Probably the questions have not even been formulated correctly. Because who knows what 'time' is? What is 'being'? And who are we?

'The morsel (...)
For a short while
It resounded between the two silences.'⁹

The profound and convoluted paths along which Simplicius went in search of the answers about time and being led to points of view seldom held by anybody today are rarely considered except by a handful of specialists, merely to see whether they were really written by him, but not with the intention of ever consider their implications. The deconstruction of this analysis of time by Simplicius is intended to expose the foundation of his thinking. It is not the system of his thinking that will hold our attention, but his attempt to search, to feel his way towards 'time'.

In the *Corollarium de tempore* Simplicius takes Aristotle's definition of time as a starting point, something he (Simplicius), has already thought about in the abovementioned paragraph. 'He (Aristotle) aptly says that time is a measure of the course of being and its arrangement – *ho chronos metron tēs kata to einai rhoēs kai parataseōs esti.*'¹⁰ It is odd that Simplicius says 'aptly', because we do not find this alleged statement of Aristotle at all. Nearest to it comes his formulation in which he states 'time is the measure of movement – *ho chronos metron kinēseōs.*'¹¹ For many centuries right hitherto the accepted definition of Aristotle's time was written by him earlier in this text: 'For that is 'time', the 'number' (denominator) of movement according to earlier and later – *chronos estin arithmos kinēseōs kata to proteron kai to husteron.*'¹²

Simplicius does reflect on time based on the considerations and analysis of Aristotle, but he uses the definition of time given by his teacher Damascius. That reads: 'Time is therefore a measure of the stream of being – *metron tēs tou einai rhoēs.*'¹³

⁹ J.C. Bloem: uit *Verzen: Zondag. 'De flard(...)' / Het is even / Tussen de twee stiltes luid geweest.*

¹⁰ Simplicius: *Corollarium de tempore* 733, 2-5.

¹¹ Aristotle: *Physica* IV 12; 220b 32.

¹² *Ibid.*: 219b 1-2.

¹³ Simplicius: *Corol. de temp.* 774, 35-36.

The difference is remarkable and substantial. For Aristotle time is a 'number' (denominator) of movement; for Damascius and Simplicius it is the 'measure of being'. The difference between measure and number is difficult to explain and, moreover, hardly relevant here. After all, before Simplicius Plotinus had come to the conclusion that neither measure nor number actually expressed what was meant exactly. He nevertheless preferred measure above number, and in this it was obviously followed by the later Neoplatonic philosophers.¹⁴

●f greater importance, indeed, is the difference between – be it measure or number – of movement or being. Here lies the rift between the Aristotelean philosophy of antiquity and its followers of Late Antiquity and the early Byzantine period. Aristotle does not provide us with a philosophy of time anywhere, because he did not know 'time' as such. What he does is reflect on birth and growth, *phusis*. In his *Physica* he deals with the various forms of growing and changing, of natural movement. ●ne of these forms of movement gives him reason to say something about the measure in which that growth, change or movement takes place: *ho chronos*. So *chronos* does not come forward here as an independent phenomenon at all, as something that is what it is, but as something attached to, or with something else, as 'number of movement'. Everything that Aristotle subsequently states about the *chronos* is not a result of reflections about the *chronos* itself, but originates from thinking about that movement – of which *chronos* is something – its number. So when Aristotle says that *chronos* is without beginning or end because it is recurring, he does not come to this wisdom out of contemplating time, but from his knowledge what 'movement' is. The ideal movement, according to him, which never stands still, is the cycle – *sphairos* – which has neither beginning nor end because it returns to itself, it never stops and goes on moving continually. When Hegel then speaks about the '*Kreislauf der Zeit* – the cycle of time' and says that time can never stand still and has neither beginning nor end, he is still following Aristotle. But what they both say is not to be observed concerning 'time', they observed it about the movement and then transferred it on to 'time'.

With the Neoplatonic philosophers, the *chronos* no longer appears as a function of movement, as 'something attached to' (measure or number) the movement, but for the first time in the history of thinking as something independent. This independence is laboriously acquired by detaching itself. Plotinus is putting a lot of effort in thinking through about time and eternity as both being independent. Augustine can only come to his analysis of time when he has first of all freed it from movement.

¹⁴ Plotinus: *Enneads* III 7, 9.

Simplicius does not proceed as Aristotle does from the *phusis*, deciding movement to be the essence of nature, and then thinking about measures and numbers to understand and measure that movement in order to finally consider a ‘number’ between earlier and later as *chronos*. On the contrary, Simplicius, being a Neoplatonist, only arrives at the *phusis*, nature at the end. He proceeds from the One – *hen* – and acknowledges the activity of the spirit – *nous* – in it towards the soul – *psuchè*. Only when he delves deeper, to the soulless, spiritless, the randomly and scattered juxtaposed things of the world, does he arrive at nature – *phusis*.

Not only does time become detached from its natural movement and come to independence, but the same thing happens to space at the same time. The Greeks did not really know a word for space (any more than for ‘time’). *Topos* means place or spot. Space is a given, but one has to find one’s place. ‘Place’ is only there where you or something belongs. The spot of my reading lamp is next to the easy chair and not in the kitchen above the sink. The place – *topos* – is only within a certain natural order, the *phusis*. ‘Space’ is something quite different and can for instance be found on an – as yet undeveloped – building site in any new housing estate. Only when basic concepts such as *kosmos*, *harmonia* and *phusis* disappear with the late Neoplatonics, duration and place are taken away from mankind and ‘space’ and ‘time’ are created as independent entities, separate from the natural order. From there it would take another millennium before Immanuel Kant could achieve the opposite and space and time considered the two constituents of reality.

For obvious reasons the same applies to several fundamental concepts, such as for instance *psuchè*. Thales considered the *psuchè* to be held for example in a magnet; it is the force that inhabits that stone and manages to attract iron. For Heraclitus, *psuchè* is still included within the natural order too when he observes it in ‘the changing flow of running water’.¹⁵ For Plato and Aristotle the soul is still connected to the cosmic order. But the church fathers and the later Neoplatonists increasingly attribute an independent status to the soul. For Thomas Aquinas in Scholasticism the separation between soul and nature or matter is accomplished and the souls have become ‘*formae separatae*’.

In the later Neoplatonic philosophy everything, including the gods and the One, is disconnected from the natural order and the natural world. God and the soul are included or embedded, but they are withdrawn into another, transcendent reality. This disconnection would lead to the breaking of the intimate bond that was placed in the *Timaeus* of Plato and the works of Aristotle between the Designer and the order ordained by

¹⁵ D.K. 22 B 12.

Him. In future there would be two fundamentally different worlds facing each other, Creator and Creation. 'Time' as temporality, and transcendence as being withdrawn from temporal reality, is from then on the contraposition, the two poles between which medieval thinking is throbbing.

Perhaps it can be said that the problem of 'time' and 'being' could and would be raised by Simplicius for the first time. With him 'time' had become independent and was no longer seen as something attached to movement, that 'time' is a measure of being. But what would that actually mean?

e. 'Something attached to movement'

For Aristotle *chronos* is something attached to movement, namely 'the number –*arithmos*' between 'before' and 'after'. It is something, a being. What mainly briefly lights up against the darkness of fleeting and disappearing is that short 'number between before and after', *to nun*. That is the 'now' in the continuous movement that remains an unchanging 'now'. That 'now' is being formulated from the point of view of movement, it is something attached to or within movement. In Neoplatonic thinking, in which time acquires independence, the present is also considered as independent and not as that indelible indivisible (and non-existent) particle of passing. 'Now', 'the present', is independent: it is and exists and remains in the flood of time. When looked at from 'movement', the 'now' and the 'present' and our presence, our existence, has been irredeemably thrown aside and is constantly swept along through movement itself. In the Neoplatonic philosophy a new term for 'now' was created, Plotinus described it as *diastèma* Simplicius as *diakrisis*. A philosophical technical concept that cannot be easily understood which we could translate with 'spreading or diverging-from-one-point' in order to render somewhat the double meaning contained within it.

In Neoplatonic philosophical jargon, *diakrisis* means 'determination'. A stipulation, determining what something is by setting restrictions to it, in order to distinguish and separate it from what is undistinguished and vague in order to accommodate it within the boundaries and determinations of thinking. Something is divided into two sides and owing to that distinction, room is provided in which something can 'be'. Unlike the almost impossible 'now' in the movement, deprived of time, sweeping past and disappearing forever before one can observe it, a place is created where it, where one, can exist, the *diakrisis*, 'the spread' of time.

These are merely words, alienating words, and no islands on which we can save ourselves in the rushing flow of time. We are not just used to but convinced by the philosophy of the concept of time of the Stoics and Christianity, in which 'time' is interpreted as temporal, perishing and disappearing. According to this view, the essence of 'time' is not the flow of time but running down and getting lost. 'Time' is the insatiable flow that sweeps everything with it.

Cursed be time,
 the eagerness of
 days blown by -
 one after another.
 Curse that inevitable gap
 through which we will be carelessly
 lost.¹⁶

Simplicius, however, confronts us with the views of the late Academy, ideas that seem to originate from a side-track of philosophy which leads nowhere. Within that world of thinking a connection is made between time and being, and time is not thought of as that hopeless flicker before we are thrown into that flow of non-existent beings. In that mode of thinking we are not just grains of sand running down, unstoppable. 'Time' is something that offers something to hold on to, extending, forming a stretch of being. In order to be able to understand this thinking, which is at odds with what we take for granted, further explanations are necessary.

Since Descartes we, as readers, are facing practically insurmountable difficulties when we come to these ways of Neoplatonic thinking. Their direction of thought goes completely the opposite way from ours, and we stand back to back with it. Whereas we start from our self-conscious 'I think', they start from the – for us – unreachable opposite side of the road. They think strictly ontologically from descending from 'being' in itself to the things surrounding us.

Aristotle took as the starting point of his thinking the reality around him, the things he used, the growth he observed in nature and the animals he studied. His book on birth and growth and nature, his *Physica*, is the fundamental book of Western philosophy. In it he raised questions which for obvious reasons required a sequel. The closer consideration of nature, *phusikēs akroaseōs*, (*natura auscultationis*) led to the subsequent

¹⁶ C. van Lenteren: *Koppen: Recht in je gezicht*, Tilburg 2010. *Vervloekt de tijd / de gretigheid van / achter elkaar / verwaaiende dagen / vervloek dat niet te missen wak / waarin wij achteloos / kwijt raken.*

questions *meta ta phusika* concerning the true nature of movement, duration and place.

In twentieth century philosophy, whether through Husserl or Heidegger, Sartre or others, our conceptions of the world around us was chosen as the starting point. 'Boredom' can be poignantly described by an accomplished phenomenologist with the aid of a piece of chalk and a blackboard, to whom we listen with an increasing feeling of being bored and we experience the unending length of boredom.

This is totally different from what happened in the later Academy. That thinking was based on the **One** and Eternal, to whom or what we constantly wish to return. **Originating** from the **One** – *hen* –, the soul and the spirit – *hupostaseis* – are derived.

For us, the **One**, the soul, the spirit or the *hupostaseis* has to be something, otherwise they are merely insipid concoctions, vague and unreal. But for the Neoplatonic philosophers, neither the **One**, nor the soul nor the spirit, nor the *hupostaseis* are something in the sense of 'being'. There is a gaping void separating us from them. For the late Academy, a *hupostasis* is not something, but the real, deeper essence. We do not observe the things themselves; only through the **One** can we obtain a view on reality. The **One** provides us with things to see. The senses – *aisthesis* – give us no view on reality itself. They only show a jumble of fragments, colours, shapes and shards that are whirling around and which we then incorporate into our *psuchè*. The soul creates unity and coherence and only because of this we learn to observe something. That animated reality is then further shaped by the *nous*, the spirit, and put into words by the *logos*.

'Time' as such is neither something that could be noticed owing to the movement. 'Time' is a unity of the mind. This is a formulation that entails the danger that a present day reader will be more reminded of Kant than of Simplicius. Time is neither observable in the movement of reality nor is it present in our mind with the idea that because of this we would get hold of that reality.

'Time' for the philosophers of the later Academy is neither something that can be observed in the thinking of man (Kant), nor in the movement of nature (Aristotle). 'Time' is the measure of being. 'Time' gives order to 'being'. This is not immediately noticeable at first glance; it only does so when we take time and reflect on it from the unity of the spirit – *nous*.

In the tradition of antiquity 'time' first of all has to be observed somehow in order to enable us to reflect on it. Aristotle noticed 'time' because of its passing, as something about the movement he is observing which implies the essence of nature. 'Time' itself however, is something that is nowhere to be seen. 'Time' cannot be observed by one of our

senses. The traces that time, the course of time, leaves behind do not make time itself but the flow of time observable. 'Time' is the thief who unnoticeably manages to steal everything from us, an invisible thief; only our loss is evidence of the burglary of time in our reality.

Whereas in the tradition of Aristotle 'time' actually remained unobservable, the observation is included in the definition of *chronos* because the number, the difference between 'before' and 'after' is visible.

Simplicius fundamentally assumes that time is not perceived by the *aisthēsis*, is not sensory, but is present in the mind, *noēsis*. This is a fundamental change in the philosophy of time. In his book *Peri chronou*, Damascius had tried before to reflect on 'time' without taking before or after into consideration, a simultaneous time. Simplicius too attempted to reflect in this manner when he mentions the *prōtos chronos*, a time that precedes the passing time. In order to be able to follow this kind of, to us bewildering and impossible conception, we first have to look deeper into some basic ideas of the later Academy.

Time is considered here as 'measure of being'. This measure itself is not temporal. Time allows all that is temporary, all 'that is within time'. Time causes the unity and the order, also the sustainability of ideal 'being' – *ontōs on*.

The relationship between time and being has become fundamentally different from that in the tradition of antiquity. 'Time' provides unity and in doing so admits what is temporary to the original unity of the spirit and the One – *Nous te kai Hen*. The temporal takes, because of time-as-a measure of being, in being. Time is no longer just something attached to movement and therefore swept together with movement into nothingness. Time can *be*.

f. Falling apart

Naturally such considerations and insights from Simplicius were and are difficult to understand. That was already the result of the double meaning of *diakrisis*. On the one hand, time is a concept in itself that is 'falling apart', the diversion from the One. On the other hand, it has the connotation of 'going from the One', a separation from the One that still remains supported by the One.

This seems to us to be an insoluble enigma on which this kind of philosophy has to flounder and fall apart. But then again it becomes obvious that this philosophy lives, indeed thrives on an essentially different perspective from our own. All the time Simplicius' attention remains focused on the One. This one-ness is focused on even when

contemplating on aspects which seems quite confusing and remote, such as for instance ‘nature’: ‘that it is first of all one, and even if it diverges from the **One**, it is still under control of the **One** in order to be Being-from-the-**One** – *pros to hen on einai*. For even then being and non-being are not distinct – *kai oude to einai tou ontos ekei diekekritai*.¹⁷

Even the essence of nature – *phusis* – is considered to be *ekstasis* by these Neoplatonic philosophers. The *phusis* does not remain divided in itself but yearns for unity. Rarely has the platonic striving for the ‘supreme’, that odd mixture of desire and conjecture, been expressed so poignantly as in terms like *ekstasis* or *ekphusis*. Reality and nature – *phusis* – conceived as growth, as sprouting and flourishing – *ekphusis*. The world seen as a sprouting germ, something that unstoppably develops and surges on to the **One**. It is as if all reality is giving birth and is engaged with finally producing the long-trapped fruit.

Time is not something attached to movement, something that is hardly attached to something that is nothing in itself. Time is ‘the measure of being’. Time is. Time keeps measure in the temporal and leads it to unity, to the **One**. It is precisely through the measure and power of time that nothing disintegrates into the immeasurable, ephemeral, indefinite and unrestricted. – *aoristia*. That is the purpose of time, that nothing can fall out of the unity and loses itself into the indefinite, the nothingness. Time prevents expiring into that which does not originate from the **One**, into boundless declining – *hupopheresthai pros aoristian*.

Time conceived as ‘something attached to movement’ would be thus immersed in that inescapable flow from nothing to nothing and being dragged away from being. Therefore it is not; it is nothing. It would be the flow of time that destroys everything. It is the puny point in eternity and the deserted universe that lights up just for a fraction, to disappear once more into the darkness forever, in the way Emperor Marcus Aurelius wrote in the army camp near Vienna in his diary ‘*To himself*’. Simplicius, however, attempts to break through this conception of time seen as ‘tumbling into nothingness’ and to consider time as ‘keeping measure’ in order not to perish in the immeasurable. We, and everything ‘are’ because all is held up by time in the unity of the **One** – *Hen*.

In the expression ‘measure of being’ an explanation is needed to clarify what is meant here by ‘measure’. To our way of thinking, things do exist, but on earth there is no need for measurement, apart from our being aware that measuring can be done by the measures we have set. Trousers or shoes do not possess a certain size of their own, but we manufacture them

¹⁷ Simplicius: *Corol. de temp.* 773, 19-23.

according to a size determined by us. Music does have a natural rhythm, but the 'measure' of the bars is marked by us.

Simplicius perceives this the other way around: first there is the measure, only then what is measured by the measure, the things. Things get their status and existence only through the measure, the determination. This applies both to the sphere of the conceivable by thought – *noësis* – and to what is perceptible with our senses – *aisthēsis*. The measures of origin – *genēton* – are: number, size, space and time.¹⁸ Four concepts which we encounter in the centuries of philosophical thinking afterwards and with Kant, but of which the meaning shifts and differs substantially. Any attempt to explain accurately what Simplicius meant by these four measures, and how different the content is to him and for us, would require many extra chapters in this book.

'Number' would be better represented by the number of different units. According to the later Academy, 'number' indicates the difference of the unit and 'measure' the unity of this difference. *Megethos*, the 'size' would be better translated as the 'distance, in-between'. *Topos* we usually translate as 'space', but within this philosophical jargon it has to do with the multiplicity of units, and 'expanse' would be a more adequate translation. *Chronos* which is more or less translated as 'duration', when used in early antiquity; and 'time' – *tempus* – in Late Antiquity indicates in the context of Simplicius the measure underlying the number, distance and expanse.

Here too, Simplicius is indebted to his master Damascius. Damascius, for the first time in the history of philosophy, in his *Peri chronou* attempted to take two decisive steps when philosophizing on 'time'. First, he tries to determine the amount of time. That probably seems very odd to us, but by doing so he breaks through the thinking of Aristotle in which time is thought of as the accumulation of an amount of successive now-moments. But each of those 'now's did not actually exist, they disappeared immediately. The sum of many 'nothings' still does not come to anything and time would still not exist in that case. Because 'now' had no size, expanse or quantity; nothing could be done with 'now'. 'Now' was a zero between the two rows of numbers, 'before' and 'after', which were even less. Damascius referred to the well-known paradoxes of Zeno and then states that the sum total of those 'nows-as-zero', no matter how long one continued to add them odd, still yielded nothing. But time *is* – that remained the basic conviction of the Neoplatonic philosophy – and therefore also its components. Also the barely present of the 'now' is a quantity. Damascius did not even hesitate to take the next step: if 'now' *is*,

¹⁸ *Ibid.*: 774, 20-23.

an amount, then it is also divisible- *meriston ara to nun*. And yet ‘the “now” is time and not the limit of time – *chronos ara, kai ou peras chronou*’.¹⁹ The divisible quantity of the ‘now’ is time and not just a boundary between the earlier and later, the threshold that itself was supposed not to exist.

The second innovation that Damascius attempted to think through about ‘time’ was a direct consequence of the first step. ‘Time’ as ‘amount’ has an expanse and is therefore connected to space. Time and space, being other than duration and place, were actually thought of within philosophy only in the later Academy. Simplicius adopts the thought of Damascius concerning, what we would call, the spaciousness of time. ‘Time’ contains quantity, expanse and also spreads out – *diarripsis* – in space.

Simplicius uses the phrasing *paratasis tou einai* for this.²⁰ That does not mean ‘extension of being’ in the meaning we have adopted since Descartes: *res extensae*. It does not have to do with objects stretched out in space that are measurable because of this stretching out and therefore only knowable because of this. Simplicius meant that ‘being’ actually means to be spread out. The span is the essence of being. Something that does not spread out does not exist. The span is not a characteristic of being, the span is what we mean with *being*. Time as span *is*.

Simplicius and Damascius both struggled with the same dilemma. ‘For us – *kat’ hēmas*’ time is the first form, unity, in which reality presents itself to us. But they want to think about what time is of itself – *kat’ hautō*. In itself, of itself, ‘time’ is the way in which the One allows to be taken part of. With this, for the first time in the history of philosophy, ‘time’ is attributed with its own ‘being’.

Here a fraction within philosophy occurs. For Plato *chronos*, the duration, was still a derivative of the divine order, the *kosmos*. Duration is an ‘image of eternity – *aiōnos eikona*’.²¹ Part of the constantly sustainable.

Aristotle does not found his determination of duration on the *kosmos* but on *phusis*. *Chronos* is ‘something attached to’ movement and in its turn movement is the essence of the *phusis*. Starting with Proclus, Jamblichus, Damascius and Simplicius time *is*. ‘Time’ *is*, not because it shoots out as a series of non-existent fragments of ‘now’ from ‘not yet’ to ‘no more’, but because it lasts for a while, it stretches out, a time span. Whereas in the tradition adopted by us, Augustine considered *tempus* a *distentio*, a scattering, getting lost in fragments, a falling apart, the later

¹⁹ Damascius: *Aporiai kai luseis peri tōn prōtōn archōn*. II 237, 13-14.

²⁰ Simplicius: *Corol. de temp.* XXX.

²¹ Plato: *Timaeus* 37-38.

Greek Academics mark *chronos* as the span that ‘whiles – *paratetatai*’, that extends, gives way and provides the possibility to be.

One century earlier Proclus, at that time the leader of the Academy in Athens, had stated in a commentary on the *Timaeus* of Plato that ‘the divine creation is twofold – *dittès tès dèmiourgias ousès*.²² He inferred inference from this that ‘time is partly eternal, partly movable where the eternal distributes to the external – *Ho de chronos tèi men aiōnios, tèi de exō dosei kinètos*.’²³

Both aspects of duration, afterwards entered within history as ‘time’ and ‘eternity’, each turn out to have a foundation, the one in the *kosmos*, the other in the *phusis*. Damascius and Simplicius break with this foundation when they no longer think about time as ‘something attached to’ but as something that *is* independently.

The manner in which Damascius tried to understand the problem of time was the impetus Simplicius needed to come to this breakthrough in philosophy. Damascius had given him a springboard with the idea that ‘time is always entirely there – *holos hama chronos en hupostasei*’.²⁴ A thought that rejects, not because the passing of time is not expressed in it, but because it ignores the typicality of time, the ongoing sequence. Although teacher and follower came to different final conclusions, they did agree on an important motive of their thinking. Several times Simplicius, and always with approval, quotes the statement: *tōi genesthai te einai echei*.²⁵ Although time comes and goes and passes by, it does not pass us by entirely, but takes us with it into that flow. There is something that remains in that flow; we always remain in the present. The present and the ‘now’ always stay with us. What also remains is that enigmatic passing by, something remains that constantly comes on to us. ‘Time’ as continuity even has parts and constantly there are parts that come towards us and remain with us. Therefore, because both the movement and “time” continue, are constant, they *are*, they continue to exist. Not because they manage to hold their own, but ‘in becoming they have their being’.²⁶

²² Proclus Diadochus: *In Platonis Timaeum Commentaria* III 53, 6.

²³ *Ibid.*: III 26, 2.

²⁴ Simplicius: *Corol. de temp* 775, 33 ff.

²⁵ *Ibid.*: *Corol. de temp* 775, 10.

²⁶ *Ibid.*: *Corol. de temp* 696, 28ff. and Aristoteles: *Physica* ΓV 206a 18-25.

CHAPTER EIGHT

BOETHIUS AND THE CONSOLATION OF PHILOSOPHY

a. Falling rubble

The fall of Rome and its Empire evoked many different reactions. Augustine's reaction, written down in his masterpiece *The City of God*, is the best known. In it he muses about both cities, the earthly existence in the one versus the longing for the heavenly Jerusalem. Did he find answers for all his questions? Why, if God had promised Abraham he would save Sodom and Gomorrah if only five righteous people could be found in it, could Rome not be saved? There in the city where the graves of many saints and martyrs were to be found, where the most important bishop of the Christian world reigned and led the community of believers, were there not even five righteous people?

One of the most compelling answers from a philosophical point of view was given by a refugee, Salvian. In AD 410 Rome was plundered for the first time by the Vandals; the imperial city of Trier was burned down for the fourth time by the barbarians in AD 439 and in that same year Africa's main city, Carthage, was conquered, after a long siege, by the Arian Vandals and treated horribly. In the loneliness of Lérins, a small island off the coast of Marseilles, Salvian wonders why God abandons the faithful and allows them to be beaten and murdered by barbarians, heretics and criminals time and time again, their property destroyed and they themselves led into slavery?

In his *De gubernatione Dei* he harasses his reason and conscience in order to reconcile this calamity with God's justice and providence. What he decides is that the only reason for this harsh punishment must have been that the Romans had deserved it. Salvian puts forward the concept that is upheld up to the present: Roman decadence. Debauchery, lasciviousness, boredom and vanity, vain amusement, excesses, womanizing and overindulgence, effeminacy and conceit, all these things the lonely monk knows how to describe in a vivid manner. However, it is not based

on any truth nor is it the outcome of a sociological analysis of daily life, but salvation by means of a preconceived divine truth. His own logic compels Salvian to reach a remarkable conclusion: the barbarians who are the winning side must inevitably have a healthier and morally superior way of living. The idea that strange and remote barbaric peoples possessed a superior morality and wisdom was not new. For centuries it had been rumoured that Pythagoras and Plato, Pyrrho and Democritus had obtained their wisdom from Egyptian priests, magicians from Persia or even from Indian sages. In order to make Plato more acceptable, it was even claimed that he had derived his wisdom from Moses. A contemporary of Salvian, Mamertus believed that Plato's arguments to prove the incorporeality of the soul were not only derived from Pythagoras and Socrates, but originated mainly from Egyptian and Hindu sages. Remarkably therefore, he is able to quote Zoroaster, Anacharsis, Scythian sages and Brahmins.

Based on this idea, Salvian was one of the very first to express his aversion to the past; the Hellenistic, pagan predecessors, the Greeks, and to look elsewhere, to a future resting in the hands of clean living and pure-minded barbarians. He is well aware, and puts it into words, that 'the Saxons are cruel, the Franks unscrupulous, the Goths inhuman and the Huns filthy',¹ but right away manages to sum up extenuating circumstances. For instance, when a barbarian breaks a sworn oath, then that is more or less understandable; after all, he swore the oath on an idol and not in the name of Jesus Christ. They are ignorant; they know no laws; they cannot read nor write and therefore we should not judge them as strictly as one would a Roman. And after all, everything that we find at fault in them is more than compensated by what we have to praise in them. Cruel? Certainly, but also courageous and masculine, not effeminate like those Greeks.

The suggestion of Roman decadence as the cause of the decline of the Empire would, many centuries later, inspire Nietzsche to voice the vicious allegation in which Christianity itself would be regarded as the cause of decadence in a healthy pagan society. Naturally, the opposite was true for Salvian. When the barbarians managed to storm the walls of the imperial city of Trier, the magistrate in charge was enjoying himself at a shameless banquet, an orgy. Whether that is true or merely an allusion to the famous scenes of the downfall of Babylon or Nineveh – who can tell? What Salvian emphasizes is that Africa Caesaris fell prey to the Vandals because that area housed most of the theatres and circuses, and the people were over-fond of the games. The fact that the Visigoths overwhelmed

¹ Salvianus: *De gubernatione Dei* IV 14, 67.

Aquitania was due to the too sumptuous wealth and luxury in that region. That is true, of course, but not in the moral sense insinuated by Salvian.

The thesis of the purity and high moral standards of the barbarians in itself was based on other presuppositions than we would assume. 'The barbarians are totally different from the peoples among which they settle; they do not understand our ways, do not understand our language and, if I may say so, they stink, both their bodies and their clothes smell badly, and they usually prefer to stick to their own ways of doing things, instead of adapting to Roman morals and customs. They feel more at home with the Goths, Bagaudae or other groups of barbarians. For they prefer to live in freedom under an absolute ruler, rather than to be slaves in the free world.'²

The barbarians are praised for their virtue; love for young boys and effeminacy is Greek, civilized, but abhorred by barbarians. So God allows them their victories because of this modesty. The way in which marriage was held in high honour and valued by the Vandals stood in shrill contrast to Roman immorality and also to the disgusting suggestion of Plato defended by Socrates in *The Republic*, that women should actually be common property. It is a wry contraposition which is extensively discussed by Salvian, in which he considers the moral of Christian marriage better respected by the barbarians – even though the Vandals were still followers of the heresy of Arius – than in the civilized society and the philosophy of Plato.³ Incidentally, the way in which Salvian quotes Plato is remarkably careless and incomplete, based more on hearsay more than on the consultation of actual texts.

At the time that Salvian pointed out the divine ruling of the world order, not everyone was inclined to recognize the healthy forces of the barbarian peoples. Quodvultdeus asked Augustine for advice at the approach of the Vandal hordes. Augustine stated that the shepherds were not allowed to leave their flocks, and that the leaders of the Church were duty bound to remain with their congregation and bear witness of their faith by offering their lives. It became quite clear in the following months that indeed a lot of blood was spilt. The Vandals were incredibly cruel: murder, rape, large-scale robbery and destructiveness. Augustine died in Hippo Regius on August 28 in AD 430, while the city was being besieged by the barbarians for months.

The struggles about Carthage would still continue for several more years, the city eventually being captured by the Vandals in the autumn of AD 439 as the result of betrayal. In October of that year Quodvultdeus

² *Ibid.*: V 5, 21.

³ *Ibid.*: VII 23, 101.

preached his last sermon, and fiercely opposed those murderers, rapists, destroyers. He told his audience that salvation could no longer be found here on earth, but could only come from the Father and Creator. He stirred up his congregation and an uproar was looming, but the king had him arrested, put aboard a ship and sent him into exile in Italy. There, for many years to come, along with other refugees and exiles, he would agitate in Naples and its surroundings against the heretics and oppressors in his former homeland. Around AD 450, Quodvultdeus published his *Liber promissionum et praedictorum Dei*, in which the faithful were encouraged to hold on to the pure faith and to await the fulfilment of the promises and predictions of God. There was no question of any reconciliation with the barbarians.

b. 'It is nothing'

At the beginning of the fourth century, Ambrose, as bishop of Milan, could still tell the faithful that it was their duty as Christians to defend the Empire against the barbarians. Among Greek bishops, such as Synesius of Cyrene, even a sort of xenophobia is noticeable and a desire for an Empire purified from alien, barbaric blemishes.

As we saw earlier, when the barbaric and often heretical peoples actually got a foothold in the Empire, reactions were divided. These reactions were often more based on religious grounds from Arians, Monophysites or Orthodox, than on a contraposition of peoples such as Germanic against Roman. Even though the barbarism of the Vandals was severely reproved by Quodvultdeus, his real focus was against the persecution of those Christians who remained Catholic by those who adhered to the heresy of Arius. In Gaul the high degree of cooperation with some of the invaders is even worth noting. Syagrius resides at the court of the king of Burgundy and speaks Burgundian as if it were his mother tongue. But Sidonius Apollinaris uses a far more hostile tone in his letters. Not until the armies of Justinian come from the East to 'liberate' Italy from the yoke of the barbarians and to restore the Roman Empire do many Romans come to the conclusion that the Goths were preferable to the Greeks. 'More than mourning games, foolery and piracy was not given to us by the Greeks and the protection of the Empire was better handled by the Goths.'⁴ At the time of that 'liberation' by the Greeks, paganism also revived in Rome and, among other things, the temple of Janus was reopened for the first time in decades.

⁴ Procopius: *De bello Gothico* I 18.

However varied the reactions to the downfall of the Empire (a world of over a thousand years of civilization) might have been, an odd constant element is noticeable. Unlike modern reactions to catastrophes such as the two world wars, we can observe a remarkable indifference towards the decline of the ancient world. I have drawn attention several times before to the words of Augustine, filled with indifference, even disgust, towards the greatest philosopher of Late Antiquity, Plotinus. Who cares when 'the stones and the dust' fall down, when the supporting pillars of this world collapse and the dust of the demolition rises up in clouds?

Pierre Courcelle has done thorough research into this philosophical idea, a *topos* in ancient philosophy and rhetoric, and I am very much indebted to him for what follows in this chapter.⁵

The idea is based on a letter written by Servius Sulpicius Rufus in March 45 BC to his friend Cicero to comfort him following the death of his daughter Tullia. Is it right, he asks his friend, to grieve over the loss of a human being while there is so much greater sorrow when one considers how even the oldest and most famous cities of Greece, as a result of the campaigns of Paullus and Sulla, were laid in the ashes?⁶ Rufus mentions a whole list of famous cities that he has seen lying in ruins. The latter was an image that was not easily forgotten and that, moreover, became topical again when the Empire collapsed. In a letter written by Ambrose of Milan to Faustinus following the sudden death of Faustinus' sister in AD 387 he mentions numerous cities, such as Bologna and Modena, that had been destroyed and then he admonishes Faustinus: so many famous cities lost, and you are grieving the loss of one person! Ambrose clearly indicates that here he uses a *topos*, a standard way of convincing.⁷

Thirty years later, Rutilius Namatianus travelled from Rome to Gaul passing the cities destroyed by the armies of Alaric, and in a letter he uses the same polarity: the grief for the fate of one human against the image of destruction of so many cities.⁸

It is a wisdom taken over by Rufus from the Stoic philosophers on his journey through the devastation of Greece. The idea rests not so much in the comparison, but in the remark that cities, pillars and stones will also come to an end, as man will. Seneca too was familiar with this idea and put it forward to his friend Liberalis, who was struck by the news of the burning down of his hometown, Lyon. 'Cities will die', Seneca reminds

⁵ P. Courcelle: *Histoire Littéraire des grandes Invasions germaniques. Appendice III Le stoïcisme chrétien devant le spectacle des ruines*. P. 277. Paris, 1964.

⁶ Cicero: *Ad familiares* IV 5, 4.

⁷ Ambrose: *Epistulae, ad Faustinum* XXXIX 1 (P.L. XVI 1145c).

⁸ Rutilius Namatianus: *De reditu suo* I 409-414.

him.⁹ Cyprian of Carthage quotes the same wisdom. The slave Epictetus delivered a lecture about this theme. The subject of his lecture was ‘that one should not get angry with people and about what is big and what is small for man.’ That resulted in a fascinating discussion between the Stoics and their students. ‘What do you consider to be important matters? Wars, uprisings, the destruction of many people and the devastation of cities? – *ti mega*;

It is nothing – *ouden*.

Is it really important that many cattle die, that swallow nests or stork nests bum down?

Is that then comparable?

Completely comparable – *homoiotata*. Bodies of humans, cattle and sheep will be lost. The homes of people will be burnt and the nest of storks. What is enormous and threatening in that? – *ti mega è deinon*.¹⁰

This discussion was held with his students and interested passers-by. The conversations and lectures were later written down by Lucius Flavius Arrianus, his *Dissertationes*.

When Plotinus wrote his treatise ‘*About Happiness*’, he surely consulted this text. Plotinus begins with the same question *Ti mega*; ‘What grandeur can there be in the things of men that cannot be looked down upon with contempt by him who has risen to a level higher than all those things and no longer has a bond with the lower?’ Then Plotinus mentions kingdoms and dominions and such and their destruction and continues: ‘If one considered this to be a great catastrophe, or merely a disaster, one would have a ridiculous philosophy of life and such a person should no longer be considered “wise”, because he considers beams and stones – *xula kai lithous* – and, by Zeus! the dying of mortals as important. This man should, according to us, adhere to the philosophy that being dead is preferable to living with the body.’¹¹

This treatise of Plotinus about happiness was read more than a century later by Ambrose and he was struck by the phrase about the stones and the dust. Ambrose paraphrased it in a text about Jacob’s ladder which also leads to happiness but not here on earth. Augustine was probably familiar with this text of Ambrose, because it was first presented and then published in AD 386 when Augustine stayed in and near Milan. But Augustine also used Plotinus’ text twice, on two rather decisive occasions: in his extensive treatise on *The City of God*, written in response to the fall

⁹ Seneca: *Epistulae*, ad Lucilium XCI 8-12.

¹⁰ Epictetus: *Diatribae* I 28, 14-17.

¹¹ Plotinus: *Enneads* I 4, 7.

of Rome in AD 410 and during the siege of his own episcopal city Hippo Regius, just before his death.

The phrase ‘mere beams and stones’ is quoted: ‘*ruina eius lapides et ligna*’¹² only in this case the wrath of God is attached to the downfall of the city of Rome.

Augustine would once again, as a consolation, and even more literally, repeat Plotinus’ text at the devastating invasion of the Vandals: ‘*Non erit magnus magnum putans quod cadunt ligna et lapides et moriuntur mortales.*’ But his secretary Possidius, who told us this, now adds a remarkable note to the consoling Stoic thought: while Augustine said this, he was in tears – *plangebat*.

c. Among the stones

Was there really comfort to be found in philosophy while the ruins of civilization were all around? It would produce the last great book of antiquity, the *Consolation of philosophy* by Boethius.

Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius would mean more for Western philosophy than he could ever suspect. Yet, although we do not know the exact dates, he died when he was barely forty-five years old. He was born around AD 485 and was strangled in the prison of Pavia in AD 525 or 526. The young Boethius, himself the son of a consul, married the daughter, Rusticiana, of the influential senator Symmachus. The senator’s ancestor Aurelius Symmachus was the man who had resisted the Emperor and Ambrose of Milan to the utmost in the struggle for the preservation of the altar of Victoria in the building of the Senate. Meanwhile the Symmachii family had become Christian, around AD 500; there was even a Symmachus who occupied the throne of the bishop of Rome for years, fiercely controversial.

Rusticiana had two sisters, Proba and Galla. The former became a nun, and the latter, after the death of her husband, also joined a nunnery just behind the St. Peter, which centuries later was still known as ‘*cata Galla patricia*’. Gregory the Great tells us about the vision of Peter Galla had when she was dying from breast cancer. Both women were influential, corresponded with important bishops and authors, such as Fulgentius of Ruspes, and through Proba important excerpts from the texts of Augustine reached Rome. Symmachus himself was quite familiar with the Greek language and was completely at home in Neoplatonic philosophy.

¹² Augustine: *Confessiones* X 33.

Apart from in Athens, the most important school of Neoplatonic philosophy was situated in Alexandria, centred around the pupil of Proclus, Ammonius. His successors were philosophers whose ideas keep appearing in the texts of Boethius. One of them was Johannes Philoponus, a Christian who stayed in Alexandria, and Simplicius, who returned to Athens and joined Damascene and remained a convinced heathen.

Boethius shared the desire of Cicero, many centuries before him, to bring much of Greek philosophical literature to the West and to make it accessible in Latin. In the tracts of Boethius, the voice of Augustine is the predominant one, although he, more than his predecessor would have liked, emphasized the distance between faith and knowledge. What they share is a preference for music. Both recognized in musical proportions the resonance of actual proportions. The numbers of the tones, they believed, corresponded to the moods of people. There was a 'secret kinship' – *occulta familiaritas* – between music and the soul.¹³ In this way, mathematics and metaphysics approached each other, as was indeed the case in the whole Platonic tradition. The attention to music was modern. For Plato and Aristotle musicians still belonged to inferior people with chubby cheeks because of their incessant playing of wind-instruments and their cavorting with dancing girls and other people best avoided. Even the Epicurist Philodemus, who wrote extensively about music, explicitly distanced himself from musical performers. For us, the flowing movement of music is also essential, the sounding and dying away of the tones. In the tradition of Plato especially the fixed relations between the different tones were studied. After all, everything that was variable remained vague and lost its essence and individuality, its identity in the accelerating movement.

For Boethius, the order of the sciences ranked from low to high, as determined by Porphyry: *physika, noera, noeta*.

The natural sciences study the movement of objects. The shape of these things cannot be studied separately from its substance and abstract forms are therefore not feasible in these lower forms of science. More promising are the mathematical sciences, which deal with immovable objects. Geometric forms do exist in our minds and are not 'defiled' because they do not need to be considered as part of every-day reality. But 'real' knowledge is reserved for the first form of philosophy, theology, which is concerned with transcendence. These are subjects which are unmoving and do not descend into matter, and they can only be understood when all conceptual forms have disappeared and the pure mind

¹³ Augustine: *Confessiones* X 33.

can contemplate on pure being. For Boethius, therefore, ‘nothing could be better understood than God – *nil deo melius excogitari queat*’.¹⁴

To us this may be a somewhat bizarre and incomprehensible conception, a kind of topsy-turvy world, but valid since Aristotle and accepted in later commentaries on his work and by the most important Neoplatonic philosophers, such as Porphyry. For Boethius, this gradual construction of the sciences was self-evident, as it was for his contemporary Simplicius. Simplicius had presented this hierarchy in the introduction of his well-known commentary on the *Physica* of Aristotle. The mind, he explains, is capable of penetrating the nature of objects, even where the forms are inextricably connected with matter. But, obviously, the knowledge of metaphysics and theology is superior, as it can ignore matter and movement and contemplate pure forms, separate from obscure matter. Those sciences that only partially succeed in separating form from matter are situated therefore between these two extremes.

The most fundamental book of Western philosophy, the *Physica* of Aristotle, was at that time no longer at hand in the Latin West and only known through the comments of Alexander, Simplicius and others. It was not until AD 1136 that a Venetian, James of Venice would rediscover the Greek text in Constantinople and introduce it in the West through his hastily produced translation into Latin. To Aristotle it was essential that every science should develop its own methodology because they all were essentially different. Aristotle had also thought through the categories of knowledge and understanding of reality; actually, he invented them. The text of this work was lost for the West in the sixth century AD and was only known in the poor shape of the treatise *Decem Categoriae*. Boethius was familiar with it, as was Isidore of Seville, Johannes Scotus Eriugena, and in the time of Alcuin it was used in the schools of the Carolingian empire. Five centuries of disordered mishmash supported the course of the sciences and led the way. The treatise, attributed to Augustine, gave the text some authority. It can still be found in the edition of the *Patres Latina* by J.P. Migne among the works of Augustine,¹⁵ but eventually it turned out to be a translation by the Roman aristocrat Vettius Agorius Praetextatus, dating from AD 380, probably as one of a series of excerpts by Themistius.

During Late Antiquity the logic of Aristotle was already considered complicated, difficult and incomprehensible. Porphyry says that when giving a lecture, Plotinus practically invariably preceded this by a reading from commentaries on the writings of Aristotle by authors like Aspasius,

¹⁴ Boethius: *Opuscula sacra* III 93.

¹⁵ (Pseudo-) Augustine: *Decem categoriae*, P.L. 32, 1419-40.

Alexander of Aphrodisias, Adrastus or any others who were available at that time.¹⁶ When one of Porphyry's friends, Chrysaorios, confessed to him that he found the theory of the categories of Aristotle to be incomprehensible, Porphyry wrote for him a short introduction, the *Eisagōgè*. In fact, this brief document only offers some assistance about the differentiation made by Aristotle between essence and side issues, substance and accidents. Aristotle distinguished five different predicates: species – *genus*, peculiarity – *species*, differences – *differentia*, properties – *propria* and side issues – *accidentia*. This simple list of five predicates became the most important introductory textbook for Western philosophy during the Middle Ages, thanks to Boethius' commentary on the Latin translation, *In Isagogen Porphyrii Commenta*. At the same time, a Syrian translation appeared in the Orient; then in the seventh century another Syrian translation; an Aramaic translation a century later, and an Arabic translation in the tenth century. Through all this, the introduction by Porphyry, a short text written as a favour to a friend, had become one of the most fundamental texts for the world at that time.

Learning how to ask the right questions in a correct way and raising the manner of classifying, determining, dividing and clarifying is of great importance to Boethius. The general remark of Aristotle that 'the infinite is unknowable'¹⁷ becomes for him the mandatory and several times repeated rule: '*scientia infinita esse non potest*'. Knowing is determining, knowing is knowing where and how something should be classified. In Scholasticism the urge to classify is already beginning. The Greek concept *theoria* was translated as *speculatio* by Boethius. And indeed philosophical thinking became an endless mirroring and reflecting, sharing, dividing and subdividing.

What Aristotle named *katègoriai* became *praedicamenta* at Boethius. For Aristotle it had to do with the most fundamental ways of being – *katègoriai tou ontos* – whereas from Boethius onwards it was understood as a treatise on the predicates in propositions. In the works of I. Kant *katègoriai* became '*Stammbegriffe des reinen Verstandes*'.¹⁸

Whereas with reference to Aristotle ten different categories are usually construed and for Kant a baroque 'Table' of four times three categories is appropriate, Boethius used only the *quinque voces*, the five important categories used in the Middle Ages. This approach originates from the Stoics, where only five main categories were sufficient. Plotinus too exclusively used these five *megista genè*, with, in fact hardly any reference

¹⁶ Porphyry: *Vita Plotini* 14.

¹⁷ Aristotle: *Metaphysica* 994a-b.

¹⁸ I. Kant: *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* A 97 '*Basic concepts of the pure mind*'.

to Aristotle, but to a passage in the *Sophist* of Plato.¹⁹ To all of these, in addition, he gave a strongly Neoplatonist colouring. His main pupil, Porphyry, knew all these considerations, and his *Eisagōgē*, the Introduction to this matter is therefore in no way a mindless following of the text of Aristotle, but an extremely creative way of thinking and interpreting.

Here again we encounter a peculiar problem when trying to understand and evaluate what Boethius actually did with the theory of the categories of Aristotle. When we use quotations nowadays, the requirement is to come up with the most accurate, current literature, as little dated or outdated as possible. During antiquity this was done exactly the other way round; whoever came up with old, tried-and-tested texts of wisdom could supersede the current interpretations through personal words of wisdom. Boethius continually shows off, as can be seen in the prodigious introduction to his *De divisione*, where he quotes from all kinds of ancient Greek writers and philosophers. But did he actually know their texts?

Authoritative studies, such as those by Pierre Courcelle, make it clear that the Greek Plotinus and his Lebanese pupil Porphyry were indeed still familiar with the whole classical tradition and its works, but that afterwards this came to an end in the West. In all probability Boethius did not read the difficult *Enneads* of Plotinus, nor all of Aristotle's commentators he quotes, possibly not even the dialogues of Plato such as the *Sophist*, which he also quotes. He derived most of this from the work of contemporaries, especially Porphyry and the school of Ammonius, son of Hermias (not to be confused with the earlier Alexandrian philosopher Ammonius Saccas). It is not even certain whether he could quote directly from the texts of Aristotle or get all his quotations from the later commentaries. There is also a lot of uncertainty about the works that Augustine read; we do not know for instance whether he read the actual texts of Plotinus or whether he was only familiar with the later and simplified editions of the writings of Porphyry. It is quite remarkable that Augustine apparently knew nothing about the fierce attacks of Porphyry against Christianity. Augustine was not a man who would let something like that go unanswered. At the time of the emperor Diocletian Porphyry's writings were widely spread across the Empire, and then again forbidden and apparently destroyed so thoroughly by the ecclesiastical reaction that, one century later, Augustine knew nothing about this and was able to voice his admiration of Porphyry again and again. All this is hard to ascertain as practically all the works of these contemporaries were lost,

¹⁹ Plotinus: *Enneads* VI 1, 25.

whereas we of course, do possess the sources from which Augustine and Boethius quoted regularly.

Boethius had a predecessor which he mentions repeatedly in order to discredit him. For the *Eisagōgè* of Porphyry had recently been edited or translated into Latin by Marius Victorinus. This translation was a bungled mishmash, in the opinion of Boethius, who therefore produced a second edition. In the introduction to his renewed edition, he states that in his opinion his predecessor made gross mistakes. For instance Victorinus translated the Greek *schēmata* with *genera* instead of *figura*.²⁰

The text of Boethius is largely dependent on that of Porphyry. He has changed the shape. Porphyry, after all, gave answers to questions from his puzzled friend. Boethius turned it into a fluent, continuous text. As was in vogue in those days, he precedes the several parts of the treatise with an introduction, taken from Ammonius. This yields a strange result as Ammonius made increasingly fine distinctions in his work and therefore starts his introduction with listing six points. This is taken over by Boethius, followed by a paraphrasing of Porphyry's explanation, in which only three points are distinguished. Quite elegant are the schematic representations of the relations between all kinds of concepts, a way of presenting which occurs frequently in the manuscripts of Boethius' texts. But these representations were taken from the Alexandrian method of teaching and were used exactly in the way Ammonius taught.

d. Contexts and consolation

In his most famous text, of which a host of manuscripts dating from the Middle Ages have survived, his *Philosophiae Consolationis* in five books, he says he is 'nurtured in Eleatic and Academic studies'.²¹ But is this true? Parmenides is not mentioned anywhere really, Plato is quoted constantly and praised by the consoling figure of Philosophia. Boethius, listening to her, fully agrees. Both of them boldly divide the history of philosophy: before and after Plato. All other philosophical schools are only seen as deviations from the straight path. Canius, Seneca and Soranus are mentioned and praised for dying in the manner of Socrates. But otherwise the old gentlemen of the colonnade, the Stoics, are somewhat ridiculed. Even about the Epicureans Lady Philosophia has not much positive to say: 'common – *Epicureum vulgus*'.

With some respects she mentions 'that good Aristotle', quotes him as well, but on the whole she seems not very impressed. Plato and

²⁰ Boethius: *In Isagogen Porphyrii Commenta* I 12.

²¹ *Ibid*: *Consolatio philosophiae* I 1.

Pythagoras, are both named with respect and esteem, and Boethius reports that he is always mindful of Pythagorean ‘medicine – *hepou theōi*’ ‘follow the deity’.²² Whether this knowledge does actually go back to the sources remains questionable. The Pythagorean-coloured late Neoplatonic thinking of the school of Alexandria, of Ammonius and his pupils, will have provided enough quotable material, thus giving the impression that the original texts of Pythagoras, Parmenides and Plato have been studied.

The *Consolatio* was written in the style of a narrative in the first person singular. Boethius, condemned to death and awaiting execution in the prison of Pavia, seeks consolation and finds it in conversations with Lady Philosophia. In the second book, self-knowledge is looked for; in the third and fourth books (up to IV pr. 5) the laws of reality are investigated and from the second part of the fourth book and in the fifth book the knowledge of the meaning of this world is investigated. Lady Philosophia offers consolation both through the increasing insight that she provides in her conversations with her partner who is sentenced to death, and she manages to bring about a Neoplatonic ‘turnabout’ conversion. Destiny and destination reverse and provide comfort.

Boethius repeatedly claims to refer to old sources, but research shows again and again that they were not the works of philosophers from the fourth century BC in Athens which he read, but the philosophers of the schools of Athens and especially Alexandria from just before his own time, so eight centuries later. Proclus, Jamblichus, Porphyry and Ammonius are usually the sources, and from those books, lost since, he takes the quotations from the earlier philosophers. Sometimes this is quite clear – for example in the case of the verse of Parmenides quoted by Boethius. Did he really still have access to this very early text? But exactly the same verse was also cited twice by Proclus and it appears no less than seven times in the commentary Simplicius wrote on the *Physica* of Aristotle.²³ It will also have been the commentaries, lost to us, from Ammonius on the *Gorgias* of Plato and on the *Physica* and the *Peri Hermèneias* of Aristotle which Boethius used, ignoring the original texts.

Another remarkable aspect of the *Philosophiae consolationis* is the alternation of prose and poetry. The poetry is strictly metric, with a lot of elaborate and continually varying metres. But there the influence of the period can be noticed. When Boethius uses the exceptional hendecasyllabic

²² *Ibid.*: *Consolatio* I 4.

²³ P. Courcelle: *Les Lettres grecques en Occident de Macrobie à Cassiodore*, Paris 1948, p. 287, nt. 1.

metre of Sappho, he does not apply it as she does, but in a manner that was customary since the time of Nero.²⁴

The most profound and comforting thoughts of the Consolation have to do with the relationship of time and eternity. Here too Plato is the point of origin, in this case a passage from the *Timaeus* in which it is said that the world was ‘conceived’ and at the same time as ‘time’ itself.²⁵ For Augustine it was a particularly important point of departure that reality and time are related to each other and were conceived together – ‘created’ in his words.²⁶

This became a fiercely controversial issue for Neoplatonics, because with Aristotle they were convinced that this reality was, is and will be eternal. Boethius, who probably never read this passage in the original but in the commentary written by Proclus was therefore confronted with a problem. Plutarch and Atticus had agreed with the vision of Plato, but later on Plotinus, Porphyry, Jamblichus and also Proclus had argued that Plato could not have meant that there was a temporal origin of the world but that there was a causal one. After all, how could Plato have believed that the world had come into being together with time, when he considered this reality eternal? Proclus solves this enigma by carefully distinguishing between the *aidiotès*, the unlimited duration of reality and the *aiōnion*, the eternity of God. It becomes clear that Boethius gradually adapts this solution. In his commentary on the *Eisagogè*, one of his early works, he still uses the two Latin equivalents for the Greek distinction, *perpetuitas* and *aeternitas* as synonyms. Then in his *De interpretatione* he uses the concepts ‘*sempiternis* et *immortalis* – everlasting and immortal’ in the manner of the Peripatetics as applicable to the celestial bodies. Not until his philosophical testament, the *Consolatio*, does he make the clear distinction between the unlimited duration – *sempiternitas* – of this world and the eternity of God – *aeternitas*.

‘That God is eternal – *aeternus* – is the common judgment of all that lives and thinks.’ This leads to the question, what is eternity? The answer will teach us something about the nature of God. ‘Eternity then is the simultaneous and complete possession of infinite life – *Aeternitas igitur est interminabilis vitae tota simul et perfecta possessio*.’ A definition that becomes clearer when we contrast it with temporal existence. ‘For everything that lives is continually moving “in the present” coming from the past en going towards the future’ and nothing is able to encompass and

²⁴ *Consolatio* II 3, 6; III 10; IV 7.

²⁵ Plato: *Timaeus* 29d-e.

²⁶ Augustine: *De civitate dei* XI 6.

hold on to its entire allotted time simultaneously. ‘Yesterday’ is constantly lost and ‘tomorrow’ is as yet unattainable; only the present is here for a moment, but that is only too short a moment. For anything that is subjected to time is valid; this is what Aristotle says about the *kosmos* – that it had neither a beginning nor will ever end, but that it extends its life span over an endlessness of time – *de mundo (...) vitaeque eius cum temporis infinitate tendatur* – which is essentially different from the eternity of God.²⁷

Therefore Boethius rejects the idea of those who believe what Plato states, that ‘this world has neither had a beginning in time, nor will it diminish in time, coming to the conclusion that the created world is equally eternal, just as its creator is eternal.’²⁸ For this ‘equally eternal’ he uses the term *co-aeternus*.

●f course, this solution leads to other, major problems. So God, the creator, was present before the creation? Certainly. He is ‘older’ than His creation, but this ‘older’ should not be understood in a temporal sense. It can probably not be understood at all.

Boethius does not mention the person whom he is addressing here. It could be Johannes Philoponus, who indeed maintained that idea, but he did so after the death of Boethius. ●r does it refer to the lectures given by Ammonius in Alexandria in AD 486 about the *Physica* of Aristotle and especially about the commentaries on that text. ●ne of the lectures was interrupted by a Christian who protested, Zacharias of Mytilene. After a discussion between Zacharias and Ammonius which lasted for hours, many students chose the side of the unexpected visitor and wanted to make a difference between the eternity of God and the durability of the world created by Him.²⁹

Boethius wrote that philosophy was ‘*summum vitae solamen* – the highest conceivable consolation in his life’.³⁰ It is remarkable that, in the beginning of the sixth century AD, someone who knew his end was approaching did not look for consolation in the revealed wisdom of the Christian faith, but in the last wisdom and quibbling of the Alexandrian Neoplatonic school. But, wasn’t Boethius a Christian then? From the ninth century this remained a rather controversial issue for nigh on a thousand years. How could it be otherwise; in this excellent work, the *Consolatio*, nothing is said about Christianity, whereas the Greeks gods and goddesses,

²⁷ Boethius: *Consolatio* V 6.

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ P. Courcelle: *Les Lettres grecques en Occident de Macrobe a Cassiodore*, Paris 1948, pp. 296-299.

³⁰ Boethius: *Consolatio* II 1.

pagan philosophers, tragedy writers and rhetoricians with some understanding of philosophy are mentioned and quoted. *Fatum* and *Fortuna* play an important role, whereas Augustine had even banned those words. The kind of ideas that Boethius constructed concerning the sustainability of the world were rejected and contested by Augustine. The reward of heaven is mentioned nowhere; on the contrary, demons and benevolent forces are active and ultimately purifications will be waiting, according to the teachings of Plato as explained by Neoplatonism. The thinking of Boethius is rational and not Christian.

But of course he was a Christian himself, and if he had not adhered to this new state religion he would never have held his high offices. And his *●puscula sacra* clearly indicates his faith. But for him, belief was rational in a manner which seamlessly matched his scholarly Neoplatonic ideas.

Usually the contrast between Christians and pagans is over emphasized and seen as too sharp in a black and white contrast. ●nce, ●rigen entered a lecture of Plotinus out of curiosity. Plotinus immediately, out of deep respect, interrupted his presentation and paid homage to this great spirit as the greatest of the philosophers of Late Antiquity and one of the most important founders of Christian doctrine. Porphyry, the fiercest opponent of Christianity, a foolish and stupid superstition in his opinion, was also present. But church fathers like Augustine, and later on Boethius as well, will unfold and sharpen their minds with the aid of the highly venerated writings of Porphyry.

Sometimes the closure of the nearly thousand-year-old Academy of Plato in Athens, on the authority of Justinian in AD 529, is referred to as the dramatic ending of the philosophy of antiquity. The last pagan philosophers fled to the Persian court where they were given a new position. But what was destroyed in Athens remained and flourished in Alexandria. The pupils of Ammonius continued to think about Plato and Aristotle and were giving lectures there, and in AD 612, in Constantinople, another chair was created by the Emperor to teach Plato's philosophy.

e. Constructor or creator

For eight centuries the texts of Boethius were read and studied, and consolation was drawn from his *Consolatio*. Then, from the Renaissance onwards and especially during the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century, Boethius was seen as 'a rather lonely and forgotten foreigner in a world grown strange.'³¹ Nevertheless, his philosophical input and

³¹ H. Chadwick: *Boethius. The Consolations of Music, Logic, Theology, and Philosophy* p. 223.

especially the high standard of rationality continues to fascinate. Lady Philosophy can still also carry on a comforting and meaningful conversation with us. After all, she goes far beyond the moralism of the Stoics, to the unfulfilled desire of Plato and the understanding of the transcendence of Neoplatonic philosophy. Such a craving for salvation and unity, and presented in such a rational manner. In the ninth poetic interlude of the third book, a poem written in eighteen hexameters, reference is made in a superior manner with and to texts of Plato, especially from his *Timaeus*.

*'O qui perpetua mundum ratione gubernas,
Terrarum caelique sator, qui tempus ab aevo
Ire iubes stabilisque manens das cuncta moveri (...)
'● you who rules the world by perpetual reason,
Founder of earth and heaven, who orders time from eternity
To continue, and remaining stable incites All to motion (...).'³²*

It is an ecstatic hymn, centrally placed in his work. Boethius found examples in Plato, Proclus and Synesius. The theme of the creator of heaven and earth, 'remaining stable, inciting All to motion' is of course derived from Aristotle's *Metaphysica*. What causes the Unmoved God to set the All in motion? Because of his goodness. No external cause is at work, creation is entirely an act of God's goodness, a theme that is already present in the *Timaeus* of Plato.³³

In the fourth stanza of the same hymn Boethius says 'no external forces drove God to create heaven and earth'. ● of course not, as that would diminish the omnipotence of God. But the creation – Boethius avoids the word *create* – is 'of flowing material, an innate form of the highest Good by a celestial example'.³⁴ Here the matter-form principle of Aristotle is used, creation conceived as 'giving shape', leaving unmentioned where this 'flowing material' was or came from. Furthermore, it should have been established by a rightful believer that God created everything at his own discretion and pleasure. But in the *Timaeus* not just the creation of just anything is described and thought through, but the creating of a well-ordered and coherent whole, the *kosmos*, which the god does with the use of mathematical relations and numbers, the right proportions. How else could the god have created harmony, the balance between fire and water, ebb and flow, cold and warm, dry and humid, land and sea? The world soul is also made harmonious by the god and of course placed in the

³² Boethius: *Consolatio* III 9, 1-3.

³³ Plato: *Timaeus* 29e.

³⁴ Boethius: *Consolatio* III 9, 4-5.

centre. In the *Timaeus* this process is described in more detail, two circles of the world-soul holding each other in balance, putting everything in motion and leading back to the deity. Boethius copies all this in detail in this hymn, but obviously leaves it unclear whether these mathematical structures, proportions, divisions, balanced arrangements that ‘force the purer fire to go up while the ashes are pressing on the earth’ do so because of their inherent order – which would imply that the deity, therefore, had to comply in this way to make a natural and balanced order – or that this too was caused by the omnipotence and goodness of God.

The entire ordered creation, the All, originates from (the) god and returns – *anamnèse* – to the god:

*‘Da, pater, augustam menti conscendere sedem,
da fontem lustrare boni, da luce reperta,
in te conspicuos animi defigere visus.
Dissice terrenae nebulas et pondera molis
atque tuo splendore mica; tu namque serenum,
tu requies tranquilla piis, te cernere finis,
principium vector dux semita terminus idem.’*
‘Permit, father, the mind to mount this majestic throne;
permit it to see the source of good, when the light is found;
permit the soul awareness for the vision of you;
scatter the mists of earth, lift up all heaviness;
so shine in your splendour; for you are untroubled,
you are the tranquil rest for the pious, to perceive you our aim
beginning, bearer, guide, way, but also end.’³⁵

These are the last seven verses of the touching, truly comforting hymn. But where were his thoughts and those of his first readers or listeners directed? Was it towards the Christian *credo* or *requiem* or did they still hear the voice and words of Virgil in ‘*sedem augustam*’? It is a pure echo of Neoplatonic philosophy, the voice of Ammonius and the school of Alexandria.

In the final stanza the god is called ‘beginning, bearer, guide, way, but also end’. That is the style of an ecstatic hymn where in the closing stanza everything almost seems to get out of hand and the poet almost loses his grip on the perfection he has achieved. Almost, because it is still kept just under control. Similar statements can also be found in the New Testament: ‘I am the way, the truth and the life’ or ‘I am alpha and omega’.³⁶

³⁵ Ibid: *Consolatio* III 9, 23-29. Translation by the author.

³⁶ *John* 14, 6 and *Revelations* 22, 13.

'*Principium, vector, dux, semita, terminus idem*', that is Ammonius, but Augustine would have no problem with it and would have recognized '*Deus unum et idem*'³⁷ in it. The definition is given by Boethius in the text, where he discusses the content of the hymn with Lady Philosophy. She says: 'It is therefore the highest good, which controls everything and orders mildly – *est igitur summum, inquit, bonum, quod regit cuncta fortiter suaviterque disponit*.'³⁸ Boethius responds with delight to these well-chosen words of Lady Philosophy. Why? The striking definition can be found almost verbatim in the Bible, in the eighth book of *Wisdom of Solomon*. Admittedly, that is an apocryphal book, but it is a text quoted and praised by Augustine and would be used in the advent antiphon ● *Sapientia*. Henry Chadwick explains the joyful outburst of Boethius by pointing out that here for the first (and last) time it is apparent that Lady Philosophy also knows the Bible: 'Fancy you, of all people, knowing the Bible.'³⁹

Be that as it may, the definition of Lady Philosophy with which Boethius, full of enthusiasm, agrees, clears away for him the same series of difficulties encountered by Augustine in his deliberations that led him to the conclusion that God is 'the highest pivot of all causes – *summus causarum cardo*'.⁴⁰ Boethius himself formulates it elsewhere in the text, in words to which medieval thinkers would often return: 'By the word "God" we mean the ultimate that is conceivable – *nihil melius cogitari* – and therefore that must be the highest good in its highest and most ideal degree.' The pivot where the highest good and the highest being coincide and where, as Augustine notes, 'no philosophical school approaches us Christians as closely as the Neoplatonic one does.'⁴¹

'The old earth is still there, and heaven still stretches out over me.' This quotation from Goethe contains the first words written in the diary by Nico Rost in Dachau concentration camp on June 10, 1944.⁴² Through Goethe and Hegel, classic German literature and philosophy as a basic necessity for life functioned even more impressively for Marcel Reich-Ranicki during the war, as he describes in his autobiography *Mein Leben*. Goethe's

³⁷ Augustine: *De civitate dei* VII 9.

³⁸ *Consolatio* III 12.

³⁹ H. Chadwick: *Boethius. The Consolations of Music, Logic, Theology, and Philosophy*. Oxford 1990, p. 238.

⁴⁰ Augustine: *De trinitate* III 9, 16.

⁴¹ Augustine: *De civitate dei* V 5.

⁴² N. Rost: *Goethe in Dachau. Literatur en werkelijkheid. Dagboek 1944-45*. 'Die alte Erde steht noch, und der Himmel wölbt sich noch über mir.'

description of the ascending of the scaffold by Egmond 'supported and helped' Nico Rost, keeping him alive.

The statement of Goethe to Eckermann when suffering great grief at the death of his only son, 'yet the world is still standing and the vault of heaven above it', implies a great source of consolation: I can stand up; I remain, in spite of grief and loss, and remain alive: after all, heaven and earth are still standing.

We have seen that since the letter that Rufus wrote to his heart broken friend Cicero after the sad death of his beloved daughter Tullia, a *contraposition* was used between the demise of 'the stones and the dust' of regions and cities and the consolation derived from such occurrences at 'minor' tragic events such as the death of a loved one. In the Dachau camp where humans and human kindness were destroyed, consolation was derived from 'Goethe in Dachau', at the same time as being well aware that Goethe could not offer any protection against typhus.

The consolation that Boethius wanted to offer also clung to the great spirit of poets and thinkers, but in a way the situation was even worse than in Dachau. The earth was no longer stably fixed, Rome and the Empire had fallen, but above all, heaven no longer spread over it, the natural order in beauty and balance, the *kosmos* had gone.

I certainly do not intend to imply that Boethius in his 'Consolation' attempts to obscure something; personally he would not be aware of it, but in the conversations and expositions he has with Lady Philosophy in his prison, an image of God and the world is contemplated on in which something substantial is shifted in comparison with the ontology of antiquity. In short: world and reality are no longer described as 'in order', meaningful, natural and divine – but the other way round; everything was made and ordered by God. We ourselves, the world and the reality surrounding us, were no longer experienced and thought about as being natural – *natus* – born and grown, but as being, 'fabrications of his hands' meant that in the first place the natural order was lost. The Creator God was the one who had to give order to everything and the meaning of being was no longer inherent in germinating and ripening, in giving birth and flourishing, and even in wilting and withering, in dying and disappearing, but the meaning of why all this happened remained with Him.

We have already come across one of the most complicated philosophical consequences of this shift, with the Cappadocian Church Fathers and Augustine: that apart from God nothing else was the cause of the creation of world and reality that He created '*ex nihilo*', out of nothing. This 'Nothing – *Nihil*', is a total negation, the assurance that nothing else was at work but Him.

In nature invariably ‘something’ is there, present, and an ‘absolute nothing’ does not exist. A vacuum was inconceivable in ancient ontology: something may be empty and something can be absent somewhere, but that too is ‘something’, ‘nothing’ remaining an impossibility and inconceivable. Also the idea of the adherents of the ancient atomic theory – that there are only indivisible particles and their compositions, and that they move in a void, *kenon* – although they acknowledge emptiness, a void, as a space to move around in, by no means believed that there a ‘nothing’ could exist.

What did this ‘nihil’ actually mean to Boethius, who, within the tradition of Aristotle, characterized what was vague and undetermined as uncertain and unknowable?

For Aristotle, nature – *hè phusis* – was essentially in motion. Not only because there was always birth, germination, flourishing and decay. Movement was not something co-incident, but the essence of nature. ‘In principle, nature is of itself – *per se* – in motion and not *per accidens*.’⁴³ Which in itself provided a reason for the Neoplatonics to contemplate less about nature moving than about motionless ideas; ‘being’ itself.

Boethius appears to be in doubt about the essence of nature. What is it actually? It can more or less mean ‘everything that is or exists’. But it could also exclusively indicate all physical objects. Or only incorporeal substances. In any case, he believed – and in doing so remained within the Neoplatonic tradition – that ‘*natura*’ is a concept that referred to objects that, insofar as they do exist, can also be known by the intellect. That is a legacy of Pythagoras that strongly emerged within the latter Neoplatonic schools: existence and knowledgeability do imply each other. We are unable to know what does not exist and what remains unknowable does not exist.

This could explain why he inserts a parenthesis in his definition of nature: ‘as far as they exist’. Non-existence, ‘*nihil*’, would after all be unconceivable. ‘*Nihil*’ is of course inconceivable and unthinkable and because of the theological conception of ‘the creation out of nothing’ – *creation ex nihilo* – it became a metaphysical problem. For Augustine, the meaning of ‘nothing’ lies mainly in, as yet formless, matter. In accordance with the ideas of Plotinus he assumed the stages or steps of ascending ‘being’, and he therefore believed that giving shape would lift up something from the stadium of ‘it is nothing as yet’ to ‘it does exist’ as this or that. Augustine therefore asks himself ‘what is “nothing” if it is not formless matter – *quid sit nihil, quid informis materia?*’⁴⁴

⁴³ Aristotle: *Physica* 192b 20.

⁴⁴ Augustine: *De ordine* II 6, 44.

Whoever accepts this, as Boethius did, can entirely remain within the definition of nature as substance, as construed by Plato and taken over by Aristotle. Nature, physical or incorporeal, is that which is capable of action of its own accord or with which something can be done.⁴⁵ Because of which *'natura'* and *'substantia'* imply one another – and exclude a *'nihil'*. Aristotle goes one step further, a step that would have great influence on theology: therefore, according to him nature is 'the specific difference that is being made through which everything takes on shape'.⁴⁶

f. Debris and dust

Rome was conquered several times, first of all by the Vandals, then by the Goths, subsequently by the Greeks then and then once again by the Goths and then a third time by the Goths. In December AD546 the city came once again in the hands of King Totila. His people had bled to death before the walls of Rome, and the Greeks had been the scourge of Italy and left the country depopulated to a large extent. One of the first acts of Totila was to set fire to the library of Cassiodorus and Agapithus on the Mons Caelio. In the streets of Rome an old, esteemed woman could be seen: Rusticiana, one of the three daughters of the former *'princeps senatus'* Symmachus, the widow of Boethius.

Her father had been the last leader of the senate and was killed by the Goths. Her husband had been the last great philosopher of antiquity, and had also been killed by the Goths. Her possessions had been confiscated and all honours were taken from her. She also lived to see the statues of her father and her husband being re-erected by the rulers.⁴⁷ Following the failure of the negotiations between the actual ruler Totila and the formal ruler, Emperor Justinian in Constantinople, Totila decided to set fire to some palaces, to demolish most of the walls and to expel the entire population from the city. For a period of forty days, in Rome – *caput mundi*, there would be no living person.

⁴⁵ Plato: *Phaedrus* 270d; *Sophistes* 247d-e; Aristoteles: *Topica* 148a 18.

⁴⁶ Aristotle: *Physica* 193a 28-31.

⁴⁷ Procopius: *De bello Gothico* III 20.

CHAPTER NINE

CASSIODORUS SENATOR

a. Civilization and barbarians

In the year (AD 523) that Boethius wrote his *Consolatio Philosophiae* while awaiting his execution in the prison of Pavia, he was succeeded in the highest office, *magister officiorum*, by a man from southern Italy, Cassiodorus Senator. As the king's Chancellor Cassiodorus found himself in a more or less hopeless position. At the barbarian court he represented the civilization and the interests of the defeated Romans. But the resistance that the Roman magistrates still showed was dealt with in a brutal way. In AD 525 Symmachus, *princeps* of the Roman Senate and son-in-law of Boethius, was put to death. A few months later, the king, Theoderic, died and formally left all power to a child, his daughter Amalasantha.

In Constantinople Emperor Justinian began intriguing in his attempt to recapture the western half of the Empire. This was to result in a series of devastating wars in which the civilization of antiquity would perish for ever and Italy would be governed by the Byzantine Greeks for a while. The situation in which Cassiodorus found himself can be compared with the situation of Plato in Syracuse and also with Cicero during the fall of the republic, with Seneca at the court of Nero or with Thomas Moore as Henry VIII's Chancellor. These comparisons are seldom made, for just as we have merely fragmentary testimonies dating from the beginning of philosophy in the sixth century BC, the end of the philosophy of antiquity in the sixth century AD is only fragmentary and above all buried under the rubble of Christian prejudice.

Cassiodorus in particular has been a victim of these unfavourable times. Information about him from contemporaries is lacking to such an extent that scholars have wondered whether the silence about him, from Ennodius for example, might be deliberate and a sign of disapproval. Was he being reproached for his collaboration with the Goths? Or for his attitude during the trial against Boethius?

Education during the Middle Ages can hardly be imagined without the influence of Cassiodorus, but his name is seldom mentioned. From the

Renaissance onwards he would be completely forgotten, apart from being occasionally ridiculed as a 'dark oaf'. During the Middle Ages, his career (he had been a senator and became a monk) counted as some sort of recommendation, but during the Renaissance it was precisely these things that were held against him by humanists and enlightened philosophers alike. Not until the nineteenth century were some studies about him published, especially in Germany, but in them the opinions about him vary from condescending compassion to pure ridicule. 'A cabinet of curiosities' was one of the opinions.

Not until 1955, in a speech given by Arnaldo Momigliano was the question asked as to whether it was actually a mere coincidence that appreciation for Cassiodorus had increased considerably after it had been personally experienced by many what it was like to live under a barbarian occupying power and access to certain books refused.¹

In the early Middle Ages, first of all with Bede, the misconception arose that Cassiodorus had first been senator and after that a monk. His family name was Senator, but the family was not senatorial at all. The Cassiodori family originated from Syria and possibly Senator's grandfather had quite recently arrived in Italy in the train of Empress Galla Placidia. This may possibly be one of the reasons for the silence about him; he was working everywhere and nowhere at home. In Rome the aristocrats and senatorial families looked down on this *homo novus*. At the court in Ravenna and Pavia the Gothic rulers distrusted him and in Constantinople he was considered an enemy by the Greeks. Moreover, he was generally thought of as a provincial, being, as he was, of Syrian origin and living obscurely, like his father and grandfather, on the family estates in Calabria where he had been born. He was born in Squillace, a Greek colony founded by Ionians as early as the eighth century BC and later on ruled by Croton – the city where Pythagoras lived after his escape from Samos. For more than a thousand years the official language in those regions was Greek; it would remain so under Byzantine authority until the eleventh century and when, during the Renaissance Petrarca was the first person to learn Greek, he learned that language from Barlaam, a monk from Calabria.

Also from the perspective of Senator's political career prejudices emerged. Whoever considers the sixth century AD as focusing on the decline of classical civilization and the increase of barbarism and foreign domination, will have little understanding of the actions of Senator. In his eyes and

¹ A. Momigliano: *Cassiodorus and Italian culture of his time* (1955). In *Studies in Historiography* (1966).

those of his contemporaries however, the Gothic troops had entered Italy on the authority of the emperor and had been given legitimacy by emperor and senate. But this did not actually make the Goths *cives Romani* and therefore they did not qualify for civil and higher state offices. The magistracy therefore remained in Roman hands and the Goths lived according to their own laws. ●f a total population of about six million, their number, fifty thousand able men, was by far in the minority. This was also the reason why a relatively small Byzantine expeditionary force led by Belisarius would suffice for their rapid defeat. But who of the Romans really wanted to drive them away? The Goths fought for the security of the Empire by order of the emperor, adhering to all laws, obeying the court in Constantinople and their king taking much more account of the wishes of the Roman Senate than this high institution had been accustomed to for many centuries. The latter situation led Boethius astray and was the reason for his presumptuous behaviour, for which he had to pay with his life.

What the Goths desired above all else was land in exchange for their military services. There was plenty of land available in Italy and the patrician Iberius, in charge of the division of land, garnered praise for his efforts.

Both Theoderic and his daughter Amalasantha were quite fluent in Latin and Greek and the praise given to them by Senator in his *Variae*, ‘the Goths deserve to be praised as protectors of civilization – *Gothorum laus est civilitas custodia*’, is well deserved.² It is in line with what present-day scholars such as Momigliano give as their judgment: under Gothic rule, society was ‘humane and easy-going’. After two hundred years of wars, civil wars and raids, the Goths guaranteed peace, security and prosperity; after the harsh Roman military power and its brutal autocracy, the leadership of the Goths was benevolent and respectful towards the senate. Both the senate in Rome and the court in Ravenna understood that only through mutual cooperation did the Empire and its civilization have a chance of survival. From the Greeks only conquest, domination and extortion was to be expected. For Constantinople, Italy would only be considered as a distant, subdued, alien province, which would be relentlessly suppressed. Senator, as *praefectus praetorio* probably remained faithful to this policy until the fall of Ravenna in AD 540. After that, all was lost. Rome – *caput mundi*, which he had known in all its splendour, would, in the following years turn into an empty desert landscape, as described with trepidation by Pope Gregory the Great at the end of the sixth century.

² Cassiodorus Senator: *Institutiones* II 3, 5.

The ideals of Cassiodorus Senator were primarily not politically but culturally orientated. He wanted to save the world as he knew it, its civilization and language, its wisdom and science. Both of his historical works, *Chronica* and *Historia Gothica*, are often met with derision. And yes, when compared with the works of his Greek contemporary, Procopius, they are pathetic. Yet their importance is remarkable. They are the last books of Roman historiography. But they are also the first studies that attempt to understand an alien and hostile people. He tried to discover and explain to his readers what the Goths understood by honour, loyalty, heroism and similar concepts. Both books are indications of his constant attempts to promote mutual understanding and a peaceful cohabitation of both peoples. For that peaceful coexistence the Roman tradition had always reverted to an imperious concept of integration, integrate subjected peoples to their civilization, a form of further submission. Senator showed more respect and curiosity.

●f the twelve books of his *Historia Gothica*, none have survived. After the fall of Ravenna, Cassiodorus fled to Constantinople and there too attempted to achieve something in his policy of reconciliation. ●ne of his means was to order a shortened version of his book. That is the *Getica* of Jordanes. This is no more than a series of excerpts from the lost original. The book was offered to the court in AD 551. It was too late, this ideal of peaceful coexistence; it had already given way to the actions of the emperor. Justinian had started with the eradication of the Goths and the suppression and extortion of the Romans.

Disappointed, Cassiodorus withdrew from politics and returned to his estates in Calabria. There he received friends and scholars and founded a living and working community, *Vivarium*, named after the fishponds on the estate. He was born around AD 485 and lived to a great age, dying around about 580. The second half of his life was entirely devoted to philosophy and science, as another way of reaching the goal of the first half of his life, the creation of a peaceful harmonious society. Less than twenty years after his death, barbarism also reached these remote areas and his estate and library were so thoroughly destroyed that we are completely unable to pinpoint their exact location near Squillace. But owing to the work that had been done there for almost half a century, education in philosophy and science in Europe inherited a foundation which was to last nigh on a thousand years.

b. The last library

Whoever in contemporary Rome walks from the sunken ground where once the large circus was situated and ascends the Caelimontana, will be walking on top of the antique *clivus scaurus* which is still situated there a few metres below the present street-level. On the right, an octagonal ruin is visible, recently restored and accessible from the terrain of the San Gregorio Magno. There it was that the last library of Rome was founded by Cassiodorus and Agapithus, the man who would in later years become a pope, a few years before the battle between Goths and Greeks put an end to the civilization of antiquity. It was the first library that Cassiodorus founded, *Vivarium* was his second attempt. On the walls of this building, on which the hooks can still be seen to attach the cabinets for the codices attached, part of Europe's fate once depended. We do not know the ideals that inspired him to take on these great and at that time disheartening tasks. Some still consider it a conservative, panic stricken attempt to preserve what could be saved while civilization rushed faster and faster towards its demise.

During his busy life all the ancient metropolises were no longer in power, but still in possession of their former splendour, and during the second half of his life, withdrawn on his estates in Calabria, the disasters of those years would have come to him as rumours from afar. The '*vetuste servare*' from his *Variae* relates to the Goths who respectfully 'preserved the old' and showed respect for the Roman civilization. Cassiodorus had never belonged to the conservative Roman party of the nobility of Boethius and Symmachus, considering himself to be '*antiqui Catonis novellus imitator*' and even openly showed his aversion of it. Also the construction of the future must have been alien to him. What future? The fact that in later centuries he was mentioned as 'the father of the schools of Europe' would never have occurred to him.

He certainly did not strive for the salvation of only his own soul. When Bede in later years described him as 'from senator to monk', he was not only mistaken about the first, but certainly with the second as well. When Cassiodorus Senator talks about his '*conversio*', there is no reason to assume that he meant something like an entry into a monastic order.

What was of primary interest to him can probably be observed most of all in the unadorned account given by him in both books of his *Institutiones*.

The first book is a description of the Vivarium library. The second book would serve as the textbook of the West for over a thousand years. It gives an overview of the seven sciences, the *artes liberales*.

There are not many books that could so easily be ridiculed, as these *Institutiones* were. In many manuals on the history of philosophy the book is not even mentioned and also the name of Senator is too often missing. Only in passing does Hegel mention him as ‘politician at the time of the great migrations’. It is also questionable whether we can still consider this work as belonging to philosophy. In his *Institutiones* he tries to give a definition of philosophy, but he does not go beyond copying a list of definitions from the school at the library of Alexandria. Augustine still dared to take over and endorse the definition of philosophy as the desire for wisdom and ‘aiming to conform with the deity’. Senator prefers to ignore this definition and opts for the more neutral ‘preparation for death’. As explanation he adds that this definition is according to him the humblest of all. Whoever considers philosophy to be something for the ‘heroes of the mind’, or as Nietzsche does, as an activity for ‘mächtige Naturen – great spirits’ who experience and devise *beständig ausserordentliche Dinge* – continually exceptional things’, living ‘in Eis und Hochgebirge – icy upper mountain regions’, will shrug his shoulders about the humility of Senator.

But the roads of wisdom seldom lead across ice and the highest mountain ridges, but, as all roads do, through the valleys of life. The roads along which the philosophy of antiquity has come to us, led past library desks and monks who gave their time to copy again and again texts that had become almost illegible and at times unintelligible to them. E.K. Rand in his *Founders of the Middle Ages* writes with awe about the ‘powerful effect of the master-mind’ of Gregory the Great. ‘But the ultimate victory’ he attributes to someone like Senator ‘in which the old education is vitally embedded in the new.’³

Virtually all manuscripts which were used for the first printed editions during the Renaissance date from the short period between Cassiodorus and the Carolingian Renaissance. In the second book of his *Institutiones* Senator instructed his staff of scholars in grammar, rhetoric and orthography. Senator’s knowledge of the Greek language enabled him to understand complicated philosophical works and to translate them into Latin. It is not even quite clear which of these two languages was actually his mother tongue. His co-workers had already considerably more problems and the translations known to us from the circle around Cassiodorus are often no more than adaptations, awkward sometimes and not always really understandable. Probably, like a master painter in his

³ E.K. Rand: *Founders of the Middle Ages*. Harvard 1928, p. 250.

studio, he added some rhetorical stylistic features in texts translated by his staff, finishing with a well-phrased conclusion.

To translate a text as closely to the original as possible was unknown in antiquity and even Jerome when translating the Bible did so to his personal liking and hated to niggle about choosing the correct words. This translation of the Bible, the Vulgate, was edited and republished by the workers at Vivarium. It was that edition of the text which would remain an undisputed sacred text for more than a thousand years until Erasmus and Luther. The translation by Jerome, partly written in Athens and partly in Jerusalem and Bethlehem, was published in Rome in AD 382. While re-editing the Bible, Cassiodorus in all likelihood consulted the *Evangeliarum* from the library of Eugippius of Naples as the text of the four gospels. This was his personal copy, the basic text for his translation.

In addition to the text of the Bible the community of Vivarium produced a wealth of Greek texts. In the foreword of his *Institutiones*, Cassiodorus prescribes a strict rule: 'If there is anything not quite clear in the books translated into Latin, then those who have a high command of Greek must sort out what is written in the Greek texts.'⁴

In order to do so, the worker went to the eighth room of the library, where the Greek codices were kept. Some Greek texts we only know because of the translations made in Vivarium. Translated were the works of John Chrysostom, Origen and Flavius Josephus. The latter author would remain a much-read writer to this day, partly because of this translation. In addition, Greek historians such as Theodoretus, Socrates and Sozomenus were also translated.

I leave it to historians of the philosophy of Late Antiquity to describe in how far the work of Senator and his people has contributed to the foundations of European civilization and to education in the different sciences. As far as this book is concerned, I adhere to the advice of Lord Acton: 'Study problems, not periods.' So we will not dwell on the long period over which Senator's influence extended, but will consider the problems that concerned him. Just as his early Ionian predecessors in the sixth century BC would have been astonished if they had known that they would be called 'philosopher', twelve centuries later Senator too would have been surprised and would have humbly rejected that title. His philosophical ideas, if they deserve to be called as such, are those of Augustine. But the richly nuanced images that Augustine was still able to depict had declined to no more than a rough sketch in the work of Cassiodorus. Many aspects of Augustine are missing while other ideas have received a remarkable over-emphasis. This provided enough reasons,

⁴ *Institutiones, Praefatio* I 3.

especially for nineteenth-century German historians of philosophy, to consider him with contempt and to ignore his works. But some of his scratches and lines left more of an impression of medieval philosophy in the minds of scholastics, theologians or rhetoricians than the much more nuanced views of the later Greek commentators on the hard-to-understand texts of Aristotle or the great philosophers in the Neoplatonic tradition.

With Augustine, the long tradition of the philosophy of antiquity in which thinking was a form of gaining understanding of the divinely balanced ordering of reality, in which *kosmos*, *phusis* and *telos* formed the foundation had finally come to an end. The self-evidence of the natural order had also come to an end with the new idea of the incarnation of the Son of God and his resurrection from the dead. On this road Senator took significantly further steps. For him too birth and growth, nature, was no longer the self-evident order, the exemplary and inexhaustible source of abundantly resurgent life of which Plotinus spoke with admiration.⁵ The name of his community is actually already significant: *Vivarium*. These are the cascading fish ponds, aquariums in which, owing to a complicated system of channels, the water was 'alive'; it remained flowing, making fish farming possible. He wrote about these *vivaria* with pride and in a Bible codex an image of it was included.

Senator constantly refers to Plato and Aristotle, according to him the two great '*opinabilis magistri*' and for whom he continually expresses his high esteem – only (for the attentive) to render a different meaning of their words. The knowledge of science and philosophy is no longer a form of understanding about reality and truth; for Senator it was knowledge and skill, referred to by him as *ars*. The definition of that skill – *ars* – is: 'the ability to give shape to something by knowledge of the rules.' It has to complete, perfect or imitate the unfinished aspects of nature.⁶ *Ars* is therefore the '*habitude operatrix*', the laborious endeavour to give form to the unordered by knowledge of the '*regulae*'. Nature was, according to this definition, at that time understood as something imperfect, as '*materia informis*'. In nature, matter and objects are still scattered and formless, disordered, but knowledge and skill have the ability to bring unity and to give form with it: '*Ita quae natura divisa sunt, ars hominum fecit ire concorditer* – Although in nature all things are divided, it is through human knowledge and skill that they come together in harmony.'

This view is clarified in the text with the example of lamps and timepieces. Sometimes, on a rainy day, darkness comes early, whereas on a bright day the sun can raise us from our sleep too early. These untidy

⁵ *Institutiones* I 29, 1.

⁶ *Ibid*: II 3, 20, 6.

natural phenomena are ordered with the aid of lamps and timepieces, owing to their '*regulae*', their regular and regulating course, regulating the order of the day and its schedules.

For Aristotle, the *phusis* was still the overwhelming and regulating force and *technè*, admittedly a helping force, but never sufficient. For Aristotle, *technè* was the imperfect attempt as compared to the efficient *telos*, the unfolding to completion which was inherent in the *phusis*.

Later, in the same tradition, with the Stoics, still the advice was given to take nature as the guideline for art, follow nature: '*natura artis magistra*'.

But here Senator turns everything around and in a way that has never happened before: nature is the imperfection, the as yet unordered, whereas the artful knowledge of mankind has mastered the rules to achieve the perfect order and completed form. Some of the sentences following those quoted above sound almost nineteenth-century, as if they had flowed from the pen of Karl Marx. *Ars* has shackled a rambunctious and riotous Nature, called it to order, imposed regularity upon it, adapted it – *aptare* – so that the immense powers were moderated and restricted to rules. The life force – *vitalis vis* – should not be wasted, but it must be given straight directions by *ars*. When *kosmos* disappeared as the framework of thought, *ars* created through its *regulae* a new order, *forma* and *ordo*, out of unordered nature.

The words in which all this is described are linked to and are at times even paraphrases of texts by Aristotle. And yet the link with the earlier tradition has finally been severed.

The philosophy of Senator turns away from the fundamental concepts of *phusis* and *kosmos*, natural growth and ordered reality. But, of course, it remains far removed from present-day premises in which man and machine set the rules and become regulator and manipulator of a self-conceived and constructible reality. Because of this, at least in our eyes, Senator's philosophy attains a kind of strange, ephemeral character. However, for his contemporaries and throughout the subsequent thousand years, it provided a clear and solid foundation to continue to work with and to think through. *Regulae*, as drawn up by Descartes, were as yet totally unimaginable for Senator, but on the other hand Descartes might not have been able to establish his *Regulae ad directionem ingenii* without the foundation provided by Senator with his '*regulae*'.

The rules given by Descartes are, as is stated in the very first rule, intended to enable the mind to get a hold on reality, to understand things by forming a true representation of them. With Descartes, certainty, truth and reality are not to be found in the world and in objects, but only '*in me*

esse sum certus'. True and real can only be found in thought, because of our representation of things: *'Illud omne est verum, quod valde clare et distincte perceptio.*'⁷ The truth of the 'I am', however, was still unthinkable for Cassiodorus. To base philosophy on the *'ego cogito*', on the thinking object, *'res cogitans*' and to find in it an uncomplicated and fundamental certainty, *'fundamentum simplex inconcussum*', was still centuries away from Senator.

c. Deeds and thought

During the first half of his life Cassiodorus Senator was primarily a statesman, a politician with ideals that proved unfeasible. All his life he remained a practical man who understood knowledge as a skill. But as a philosopher, he was a Neoplatonist and like Plotinus and Augustine ignored stones and dust, the reality of nature and the ordered starry sky. 'He who is worried about stones and supports and whether they will remain standing or will collapse, has a tiny mind,' Plotinus had said.⁸ God and the soul were the things with which these late philosophers were concerned, people and powers remained outside their considerations. Immediately after Cassiodorus had lost his power and had abandoned his high offices of state, he wrote a book: *De anima*. His next work, *Institutiones* was intended to be an introduction to God's wisdom and His creation.

For Augustine the reality of the world had retreated so far back into a hazy background that in his *Soliloquia* he could give a clear answer to the question whether he wanted to know anything beyond God and the soul: 'No, nothing else!'⁹ Augustine also rejected Aristotle's theory of categories, the attempt to get a grip on reality, to learn to understand the world around us. The world receded and the limited reality of the 'this' and 'here' was actually to be avoided. *Hic, hoc et nunc*, they would no longer be indicative but dismissive words. The 'this, here' became the pejorative for the passing vagueness, the fleeting ephemerality that is hardly real. Only He is. And He cannot be grasped or understood by those categories that are completely inadequate and insufficient. And the soul too, which for Homer was still visible in the breath, the blood or the vapour that emanates from a living body, became like God, elusive and impossible to indicate.

⁷ R. Descartes: *Regulae ad Directionem Ingenii*, rule 1 and *Meditationes*, III 1.

⁸ Plotinus: *Enneads*, I 4: 17, 24.

⁹ Augustine: *Soliloquia* I 2 et II 1: see also: *De Ordine* II 18.

Senator, in chapter three of the second book of the *Institutiones*, also pays little attention to the theory of the categories. He virtually ignores it and focuses all his attention on what fascinates him, the *Topica* theory and the book on the art of interpretation: *Peri hermèneias*. If we, readers in our time, had to interpret this once more, we could see this as a turning point: Cassiodorus shifts his attention and, in doing so, shifts Western philosophical tradition away from the theory of the categories of reality to the modes of thought, from objects to thinking. He provided the impetus that would reach its completion in Kant.

Significant is what Senator then writes: *‘Mirabile plane genus operis, in unum potuisse collige quidquid mobilitas ac varietas humanae mentis in sensibus exquirendis. – It is amazing that all that the human mind has found to be changeable and changing can be brought together in one system;. (...) Nam quocumque se verterit, quosconque cogitationes intraverit, in aliquid eorum quae predicta sunt necesse est ut humanarum cadat ingenium. – For wherever the mind turns, whatever thoughts are involved, it is necessary that these thoughts fall under one of the headings – topica.’*¹⁰ The fundamental question of Aristotle *ti to on*; ‘What is it that is?’ definitely steps aside for the question of God and the soul, for a form of philosophy in which there is no wondering about and admiration for the things surrounding us and the actions of mortals who are destined to die – from then onwards shoved aside as belonging to stones and dust – but the rules and schedules of thinking become the focus of attention. The tradition of antiquity attempted to get a grip on reality and to understand all that was amazing around us. It did not want to settle for seeing, seeing the world, but wanted to gain insight into the essence and truth of reality. In Late Antiquity and later on in the scholastic tradition that focuses on reality disappears and shifts to the insight of the mind. But the *Nous*, the insight, on what does the mind actually have any insight? Only with Kant in his ‘Critique of Pure Reason’ will the question of the limitations of the mind be fundamentally formulated and thoroughly answered.

For present-day readers many texts from Late Antiquity and early scholastic are tiring because of the constant attempt to completely analyse a text without trying to go from thinking to the objects themselves. Senator too lived in a reality of words and his world is that of texts and symbols. I will try to describe some facets of that world of the mind.

His attention to the world of words is obviously evident in the first place through his main work, the extensive library and book production of *Vivarium*. In the first book of his *Institutiones* he gives a detailed

¹⁰ Cassiodorus: *Institutiones* II 3, 17.

description of it and the traces of his satisfaction with this enterprise are still to be found in the texts. But are they really texts? Before him, Augustine, in addition to his interpretations, such as the explanation of the Psalms, also literally, commented on each word. Senator goes even further, he seems to want to attach importance to every word, to each syllable. His treatises are overloaded and resemble the jewellery of his time, like rings overloaded with all kinds of colourful gems. We are used to considering those jewels from the time of the popular migrations as 'barbaric'. But is that sobriquet valid at all? In Senator's collection of his diplomatic letters, the *Variae*, there is a letter to Boethius in which he actually makes a simple request – 'Will you ask King Clovis of the Franks to send us a lyre?' – each word providing reasons for a stylized and learned argument: lyre, harmony, universe, Apollo, art, education, etc. etc. It is a sparkling letter, but the 'barbaric' envoys must have been baffled about such a showcase of skill and artistry. Would they really have understood it at all? Did Senator still have a hold on this display of knowledge without coherence, on these fragmented '*memorabilia*' and facts?

The secrets of the words have to be fathomed too by searching for the origins of the words. Augustine has presented us every now and then with the most bizarre etymologies of words. Without blinking an eyelid Senator dishes up sheer nonsense: *Animus* (Latin) comes from *anemos* (Greek), a word meaning 'wind', because our thoughts go very fast. *Anima* (Latin) comes from *anaima* (Greek), 'bloodless, anaemic'. After all, the soul of man is incorporeal and therefore bloodless. An animal's soul on the other hand, runs away from the lifeless carcass together with its blood. The entertainment value of these word derivations is often great. Such as *barbarous*, which is, of course, derived from *barba* (beard) and *rus* (countryside): in fact barbarians are actually bearded yokels. And yet, of course, Senator did not intend to amuse us at all, he wanted to penetrate in a scientific way into the secrets of words and fathom their true meaning.

The same applies to his remarkable number symbolism. In his *Expositio in Psalterium* he unhesitatingly explains that psalm one obviously symbolizes our faith in the one, true God; psalm two for the duality, the divine and the human nature in Christ and psalm three deals with the trinity of God. You will understand that after that which follows is that the world rests on four pillars and our faith therefore on four gospels; that there are five books of the Law of Moses; that God created the world in six days that the sixth day, Friday, is a day of penance and the sixth psalm is therefore a psalm of atonement; seven is the repose and eight the resurrection. He then reminds us that it was no coincidence that

there were eight people in the Ark of Noah, that Easter is the eighth day and that already Pythagoras understood the particular sanctity of the number eight, because this is the first cubic number.

Many who are reading this now will be baffled at this juggling of the mind. Not so Senator; unabashed he goes on and on and tells us that twenty-seven is three times nine and that the number nineteen should be understood as twelve plus seven, i.e. the number of apostles plus the number of the days of creation, including the day of rest. Any connection with reality or the psalm in question is, at the very least, far-fetched and at times completely absent.

In the tradition of antiquity ample attention was given to the body, not only in sculpture, but with medical and biological science where, through Hippocrates and Aristotle, it took in a significant position within philosophical research. However, during Late Antiquity the physical presence disappeared behind a screen of symbolism. Nietzsche would mainly blame the rise of Christianity, but that is a too one-sided and exaggerated representation of this attitude. Peter Brown gives an overview in his *The Body and Society*, which unfortunately does not go beyond Augustine. But Senator in particular in the ninth chapter of his *Liber de Anima*, gives one of the most fascinating statements about the symbolism of the body.

● Our head is round, like the *sphaera*. A beautiful, perfect form and therefore the best seat for the soul. We have two eyes, ears, arms and legs because they symbolize both parts of the Bible, the word of God. ● Our head rests on our neck, the symbol of the one and true faith. Nothing is therefore left to fate or chance, everywhere God's plan of salvation is visibly present. 'It is amazing that in one system can be brought together all things changeable and changing that the human mind has discovered.'¹¹

That man has twenty-four ribs and thirty-two teeth has a deeper meaning. Sheer nonsense for us, but for many centuries nourishment for scholastic minds.

But this way of being intrusively busy with the meaning of reality – this penetration of the mind in its true sense has also given us much that is valuable. Under the leadership of Cassiodorus, the staff of *librarii*, *notarii* et *antiqvarii* in *Vivarium* introduced an important innovation. In former times writing was usually done '*per cola et commata*', which meant that every new phrase or new sentence started on a new line and no punctuation was necessary. Anyone who ever tried to decipher old inscriptions will be familiar with the difficulties this causes. In *De Orthographia*, his last book, written at the age of ninety-three, Cassiodorus prescribes the use of

¹¹ Cassiodorus: *Institutiones* II 3, 17: *op cit. De artibus*.

punctuation. Through the placing full-stops and commas the meaning of a sentence or phrase suddenly becomes clearer or often quite different from that gleaned from an unpunctuated phrase. In the rewriting of ancient texts, Senator's staff were the first to decide on the meaning of sentences and sometimes intervened firmly, quite literally in fact, by the placing of full-stops. Those who have studied ancient manuscripts will also have seen that there is a significant difference between these texts and the same texts which were printed from the Renaissance onwards. The manuscripts are riddled with *siglia*, symbols and signs which originated from the great tradition of the library of Alexandria. They were meant to indicate the peculiarities of the content or the rhetorical form of the text. They did not have any text-critical significance, and for that reason they were later omitted by printers, but they can be compared to the 'Urtext' editions of music, in which all later indications of how it should be performed were omitted.

At first sight, this close reading of texts seems to be superfluous and exhausting. Applying the *artes* resulted in valuable texts. The starting point of Senator was the adage '*nihil prorsus vacat* – nothing is there for no reason'. An exhausting adage. In order to meet this principle, he recommends the fourfold way to arrive at the true meaning of words and texts. For each word has four meanings: literal, imagistic (allegorical), admonishing (morally) and transporting (mystical or anagogical). Well-known is the example 'Jerusalem': literally it is the city situated there and there; the deeper spiritual meaning lies in concepts such as 'the community of saints', the church; in a moral sense the soul is meant; and in a metaphorical sense it refers to heaven.

Here a gateway was opened that provided access for more than a thousand years of searching for the divisions of the mind and the almost unlimited possibilities to explore broad areas of thought. Would the work of Thomas Aquinas or Dante be possible without this way of developing the mind? What are the *Summa* and *Comedia* but ways of exploring in ever more and more profound and more and more detailed explanations of this '*sensus litteralis, allegoricus, moralis et mysticus anagogicus*'. It became the main tool used by medieval man to delve into the world of the mind and the word. The gateway to the deeper meaning of the word – and also the open door by which the scholastic could avoid reality and the world. Reality and world in the modern sense of those words. For just like we make our world, plan it and construct it technically, a thinker in Late Antiquity and Middle Ages created his world and reality through this analysing quadruple, this almost infinite realm of reflections and

contemplations, which always offered new possibilities, surprises and viewpoints.

It was in Late Antiquity that this manner of speculation developed; it was a method of immersing oneself in word and mind, soul and the divine and it formed the basis of medieval thinking, the foundation of scholastic philosophy. Medieval European thinking does not have its roots in Athens, nor in Cicero's Rome, but was mainly nourished by thinkers of late antiquity: Porphyry, Augustine and Senator. Athens, Plato and Aristotle – in the mediaeval West they were only remote names. Until the thirteenth century little more was known from Aristotle than what Boethius had translated, and above all the Latin adaptation of the introduction and summary that Porphyry wrote about his theory of categories, the *Isagoge*. Most of Plato's dialogues were unknown, apart from (in Latin translation of course) his *Phaedo* and especially the *Timaeus*. Both texts were given a Christian interpretation: The *Timaeus* as a kind of story about the creation and a counterpart to *Genesis*, and the *Phaedo* because of the arguments given therein concerning the survival of the soul after the death of the body. The mature works of Plato, the *Sophist* and *Theaetetus*, which were constantly read and commented on in previous centuries and were regarded as the highest sources of wisdom, had been completely forgotten and were lost. The favourite dialogue of the Renaissance humanists, the *Symposium*, had been quite unknown for more than a millennium in the West. The philosophers of Rome's heyday were hardly or not at all read during the Middle Ages: the brilliant prose of Cicero was considered too difficult and the human despair of Marcus Aurelius too pagan. Boethius, Augustine and Cassiodorus were the authors who were read.

The roots of our philosophical tradition do not lead back to its sources.

With the work of Cassiodorus Senator the philosophical foundations were laid for many later, more penetrating ideas, such as those of the twelfth-century school of Chartres. Bernard of Clairvaux, the best known representative of that school, writes about the forms of scientific and philosophical knowledge. The '*scientia mundi*', knowledge of the world is the most superfluous form of knowledge; it means knowledge concerning fleeting and passing things the contemptible and shabby things, forms of vanity: '*scientia mundi quae docet vanitatem*'.

In addition, there is the equally objectionable knowledge about the body, the flesh, which can only lead to filth and lasciviousness: '*scientia carnis quae docet voluptatem*'.

There remains only one form of wisdom and science, the insight into divine matters which turns the soul away from earthly and temporal matters and which finds joy in contemplating all that is really durable and

eternal: '*scientia sanctorum, quae docet temporaliter cruciari et delectari in perpetuum.*'¹²

For Cassiodorus Senator too, birth and growth, nature with conceiving and withering, the natural order were merely incomplete, imperfect and inadequate forms. Even the regularity of the *kosmos* was deficient and insignificant in his eyes and needed regulation by means of time pieces and oil lamps, the *ars* which had to impose its rules.

And the body of man, flesh and sin, what else was it to him than just a tool in the hands of the mind. Senator writes about the body as an 'inspired tool'. *Organon empsuchon* was Aristotle's definition of a slave!

d. Description of the decline

Polybius and Senator, to compare one of the first with one of the last historians of Rome, where else could that comparison lead than to a painful defeat for the latter? Polybius wrote one of the greatest texts of mankind, whereas the writings of Senator seem to be completely inconspicuous in comparison. And yet there is a remarkable similarity: both were the first to write about a people who had recently beaten and subdued – their own people. The Greek historian Polybius wrote his book because he was a friend of Scipio Africanus in Rome and Senator described the history of the Goths and the Gothic royal house of the Amali.

The differences between them are profound and obvious. For Polybius the course of history is based on a philosophical foundation. He experiences the connection between facts as a natural whole, *sōmatoeidēs*. In his story, Senator loosely assembles fragments, excerpts from other texts and from context lists or *mirabilia*.

In his history Polybius described a kind of cycle of emerging and declining states – *politeiōn anakuklōsis*, based on the idea elaborated by Plato in his eighth book of his *Res publica*, dealing with the cycle of power. This went back to the ancient tradition of ascension and inevitable decline, as it can already be found in Homer, Hesiod and Herodotus. States are like bodies; they emerge, slowly increase, come to power and bloom, show signs of decline and inevitably cease to exist and on its debris a new state flourishes once more. That is the gruesome aspect of Herodotus' history, the slow rising of the wave, the pride and impetuosity of the rulers who want to rise higher and higher, and then the turning point, the effervescence and the rising foam, with the inevitable breaking, the collapse – *peripeteia* – of the wave and the downfall. And again and again

¹² Quotations from M. Grabmann: *Gesch. Schol. Meth.* II, 105.

new waves are rolling in and overturning their predecessors, which are broken and ebbing away. That is the philosophical idea which Polybius in the thirty-eighth book has pronounced by the Roman consul Scipio, who weeps after his triumph over Carthage. Rome has then reached its zenith; from then on the decline would be visible, only because of the absence of a strong opponent will the Romans relax and inevitably decline and then undergo the same fate that struck ruined Carthage.

The philosophical basis of this philosophy of history is based on the natural cycle and a balanced order, *kosmos* and *phusis*.

That tradition of antiquity is broken during Late Antiquity with Porphyry, with Augustine. The latter would claim that this break with the tradition as a victory of Christianity by stating that the cycle was broken by something completely new, a '*novum*', the incarnation of the Word, and the resurrection from the dead. The fierce adversary of Christianity, Nietzsche, would, like so many others, accept this assumption and take it from Augustine. With his defence of the cycle, the '*Ewige Wiederkehr des Gleichen* – eternal re-emergence of the same', he believed he had struck a lethal blow to the rectilinear Christian faith, the *via recta* of the linear sense of time that leads from God's creation to God's judgment, from alpha to omega.

With the thinkers of Late Antiquity, be they pagan or Christian, this fundamental trust in the cycle of nature, the sustainability of all that is through return and revival of everything that had fallen away from us through decay. In opposition to nature which grows and flourishes in order to perish and rise up once again, they point to God and the soul; opposite the *kosmos*, the ordered and eternal course of the stars the finite and limited temporality of 'this here'.

In his short treatise *De fine saeculi*, Augustine fulminates time and again about the hopeless futility of having to go round and round in the same cycle. For him the cycle is no longer connected to an idea of sustainability, eternity and self-evident natural recurrence. On the contrary, for him it is a most horrible form of being locked up, of forced repetition and futility.

Unlike Scipio and Polybius at the fall of Carthage or Herodotus at the demise of Croesus, Augustine was hardly shocked by the fall of Rome in AD 410. '*Caelum ad terra transibunt, quid ergo mirum, si aliquando finis est civitate?* – Heaven and earth will come to an end, why would anyone wonder why states also come to an end?' With Augustine and his pupil Orosius the cycle of antiquity with its endurance disappeared and was replaced by the omnipresent God, arranging the continuity between creation and judgment and the intervening 'in between', the too short

temporality until the end of time. Time is presented as being too short, a deficit. Man is only here for an instant and his existence is a shortcoming. Not until the Renaissance, for instance with the Florentine Nicolo Macchiavelli, would the idea of the 'pagan' cycle reappear, but always as a kind of argument against Christianity.

● One of the co-workers in *Vivarium* was the Romanised Scythian Dionysius Exiguus. He worked out a calculation of the date of Easter and replaced the old calendar with a Christian calendar. After all, the old Roman calendar was becoming absurd. The year AD 541 was according to that calendar described as 'the twenty-first year after the consulate of Basil the Younger'. In his treatise *Computus Paschalis*, which dealt with his co-worker's calculations Cassiodorus Senator was the first person to use the expression '*Anno Domini*'. 'Time' itself too is directed towards the Eternal. The sustainability and perpetuity of world and reality have vanished for Senator and around him he observes only the obsessive ticking of time, the course of time passing, temporality and the coming to an end. This passing, changeable and vanishing world sometimes fills him with a sense of paralysis. All that is rushes to an end. This end is no longer what it was for Aristotle, *telos*, completion, maturity and the fulfilment of growth, but a decline and a falling into nothingness. Cassiodorus, as Augustine, as Pascal, as Kierkegaard, experienced anxiety – *angustia* – oppression and fear while contemplating this brevity, the deficit of temporality, this being trapped in the 'in between'.

It is a feeling that would endure for more than a millennium. In the best resonance on Augustine's philosophy produced in the Middle Ages, the twelfth-century *Chronica sive Historia de duabus civitatibus* by Bishop ●tto von Freising, the world, reality and the lives of people disappeared under the influence of the awareness of existence during Late Antiquity. All that is subject to change, all that is dragged along in the speed and flow of time is all in vain, coming to grief and doom before it even started. *De mutatione rerum* is '*historia humanae miseriae*', all that is being only short-lived, temporary and actually in decline. Enduring is only the Eternal. The universe and the world are the mere flash of a match in the eternal, cold, silent and dead void. The soul of a Christian is only left with the hope of once taking part in a completely different reality, that of God's Eternal Presence.

In comparison with the tradition of antiquity, feeble attempts – from the Renaissance onwards – are made to counter this vision of temporality and the transience of our surroundings, to restore the idea of durability and the eternal cycle of this reality as the driving force of life. In her book about

Friedrich Nietzsche, Lou Andreas-Salomé reports on his attempts in the fall of 1882 to let her share his most agonizing thought: 'Unforgettable are the hours in which he wanted to entrust me, as the first person, with a secret. Something for which he recoiled and of which he saw the horror, if it were to be true. In a hushed voice and signs of deep dismay he talked to me about (...) The quintessence of the theory of the Eternal Return, which Nietzsche later described as a radiant acknowledgement of life itself, contrasted with his own tormented living conditions so starkly that this idea resembled a dreaded mask.'¹³

¹³ Lou Andreas-Salomé: *Friedrich Nietzsche in seinen Werken*. Frankfurt am Main 1983

CHAPTER TEN

GREGORY THE GREAT

a. A lunar landscape

The world of Gregory the Great seems to be bathed in moonlight. The sun of the late world of antiquity has definitively gone under and its reflected light is only visible through the reflection of the moon. The magnificent tradition of the philosophy of antiquity was still a tangible reality for Plotinus. Even for Jerome it still seemed to be present, but when we take a closer look it is apparent that the great philosophers were usually only quoted, often inaccurately, from commentaries on their work. And when we come to Augustine those great figures have faded and are reduced to notes in the texts. And finally for Gregory, they had become phantoms. The contours are still vaguely recognisable, but the distance in time had become too large. For Plotinus, Plato and Aristotle were still part of the philosophical landscape in which he lived and thought, despite the six centuries and more that separated him from them. For Augustine they were like distant mountains he looked up to from the plain. For Gregory they were reduced to a vague, grey line on the horizon; the contours of the mountains had to be guessed as they were not really visible.

The city in which Gregory lived too must also have looked somewhat similar to what we would see as a lunar landscape. Practically most buildings were still there, the temples of antiquity, the baths and palaces on the Palatine. But they stood empty and abandoned, boarded up and already partly derelict or used for entirely different purposes. Gregory was probably born about AD 550, the period in which Rome and Italy were devastated by the wars between the Goths and the Greeks.

In Rome the last library of antiquity had been founded by Pope Agapitus, a relative of Gregory, together with Cassiodorus Senator. It was situated near the Clivus Scaurus, probably next to the family palace where Gregory was born. But by the time Gregory had grown to adulthood, the library had been destroyed by the Goths and the remainder of the books were brought to safety in the Lateran. An example of the breach caused by the devastating wars is the casual remark of Gregory that for a long time

he had been looking in vain in the collection of books in the Lateran and other still-existing libraries for the *Gesta Martyrum* of Eusebius.¹

As Gregory historically lived during a period where major changes took place, it is practically inevitable that a double portrait of him is presented. He has been interpreted, portrayed and understood in two completely different ways, each in sharp contrast to the other. In some studies he is represented as the last Roman, in others as the first figure of importance during the Middle Ages. In a number of more recent studies we can see that Gregory himself and the time in which he lived are presented in quite different ways to those of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It is as if his seat, which can still be found in the Gregorio Magno on the Caelius in Rome, is being turned around. The austere marble seat placed close to the wall in a side chapel has some antique pagan scenes engraved on the back.

This austere, so to speak sombre side of Gregory were especially emphasized by Jacob Burckhardt, Adolf von Harnack and Fedor Schneider. The latter does not hesitate to treat and condemn 'Gregory I as a simple person'. Jacob Burckhardt draws an unforgettable portrait of Rome, a city full of ruins and Gregory as being a tough and unyielding.

Burckhardt likes to quote from the letters in which Gregory encourages, insults and threatens his fellow bishops: 'I know how to avenge myself on you!' Letters in which the pope also speaks as an important landowner: the bishops are admonished to convert the peasant population through coercion and heavy taxation and when his colleagues, out of a sense of Christian compassion and charity, hesitated to carry this out he accused them of negligence. ●r scholarly-orientated bishops who were told off when it was realized that they still kept 'pagan' books in their library. In astonishment Burckhardt relates that Gregory hardly dared to approach the graves of the apostles and trembled all over when doing so; Gregory was also convinced that Emperor Trajan was only admitted to heaven owing to his, Gregory's personal intercession; and that he was really convinced that he could often hear the sighs and groans of the tormented souls in purgatory.

Gregory was the first monk to ascend the papal throne. The direction of his deeds and thoughts echoed the mentality of the monk, living in solitude and abnegating the sinful world. All earthly things, everything from antiquity were damned by Gregory. As Schneider states: 'Gregory was obsessed with simplistic purity'. It is this mentality which causes him to turn against culture and civilization: grammar and rhetoric? Nothing but

¹ *Gregorii I papae registrum epistolarum* II 29, 10.

useless nonsense and a display of vanity! Mythology? Pagan stupidity! 'Concerning philosophy he only gathered silly ideas through hear-say.'² There are no citations from classical texts, and even the works of most of the Church fathers are hardly known to him or not at all. He attempts to adept Augustine's works in order to make them suitable and useful for his time, but he does so in a terribly crude and simplified manner. It is '*depotenzierten Augustinismus* – a castrated Augustine', is a scathing judgment that Von Harnack makes.

And yet this simplification was quite effective and because of that, still according to Von Harnack, Gregory created 'the vulgar kind of mediaeval Catholicism – *den vulgären Typus der mittelalterlichen Katholizismus.*'

Gregorius could openly admit that he had not bothered with the rules of rhetoric. Barbarisms sneaked into his Latin and his thoughts did not conform to the high standards of antique logic. He did not know any Greek, nor did he have any desire to learn it. He was not the only one. The founder of his monastic order, Benedict of Nursia, unlike his contemporary Cassiodorus Senator, did not know any Greek either. He too saw no need to learn that language, – *quamvis Graecae linguae nescio.*³

That led to some odd situations. When Gregory desired to exert his authority regarding a Greek heresy, he was obliged to ask a Greek-speaking colleague, the patriarch Eulogius of Alexandria, what this heresy was all about.

In order to clarify the views at issue, Eulogius sends Gregory excerpts from the texts of Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa and Epiphanius about this deviant belief. In Rome the work of the Greek Church Fathers which helped to form the Catholic faith were no longer to be found.⁴ Even the Greek texts which were still available had to be transferred into Latin word for word with the aid of dictionaries and even the translators often did not quite understand the meaning of the word, nor what sentence could be formed with them.⁵

Gregory lived during a time of inevitable development: the separation of the Occident and the Orient, the separation of the Greek and the Latin half of the Empire. At the imperial court in Constantinople, Latin was still regarded as the language of the fathers – *patrion phōnèn*, but it was no longer spoken and would soon be totally forgotten. In the West, Greek,

² F. Schneider: *Rom und Romgedanke im Mittelalter*. I, p. 99. 'Gregor ist beseelt vom reinsten Simplismus,' and 'Von Philosophie hat er nur dumpfe Vorstellungen von hören sagen.'

³ *Gregorii I papae registrum epistolarum*, I 476, 1.

⁴ *Ibid.*: I 448, 20.

⁵ *Ibid.*: II 258, 27.

being the basic language of philosophy, science, arts and culture in general, was in use for a longer period, but to a far less extent than in previous ages. The most important basic texts for philosophy, theology and a whole series of sciences (medical, mathematical, technical and rhetoric, to name only the most important) had originally been written in Greek and copies were made until far into Late Antiquity. But then something happened that is hard to understand. Pelagius was the first to write a commentary on Paul's letters, completely ignoring the Greek text. Augustine did the same and went even further, doing something even worse. He disapproved of the Greek tragedies, without ever having read any of them. All great Greek historians, tragedy writers and rhetoricians he left unread, and if he thought it necessary to mention them at all – more often than not to condemn them – the Latin works of Cicero were his authority.

●wing to this total lack of knowledge of Greek and Greek philosophical texts in the time of Gregory, the teachings of the Church Fathers declined to an almost infantile level. The four books of the *Dialogues* written by Gregory are riddled with superstitions and a world of all kind of miracles. It is a kind of *legenda aurea*, a book of miracles and conjurers tricks.

This may all seem to be true and to a large extent it is, but anyone who judges Gregory by these standards alone would condemn him completely. Schneider, whom I quoted earlier, does not see anything else in the figure of Gregory than a dangerous 'leveller – *Gleichmacher*' and fanatic. He portrays him as the man who was responsible for the elevated plans of Cassiodorus coming to nothing. According to him the wisdom of Gregory is not much more than 'secretive babblings – *Geheimniskrämerei*', his extreme 'superstitious simplicity – *jenseitsgläubige Simplismus*' causing him to be completely blind to reality – with '*vollständiger Blindheit für die Wirklichkeit*'.⁶

But are the enlightened minds and humanist scholars also blind to Gregory's world?

Gregory was depicted by authors like Schneider as facing the period to come and was presented as being one of the first truly medieval men. But for him too, the future was dark and unknown. He himself lived in his present with some knowledge of the past. His throne in itself, with the pagan scenes on its back, sheds a quite different light on Gregory's background. And one of the other scarce vestiges of his earthly existence in the eternal city is even more revealing. It is his epitaph which was written down in the *Liber Pontificalis*, written in hexameters with perfect ancient-world distichs. The epitaph opens with verses taken from an

⁶ F. Schneider: *Rom und Romgedanke im Mittelalter*. p. 102, Böhlau 1959.

antique inscription on the *Mater Terra*. The metre used is a classical beauty and the ending is overwhelming: ‘This triumph made you a consul of God.’ The two dreams of every senatorial family: a triumph and the consulate.

b. Consul of God

In general, Late Antiquity is often regarded as a period of irrevocable decline. Therefore the time in which Gregory lived is not really appreciated. All kinds of prejudices block an open-minded consideration of those years. The philosophy of that time, if considered at all, is described as turning away from reason, world and reality. The purpose of this turning elsewhere is seen as rejecting the world and its knowledge and being exclusively interested in matters of faith and religion. That presentation is completely wrong.

There have been few periods which have been as productive as Late Antiquity. In Gregory’s century the codes of Roman law were established, the structure and hierarchy of the church was organised and monasticism blossomed; Christianity was transformed from a mere ideal into a belief involving practical work. Rarely had so many new things appeared as during this time of decline and decay. Gregory and Muhammad, contemporaries, laid the foundations of worlds in Rome and Mecca respectively that would be decisive for more than a thousand years. Peter Brown characterizes Late Antiquity as the ‘sudden flooding of the inner life into social forms’. Following this statement he expresses his regret that philosophers and classicists have hardly paid any attention to this era and have left it to historians specialized in mediaeval times.

Late Antiquity was really late. Brown gives as a guideline: ‘Late Antiquity is always later than we think.’⁷

Gregory was also the first pope to see himself as ‘the servant of God’s servants – *servus servorum Dei*’. In the period after him and throughout the Middle Ages, this would prove to be an overbearing form of servitude leading to papal spiritual superiority over powerful worldly leaders. It caused emperors to fall on their knees before the mighty bishop of Rome and kings would forfeit their kingdoms. But this was not Gregory’s intention when he used the phrase from Augustine. It is a phrase that became one of the most powerful papal titles for over a millennium, but before that time it had been used by the Stoics as philosophical wisdom for nearly a thousand years. Emperor Hadrian too had used it to indicate the

⁷ P. Brown: *The making of Late Antiquity*, p. 8.

‘glorious servitude – *endoxos douleia*’ of the ruler. He wanted to imply that he, the Emperor, did not rule self-righteously, nor for his own benefit but that it was his government that was held in a form of servitude to the gods and to the community.

c. Barbarians and bishops

The key issue in the assessment of the figure of Gregory is the opinion formed since the Enlightenment about the role of Christianity within the civilization of antiquity. Edward Gibbon was one of the first to describe the downfall of this grand, millennial civilization of antiquity as ‘the triumph of Barbarism and Religion’. For him, the rise of that alien Eastern religion was more or less the cause of the downfall of the Greek and Roman civilization. Gregory the Great was seen as both the apex and the nadir of this development. In the salons of Paris and London just before the French revolution, this vision would be met with a lot of enthusiastic approval.

In shrill contrast to this vision were the words written by André Piganiol in 1917: Roman culture did not die naturally. It was assassinated. That vision was founded on the situation of – in his eyes – civilized France, being held in a stranglehold for nearly four years by ‘the barbaric hordes’, the Germans.

More recently, Amaldo Momigliano looked once again at the remarkable role that Christianity actually played in the process in which the civilization of antiquity was heading for its demise. That role is extremely ambiguous. Some fanatics of the new faith indeed saw the Empire as the evil biblical Babel. Many monks and zealots deserted the city and the world well before the fall of the Empire to live a life in solitude. Christians were bad citizens. All that is true, but it is only one facet of what was going on. Church Fathers such as Basil the Great and Gregory of Nyssa did all they could to incorporate all valuable aspects of Greek philosophy and civilization. Clement of Alexandria even saw it as his ideal, the amalgamation of the Christian way of living with Greek philosophy. And even Gregory the Great has asserted himself as the protector of the ancient city of Rome.

This ambiguity is quite recognizable in the work of Augustine. There certainly is a kind of resentment, even hostility towards the culture of antiquity. But he is also a great advocate of maintaining the ideals of education and civilization of antiquity. It is not difficult to characterize his *Confessiones*, with its constant repetition of ‘*Deus meus*’ and ‘*ad Te, Domine*’ as a form of servitude in which the ideal of the free human of

antiquity is lost. His main work *De Civitate Dei* can too often be dismissed as an endeavour to turn away from this ruinous earthly reality, to the eternal realm of God. And can therefore be seen as an aversion and leave-taking of the polis of antiquity with its ideal of the state and society. But it is more worth-while to notice his paradoxical aspects. The views of Augustine on man, society and the state were revolutionary and for the centuries after him unusually fertile and stimulating.

And it is also more rewarding to look in this way at Gregory and his time. Obviously the Christian faith can be held partly responsible for a kind of aversion to the world and a withdrawal from society. Indifference in political matters, the affairs of the Empire and its military protection can certainly be pointed out. But that same turning away from the world and public life is also apparent in the demonstrative laying down of high governmental offices by pupils of Plotinus.

When the emperor, Mauritius, because of the threatening situation in the empire, forbids military and civil servants to leave their duties behind and retreat into a convent, Gregorius reacts unusually fiercely: rescuing one's soul is much more important than attending to earthly matters. Two centuries earlier, Pope Siricius had been much harsher in his condemnation, he wrote about those 'who after having done penance, return like dogs and pigs to their own dung and once more become imperial officials; they go to the theatre, remarry, or visit brothels.' They were denied the sacraments, and that in a time that Christianity was already the state religion and the emperor was a faithful, even fanatic, Christian. In the West, Christian thinkers were on the whole more averse towards the state than those in the East. Ambrose of Milan, Augustine and his follower Prosperius, as well as the author of *De Gubernatione Dei*, Salvianus, were not holding back in their criticism of the empire and government. Ambrose even refused to give in to the demands of Emperor Valentinian to hand over some churches to the Arians in Milan. It was the emperor who gave in.

The Greek fathers were more conciliatory in their support of the government. But there the government supported the church and faith more rigorously.

Nevertheless, in both parts of the empire many thousands of men and women retired from the world. They opted for a spiritual existence and bade farewell to their earthly possessions, power and esteem, but they also left the empire and the world to its fate. Both late Neoplatonic philosophers such as Porphyry and Christian church fathers such as Augustine appear as aliens here on this earth. They wander in a strange and distant world. Their souls seem lost and in a daze, they suffer their

sinful bodies in patience. The tension and exaltation of their existence, their longing and their thinking, are directed elsewhere. They seem absent from every-day reality. When the old world collapsed before their eyes, it left many of them unmoved. They were indifferent about the fate of the world. That bodies and cities withered and decayed, they were aware of. It is an attitude that seems, to us, to lead only to unmanageable difficulties, but which provided Gregory with unprecedented possibilities. If the interest of the empire comes second to the salvation of the soul, then a threshold has disappeared and a bridge has to be constructed to connect Romans and barbarians. Gregory was the first bishop of Rome who was really concerned about the spreading of the faith beyond the borders of the Empire for the sake of salvation for all people, regardless of whether they were Romans or not. In particular, his sending of the priest Augustine to England turned out to be a turning point in European history. Jacob Burckhardt realized that the homogeneity of Christianity, from Syria to Ireland, formed the foundation of medieval Europe. 'And now the peoples could come; over time, they have all been overpowered by Nicene Christianity. And without that, the Middle Ages would have been a slaughterhouse.'⁸

d. Wondrous world

At the beginning of February 590 the bishop of Rome, Pelagius, succumbed to the plague. In the full heat of summer the plague raged violently in the city, which already had been badly hit by wars. Gregory was elected bishop and at the end of August the confirmation of that choice came from the court of Constantinople. On August 29 Gregory spoke for the first time in his new role in the Basilica of Santa Sabina on the Aventine: many houses in the neighbourhood were empty, people were dying like rats. Then came the famous plague procession, following which the angel of perdition appeared on top of the mausoleum of Hadrian, since then known as the Castel Sant'Angelo, putting his sword of retribution back into its scabbard. Ferdinand Gregorovius' History of the City of Rome during the Middle Ages begins at this point.⁹

⁸ J. Burckhardt: *Historische Fragmente* (Ed. E. Dürr) p. 48. 'Und nun konnten die Völker kommen; sie sind mit der Zeit alle vom nicenischen Christentum überwältigt worden. Und ohne dies wäre das Mittelalter eine Mördergrube gewesen.'

⁹ F. Gregorovius: *Geschichte der Stadt Rom im Mittelalter* I 254. English translation: *History of the City of Rome in the Middle Ages*, Cambridge 2010.

At first sight the scene seems very medieval: a procession of priests and people suffering from the plague, avenging angels and miracles. But is that really the case?

Processions were as much a daily occurrence in ancient Rome as they were in medieval times and the Christian angels derived their form and appearance from the Roman Victoria, which in turn can be traced back to the Greek statue of Nikè as shown so impressively in the stairwell of the Louvre in Paris. The plague had been raging often enough in the eternal city and would continue to do so. The citizens of Rome also knew that after the devastating heat of summer the plague would diminish and disappear; they had known this process for centuries. That such natural events were seized upon by the rulers for religious display, that too had long been customary. Rome owed its foundation to the propitious signs of heaven and did not have to wait until Constantine saw a sign in the sky at the Pons Milvius, or Gregorius at the Pons Aelius. And is it not quite remarkable that the miracle did not take place at the tomb of an apostle or martyr, but at the Moles Adriani, the grave of one of the emperors who had persecuted the Christians?

Anyone who browses in Gregory's *Dialogues* immediately finds himself in a medieval world full of miracles. It was even Gregorius' explicit intention to show by means of this book that the Latin saints and martyrs were as great as the Greek or Syrian miracle workers. Moreover, miracles were not at all typically medieval; in the texts of Neoplatonic philosophers such as Jamblichus and Porphyry they are abundantly present.

The texts of Gregory have to be read in a biased and superficial way in order to see solely their early medieval character. His wondrous world is still completely permeated by Neoplatonic philosophy, but in the shape Augustine had given it. For Porphyry, Ammonius, Augustine and even for Gregory the visible world is not the ultimate reality. Real is only what God sees and what God is willing to see. Human perception of reality is obstructed, almost disrupted, by the physicality of our senses. We humans therefore only perceive inessential and unreal matters. Only when we die do the eyes of the mind – *oculi mentis* – open and we begin to perceive something essential. Then the invisible reality becomes visible to the eyes of our spirit.¹⁰ It is this vision that is granted us here, living in this 'unreal' daily reality by means of the miracle.

For medieval man the miracle broke through the natural order. A rock can burn or a human can fly. With Gregory, the miracle certainly takes place outside the ancient idea of natural order, but it is amazing to see how

¹⁰ Gregory the Great: *Dialogues* IV 25.

much he tries to maintain the connection between nature and miracle. The miraculous feeding of the multitude in the four gospels he compares to the daily distribution of corn in Rome. The budding of Aaron's rod he compares to the sprouting of seemingly dead wood in Spring. And even the miracle of all miracles, the resurrection from the dead is only a miracle for those who would deny the miracle of birth!¹¹

For Gregory, miracles never have the typical medieval independence. They never stand alone but are invariably in connection with something. This is more or less a trait of the ancient Roman in him; miracles do not just occur, but only when they are useful and convenient. Miracles should open our eyes to what really is. For Gregorius, the miracle is a sort of miraculous little hole in the unreality surrounding us that offers us a brief glimpse of reality. The miracles that appear in Irish stories two centuries later Gregory would still have rejected as forms of pagan magic. While a miracle teaches us something about divine reality, magic is pagan hocus-pocus that teaches us nothing but stupidity.

Moreover, and that is a third difference, Gregory does not live in a miraculous world. Miracles are useful, they teach us something about God's world and encourage us to lead a better life. And, in spite of the almost oriental splendour of his miracle stories, for the down-to-earth Gregory the ultimate issue has to do with the virtue of the saints he describes. Right in the beginning of the first of the four books he puts it with an almost straightforward clarity: 'The value of a life rests in the good deeds, not in all kinds of miracles.'¹²

The world of Gregory, albeit full of miracles, is nevertheless much less wondrous than that of medieval man. The subtitle of his *Dialogorum libri IV – De vita et miraculis patrum italicorum et de aeternitate animarum* – does not have the meaning of indicating that here even more wondrous stories will be told than about the Eastern saints. On the contrary. It is not just that Gregory did not know any Greek at all, but he is also one of the first authors in Western philosophical tradition who shows a clear dislike of that exemplary Greek culture. He clearly and repeatedly states that he dislikes that world. For him the Orient is disappointing in all respects.¹³

The swords of the Greeks cannot defend us and yet the Greeks practise extortion on us out and steal from the taxpayers in Italy. And as if that were not enough, that Greek world, filled with heresies and casuistry, comes across as an example for us.

¹¹ *Ibid.*: *Moralia in Iob VI*. XV 18.

¹² *Ibid.*: *Dial.* I 12.

¹³ *Gregorii Papae registrum epistolarum V* 45.

In all interpretations of Gregory where he is being depicted as the first medieval man, it is always supposed to be his contempt for the world that would mark him as a medieval man. The first letter after his papal coronation is addressed to Theoctista, the sister of the Emperor in Constantinople. It is full of complaints: 'Under the pretext of being appointed bishop – *sub colore episcopatus* – I have been taken back into the world – *ad saeculum sum reductus* – and I am now more trapped than I ever was, even more than a layman. I have lost my deepest peace and quietude – *alta enim quietis meae gaudia peridi* – and have apparently been elevated outwardly but have collapsed inwardly – *et intus curruens, ascendisse exterius videor*. So I am saddened to be removed from my maker's face in this manner – *Unde me a conditoris mei facies longe expulsus deploro*. Daily I attempted to escape the world and leave the flesh – *Conabar namque quotidie extra mundum, extra carnem fieri* – to expel the forms of corporeality from my mind's eye – *cuncta phantasmata corporis ab oculis mentis abigere* – and to rejoice in the incorporeal. (...) For only he will be exalted who despises and tramples the power and glory of this world. But from this height of the mind I am suddenly, as if by a cyclone, cast down (...) When the work is done, I want to return to what I long for – *Redire post causam ad cor desidero* – but that is impossible for me because of all those confusing unprofitable thoughts – *sed, vanis ab eo cogitationum tumultibus exclusus, redire non possum*.¹⁴

He complains about no longer being able to pray in the quiet seclusion of his monastery and to be unable now to surrender to inner reflection and the contemplation of divine matters. It is not only in this letter to Theoctista that he testifies to his profound love for living in seclusion, absorbed in contemplation. And yet it is both a very one-sided image that he depicts here to his correspondent, and an almost obligatory rhetorical figure showing humility at his elevation to an omnipotent position and to accept it after some token aversion and objections. In the approximately surviving eight hundred letters, one gets to know him as someone who is constantly yearning for a *vita contemplativa*, but who night and day leads a *vita activa*. The tension between those two opposites is great, but his efforts and activities are even greater.

Those eight hundred extant letters are undoubtedly only a small part of his actual correspondence. His activity was almost feverish. It is amazing to read with how many and diverse things he occupied himself and how practical and accurate his intervention invariably was, even harsh and never neglecting any detail. Wars, financial affairs, food supplies, legislation, authority enforcement, liturgical renewals, leading the church,

¹⁴ *Ibid.*: I 5.

ruling the city of Rome, diplomacy with the emperor in Constantinople and with other often hostile princes, the setting up of missions in faraway regions abroad, the management of the many estates in Italy and Sicily: he considered it all to be his daily tasks and observed them all meticulously.

Gregory was anything but an unworldly monk desiring quietude. His namesake and contemporary Gregory of Tours still described him as ‘the man who once walked through the city dressed in silk, wearing a white robe that shone with gems’.¹⁵ After all, being in his thirties, he held the highest positions in the city, *praetor urbanus*, chairman of the senate and high judge. Around AD 574 he founded seven monasteries and endowed them with rich lands. Gregory himself spent no more than four years in the monastery on the Caelius, which was more or less an annex of the family palace. His predecessor on the papal throne, the Gothic Pope Pelagius II, first of all gave him the highest functions in the administration of the church and city and then sent him for several years as *apocrisarios* to the imperial court at Constantinople. An odd kind of fully authorized emissary, unable to speak a word in Greek.

Although Gregory wrote that he was sad to be ‘*ad saeculum reductus*’ again, he had hardly ever been away from that world and left his mark on his world and to some extent on ours. Early medieval legends are woven around his figure. For example, the one about his dealing with a monk who had held on to some coins. Gregory has both monk and coins thrown on the dung heap with the crowd loudly shouting the sentence: ‘To hell with you and your dung money.’ Did that really happen or is it a later legend? From his letters it is apparent that although he was a monk and prince of the church he was still the owner of large tracts of land inherited from his father which later on remained in the possession of his family. Also, that in spite of his being the Pope he condoned the slave trade for the sake of his country estates in southern Italy. We learn that he was ill and exhausted through fasting and mortification, and that he invariably had to stay in bed in a lot of pain for months during the last years of his life. We also know that he continued to enjoy the Retsina wine supplied to him from Alexandria.

e. A world entombed

In his very first speech in the Basilica Vaticana, Saint Peter’s on September 3, AD 590 he is supposed to have spoken about his aversion to the world: ‘Our Lord shows us a miserable and grim world to live in, in

¹⁵ Gregory of Tours: *Historiarum* X 1, 17.

order to motivate us to forsake our love for it. (...) Whoever loves God, rejoices over this ending of the world. (...) This world is old and tired and it will be swept away by a sea of misery.' That sounds ominous and impressive enough, and Ferdinand Gregorovius labelled these words as: 'This was the speech which the bishop held at Rome's graveside.'¹⁶

When one reads the text of Gregory's *Homiliae in Ezechielem* a bit more closely and less biased than this romantic German historian, will soon discover that almost the opposite is true. Gregory is actually quite anxious that this world, his world of *Romanitas et Christianitas* might come to an end. Rome had been besieged and threatened by the Longobards for many years; it was a city on the verge of starvation, abandoned by the Greek emperor and the only hope of its people rested on its own bishop.

In his letter to the church of Milan Gregory writes: 'See how everything of this world is lost – *Ecce iam mundi huius omnia perditia conspicimus*.'¹⁷ Being a skilled rhetorician, he then writes one lamentation after another and finishes with mentioning that the situation of this decaying temporal world is on its way to the final judgment of the Eternal.

Should this be called medieval and is it comparable with the twelfth-century lamentation of Thomas of Celano: '*Dies irae, dies illa, solvet saeculum in favilla* – Day of wrath, day of vengeance, on which the world will be reduced to ashes' Far from it. For Gregory the world is far from being an almost abstract concept of the temporary creation. In the second sentence he provides a lively and concrete description: cities, fortresses, churches and fields. ●f course he sprinkles his admonitions with frequent references to biblical texts, but it is not a biblical vision of ruin but the colourful everyday reality he evokes: the flooding of the Tiber, the desperate plague sufferers and the enormous shortages of provisions in the city. The Apocalypse is only used as a backdrop, a background of the daily scenes of shortages, disease and cares, hunger and siege. Even though it describes how the world appeared to be at its end – *consumatio*, it did not stop Gregory the Great nor Ambrose of Milan intervening constantly and effectively in the troubles of that decrepit world. To keep it alive? Not quite. To Aethelbert, the King of Kent, Gregory wrote: 'Seeing these signs of the approaching ending of time, we must be concerned about our souls.'¹⁸ '*Cura animarum*' is the main objective of life on earth, but it does not stand in the way of restless labouring for and in this world. In the

¹⁶ F. Gregorovius: *Geschichte der Stadt Rom im Mittelalter* I 259. '*Dies war die Leichenrede welche der Bischof am Grabe Roms hielt.*'

¹⁷ *Gregorii I papae registrum epistolarum* III 29.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*: Ep. XI 37.

certainty of the coming end and judgment, but in the uncertainty of the hour, we should be vigilant and active. *Vigilate*. And Gregory's vigilance during his pontificate focused mainly on the protection of his world of *'Romanitas et Christianitas'* from the strangulation by the heretical Lombardians.

The world was certainly not left to its fate by Gregory and neither was the study of the world and its reality. I often notice that the same letters are quoted repeatedly in order to depict Gregory as 'simplistic' and to characterize him as a medieval man. In one of his letters he explicitly rejects the rhetorical ideals of antiquity, and in AD 601 he berates his colleague, Bishop Desiderius of Vienne, for having profane books in his possession. 'I am ashamed to hear that you own and keep pagan books. The same mouth cannot praise both Jupiter and Christ.'

In his excellent study *Consul of God*,¹⁹ Jeffrey Richards makes a number of comments about these one-sided opinions. He points out that it is not quite true that Gregory rejected the profane sciences; he showed them their place; they were steps on the road to the *'sapientia justorum'*, the wisdom of those who were on the right path to the knowledge of God. Desiderius lost his way on the roads of the wisdom of antiquity. What Gregory did was to criticize the independent importance of the philosophy, rhetoric and poetry of antiquity because he considered the study of philosophy and the sciences as being subservient to a higher aim, to seeking insight into the sphere of the divine. He considered them to be auxiliary sciences, useful and helpful towards achieving something beyond the actual reach of human wisdom and knowledge. Richards points out that too much emphasis is attached to Gregory's fierce rejection of the books of rhetoric by Donatus. But Ambrose, Augustine (who was even a professor in rhetoric in Rome for some years) and Cassiodorus Senator did likewise.

Jerome was in fact the only one who could still appreciate the contrived style of Donatus. Jerome mainly wrote and seldom addressed a congregation. The three bishops I mentioned had to deal with large crowds and thus opted for a much more popular and direct style of preaching.

A contemporary and namesake, Gregory of Tours wrote 'that he was so very accomplished in the sciences of grammar, dialectic and rhetoric that his equal was not to be found in Rome.'²⁰ The style and content of the letters and works of Gregory do indeed indicate familiarity with rhetoric and philosophy and an extensive knowledge of legal matters.

¹⁹ J. Richards: *Consul of God: The life and time of Gregory the Great*, Boston 1980.

²⁰ Gregory of Tours: *Hist.* X 1, 20.

If, in his works he usually quotes biblical texts and refers to statements of church councils, but rarely quotes the Church Fathers, far less the philosophers of antiquity, it does not mean that he did not know their works. He has advanced two steps further in time. Firstly, the Church Fathers still needed Greek philosophy to be able to fathom, defend and spread the mysteries of the new faith. Then came the generations who appreciated the sciences and the wisdom of antiquity as much as the truths of the new faith. Augustine and, in his footsteps Cassiodorus had pointed out that ‘the power of expression in the holy scripture does not lie in the beauty of its eloquence – *eloquentia legis divinae non est formata sermonibus*’.²¹

Augustine, however, does not succeed in detaching himself from the educational ideals and views on the wisdom and science of antiquity. Gregory is perhaps the first person to explain the ‘holy wisdom’ completely on his own. His *Moralia in Iob*, probably written as early as the early seventies, is preceded by a letter to his friend Leander of Seville, the elder brother of Isidore of Seville. In that letter, Gregory complains that he has not written a good book because of his constant illness. But, he continues, it was never his intention to adhere to the strict rules of rhetoric. After all, the profundity of the Holy Scripture cannot be in accordance with the rules of Donatus, the text demanding its own rules.

For Augustine the supreme form of knowledge, the knowledge of God, remained outside the conceptual framework of the theory of categories. God is beyond any form of reality and thinking. Gregory goes further and demands for every real understanding and holy insight the breaking through of the restrictions and rules devised by Aristotle and others. The clarity that Donatus created with his rhetorical rules would never be able to fathom the profundities and darkness of the hidden meaning of the Word of God – *eloquium obscurum*. In the Holy Scripture, each word and sentence has its own profound meaning. ●f course Gregory also uses the ‘*regulae scripturarum*’ of Cassiodorus Senator, the four ways to fathom the deeper layers of a text. The meaning of things, ‘*rerum significationis*’ is never on the surface and never commonplace and obvious. The words and concepts are pliable and supple to his way of thinking. ●nly the eternal truth of God is unchangeable, but all other things and words change constantly and alter in value and meaning. With the word ‘pillar’ can an angel not be meant? ●r elsewhere in the text ‘pillar’ may mean: a man who upholds the word of God in front of the people. ●r symbolically, ‘pillar’ may indicate the church. The exegesis of Gregory sometimes

²¹ Augustine: *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina*. 92: *Commentarius in Apocalypsim*, p. 18, 13.

resembles the ‘Interpretation of Dreams’ of Sigmund Freud, the same characters having entirely different meanings in that wondrous dream world. And God’s grammar, what does that have to do with Donatus’ instructive booklet?

f. In the flesh

Gregorius did not yet live in the wondrous medieval world where at any moment the natural order could be broken by an intrusion from a supernatural reality. Neither did he live in the world of a medieval monk, escaping and hating the world and reality for the love of God. He was not simplistic at all, a religious fanatic rejecting beauty and science. His world, reality and truth were not yet confined to those of faith alone. It is still the Neoplatonic philosophy that captured Gregory’s views and thinking. For him, the world around him was not the true reality; it was only ‘second hand’, coming from His hands, created by the Creator. Everything is divided and scattered, confused and far away. Only the being of God is unity and is what it is – *est id quod est*.²² What man sees and knows through his senses falls short on all sides; it is unreal, untrue. Only when dying, on the threshold to that other, true world, are human eyes opened. Then we see the true reality with the eyes of the spirit. That is practically impossible here on earth during ‘our wanderings in the flesh’. It is only rarely, in a turning away from this oppressive reality that we are granted those exalted moments of contemplation in which we observe a glimpse of the exposed divine reality for just a moment. As if through cracks in the walls of this world that keep us trapped and incarcerated. Our surrounding world is seen as a threshold and as an obstacle to seeing the real world. Closing our eyes to the things around us and allowing the eyes of the mind to see reality, it is more or less the refrain in Gregory’s writings: *Ponamus ante mentis oculos* – let this be before your mind’s eyes!

In the third book of his *Dialogues* he even improves the opinion of his interlocutor, the deacon Peter, when Peter says that the miracle of all miracles is the resurrection from the dead. This customary view of Christianity is corrected and emphasized by Gregory in a manner that is typical for Neoplatonic philosophers when he replies that the inner conversion – *anamnèse* – of a human being is an even greater miracle. And with the arguments he postulates, this bishop of Rome actually even steps outside the Christian faith and returns to Neoplatonic philosophy. For the resurrection from the dead concerns merely mortal flesh, but

²² Plotinus: *Enneads* V 9, 3.

repentance and conversion concerns the salvation of the immortal soul.²³ Elsewhere he writes that man is a spiritual, animated being which was only temporarily placed in the flesh, covered with flesh. Through sinning, even the soul becomes 'fleshy'. Because of the original sin, all souls are carnal and therefore able to discern the bodies and things of this world. For a real and pure soul, a fleshless soul, those things are no longer real and pass by like ghosts while the soul overlooks them as unreal. Because of the Sin, however, we are trapped in the flesh and that weighs heavily on us and pushes us back into the darkness. 'The flesh is the shadow of death that fell upon us.'²⁴

In our dark existence the light of God is not entirely absent. God is present like the sun in a clouded existence. Gregory is capable of a very visual and poetic use of language and dares to expressively articulate the invisible presence of God 'as whispering close to my ear'. Before the Fall, in Paradise, man could speak to God and see Him. Then we came 'into this pitiful state of blindness and banishment.' He describes this in the beginning of the fourth book of his *Dialogues* and incorporates an allusion to the allegory of the cave of Plato. Driven out of paradise through our sins, man lost the light of the soul and entered the dark cave of the flesh. We have only vaguely heard that there is such a thing as a heavenly fatherland for our souls. 'But all those carnal creatures – *Sed carnalis quique* – who do not know the unseen through experience – *quia illa invisibilia scire non valent per experimentum* – and doubt whether what they never saw with their eyes is real – *dubitant utrumne sit quod corporalibus oculis non vident*.'²⁵ And then all of a sudden there are the well-known words of Plato, the opening sentences of the allegory of the cave: '*Ac si enim praegnans mulier mittatur in carcerem, ibique pariat puerum, qui natus puer in carcere nutriatur et crescat* – Imagine a mother who was thrown into a dark dungeon, giving birth to a child who would grow up and be raised in the dungeon. His mother would tell him about the sun, moon and stars, about the mountains and the plains, flying birds and about galloping horses. But the child, born and bred in that dark dungeon and seeing nothing but this dark crevice, would hear about such things, but would not know them from personal experience and would thus doubt their real existence. In the same way we, born in darkness and exile, doubt whether it is true, that message we heard of, about the existence of a

²³ Gregory the Great: *Dialogues* III 17.

²⁴ *Ibid: Moralia in Iob XVIII, XXX 47.*

²⁵ *Ibid: Dial. IV 372*

higher, unseen world. For we only know this visible, inferior world into which we were born.²⁶

By the grace of the Spirit we know that above this visible is the invisible real, true life. Not to believe in that would be as foolish as if the child did not accept the words of his mother about the light. We should not reject the light because we only live here in the darkness.

Here at Gregory the Great originates the interpretation of the allegory of Plato's cave just as we usually got to know them through school introductions to philosophy. Nietzsche's passionate appeal: 'Friends, remain loyal to the earth – *Freunde, bleibt die Erde getreu*' is directed against this 'betrayal of the world' and against those liars who try to concoct all kinds of subterfuge, these insidious 'other-worldly *Hinterweltler*'.

This interpretation of Nietzsche has no longer anything to do with Plato's hesitatingly expressed conjectures about the vastness of reality. Plato did not yet know about another world, a kind of 'superior' world. Plotinus was the first to speak of two worlds, a world of the senses and one of the mind. The dualism of Plato is only an invention of Neoplatonic philosophy. What at the early beginnings of philosophy in antiquity was still discussed and contradicted in a flurry of questions in conversations in the streets of Athens, has, with Gregorius, gelled into rigid certainty, a black-and-white picture of reality. An image that would dominate the Middle Ages until well into the twentieth century. Gregory often does no more than collect ideas found in the works of Augustine and then formulate and present them in a rigidly positive and assertive manner. That is the reason why the influence of Gregory has been remarkably extensive. The Gregorian interpretation of Augustine's philosophy would be decisive for many subsequent centuries. Despite this large influence, however, it was also a line of thinking that had in a way come to a standstill. Gregory was the first one in the tradition of philosophy of antiquity, in which formulating questions was paramount, to 'knowing' certainties. Augustine still stated that because of many ideas, doubts and questions, he could often not fall asleep and would therefore get up in the silence of the night to reflect.²⁷

Gregory was a restless worker, but he accepted the answers that tradition had given him. His assertiveness was as yet unprecedented in the Latin West at the time, as was also the case in the Byzantine East. The ironic smile of Socrates had disappeared.

²⁶ *Ibid*

²⁷ Augustine: *De ordine* I 3, 6-7.

Gregorius was a diligent man. In the winter of AD 590 he held a grand series of forty homilies about the gospels in the basilica Santa Maria Maggiore. Many thousands listened to them, filling the building up to the walls of the aisles. The brittle health of Gregorius did not allow this effort to continue. According to tradition, it was in the spring of 591, in the small church of SS. Nereo ed Achilleo, that, in the middle of giving his 28th lecture on the gospels, he collapsed, exhausted. In 593 he once more gave an impressive series of twenty-two scholarly explanations about the prophet Ezekiel, this time especially meant for the clergy of the city. In the meantime, he worked at his masterpiece, the historical, allegorical and moralistic interpretation of the book of Job. This impressive work of thirty-five books appeared in six volumes in AD 595. About that time, the four books of Dialogues also appeared, of which the second book, the biography of Benedict of Nursia, became an overwhelming success. The *Regulae Benedicti* and the *Regulae Pastoralis* appeared and all kinds of *Regestae* were part of his daily work. He continued to work on the profound interpretations of Ezekiel and the definitive and often rewritten edition did not appear until the spring of AD 602.

In spite of his oft-quoted harsh remark to Leander of Seville about his lack of interest in grammatical rules, regardless of which page you look up, the writings of Gregorius reveal a masterly understanding of the Latin language and style.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

ISIDORE OF SEVILLE

a. Gatherings of memories

Isidore of Seville is a name which is hardly ever mentioned in the history of philosophy. That he has a prominent place in this book is not only due to my long standing preference for him (and for the venerable Bede), but also to the fact that he contributed much to philosophical and scientific education. In his *Paradiso* Dante praises the three grandmasters of contemplation: 'Isidore, Bede and Richard (of Saint Victor)'.¹ The books of Isidore, and in particular the twenty encyclopaedic books of the *Etymologiae* dating from AD 626, were the scholastic textbooks for nigh on eight centuries. Not until the thirteenth century when *De rerum proprietaribus* by Bartholomeus Anglicus appeared would the encyclopaedia of Isidore have any rivals in popularity. But even then the humanists would still be enchanted by his wealth of knowledge and clear Latin. In Augsburg, after having published his first printed edition of the bible Günther Zainer published Isidore's *Etymologiarum libri viginti* and his *De natura rerum*. He remained admired and read until just before the beginning of modern philosophy. Around 1600 three editions (Paris 1580, Madrid 1599 and Paris 1601) appeared of his collected works. After that, even though he was canonized and a couple of decades ago even became the official patron saint of the Internet, he remained largely unread apart from by some specialized professionals.

We do not know much about his life. He was born in an ancient Phoenician region in Spain. He had a Greek mother, Theodora, and a Roman father, Severian. Orphaned in his youth he came under the care of his elder brother, Leander. Leander was his predecessor as bishop of Seville, their brother Fulgentius was also a bishop and their sister Florentina a powerful abbess. Leander belonged to Pope Gregory the Great's circle of friends and maintained correspondence with Rome. The letters of Isidore that have been preserved mention hardly anything about

¹ Dante: *Il Paradiso* X, 130.

the person who wrote them. Not until five centuries after his death did a *Vita Isidori*, an uninformative panegyric probably by Lucas de Tuy appear. In the editions of his works which appeared in the Middle Ages, the catalogue of his library – *Versus qui in bibliotheca sancti Isidori legebantur* – was sometimes included at the back.

Starting off with the Bible all books studied by Isidore are listed in verse. The Greek Church fathers, Origen and Chrysostom, and the Latin ones, Hilary of Poitiers, Ambrose and Augustine are mentioned together with the works of pagan and Christian authors such as Prudentius, Avitus, Juvencus and Sedulius. Then come historical works of Eusebius and Orosius, juridical writings and the books of the *artes liberales*. For Isidore, philosophy belongs among the *artes* and mainly involved dialectics, works on morality, some scientific works and educational definitions. Judging by his *Ethymologiae* he has a broad knowledge, that is to say, he quotes many Greek and Latin philosophers, and yet, for him philosophy is a kind of education to higher spheres, in accordance with the views of the later Neoplatonic philosophers.

The source of this *Versus*, probably originates from the *disticha* in his library. In antiquity the title and author on a book scroll or bound volume would only be visible when one unrolled or opened it. In what was once the library of Pope Agapitus on the Clivus Scauri, inscriptions with names and titles were found above the shelves which once contained these scrolls. In the *scrinium* of the Lateran they had even images in fresco of the authors, among them the earliest representation of Aurelius Augustine.

In the catalogue of his library which was sometimes included in medieval editions of his works we also find comments, such as those about the many works of Augustine – that there was no one who would read all of them. Or about Origen's *De Principiis* that it was not lent out to others because of the many heresies contained in it.

Most of what we know about Isidore we learn from the deeds of the several church meetings where Isidore played an important role. During the fourth Synod in Toledo in AD 633, he urgently requested that seminaries be connected with all episcopal churches where apart from the compulsory languages Latin, Greek and Hebrew, Law, Medicine and the liberal arts would be read.

Isidore was born around AD 560, give or take ten years. His name is a bit odd, being one of those pagan theophoric names: 'gift of the goddess Isis'. He was the youngest of five children and the circumstances through which he became an orphan are enigmatic. In AD 552 Byzantine troops landed in Carthage, they were Greeks, who were described as 'enemies' by his

brother Leander. Isidore too chose the side of the Visigoths against those who wanted to restore the Roman Empire. The family was expelled or fled to Seville.

In a long letter from the elder brother, Leander to their sister Florentina he suggested she live as a *peregrinatio*. The meaning of that word is unclear. Did she live in *terra peregrina* because they had been expelled from their home land? Or was it because Florentina chose to withdraw from this world in a nunnery? Is she here being compared with Jerome, Paula and other women who left Rome to be pilgrims in the desert? Are perhaps all believers seen as ‘pilgrims’ and ‘refugees’ from far away, just like Abraham who was a stranger and Lot, who fled Sodom? Does it indicate especially those women and men who remained virgins? For ‘a virgin does not want to turn back to bygone days’; to have fallen into the flesh once is enough for them, to have physical intercourse and to bring forth once more ‘flesh’ begotten in sin and filth would only result in delaying the coming of the Lord.

This is also the title and subject of this treatise in the form of a letter: to be a virgin is to resist the world; virgins reject and despise this world. The aversion to the world, to the body and to living itself is what took shaped daily life and thinking. The ancient appreciation for the beauty of the body and living in the light of the sun disappears. Leander evokes to his sister the image of their weeping mother. She wept, he writes, “burning tears in the knowledge of never seeing her native country again. But she was aware that owing to her expulsion to a strange land – *peregrinatio* – she recognized God: I will die as one expelled – *peregrina* – and instead of going to my grave I will receive and learn to know the Lord’.²

This is a decisive step further than Monica, the mother of Augustine, who all her life longed to return to her homeland to be united in the grave with her husband. Monica, who only during the last hours of her life, in the conversation with her son, sitting in the windowsill of the inn in Ostia, renounced this desire in the knowledge that He who had created everything would also remember the place where her body was laid to rest.

Isidore’s most famous book is his *Etymologiae* in twenty volumes. The title reflects the philosophy of the Stoics, that within the language the true nature – *etymon* – of things lay hidden. Isidore intended to dedicate his *Etymologiae* to the Visigoth king Sisebut, an erudite man and writer of the *Astronomicum*, a poem about solar and lunar eclipses and of the *Vita Desiderii*. Isidore is the first to use the term *lingua mixta*. The corrupt Latin of the street, the vernacular language penetrated the Latin of those

² Leander of Seville: *De institutione virginum et contemptu mundi*.

days. The difference between written and spoken Latin had become quite considerable.

Isidore himself, as he writes in his dedication to King Sisebut of *De natura rerum*, attempts to write in the antique style – *stilo maiorum*. Writing is not the term he used, for two reasons. He modestly states that although this book is, apart from the *Etymologiae*, his major work it was merely concocted from what he had gathered together from what he remembered from writings he had once read – *ex veteris lectionis recordation collectum*.³ And besides, he obviously did not write himself, but dictated. He usually closed his long letters with a short, self-written – *ex manu sua* – prayer.

He was famous over many centuries and then for several centuries reviled as merely being a compiler. *Com-pilare* in classical Latin means ‘to rob’, ‘to plunder’. We still use a word that is derived from this: plagiarism. That is certainly not what both the word and the indicated efficacy for Isidore meant. Late Antiquity was full of this kind of activity, the collecting of the great wealth which threatened to be lost for ever and the rescue of the most important things. This laid the foundation of European civilization, which is based not so much on antiquity itself, its origin and its prosperity, but on what was saved during Late and all-too-late Antiquity. To show gratitude is here more appropriate than derision. They made excerpts – *excerpta*, they made anthologies – *florilegia* – or shortened representations of histories that had become too long – *epitomai* – in Greek and – *breviaria* – In Latin. For philosophy this ‘gathering’ was important owing to the doxography, the presentation of the different doctrines of the various philosophical schools.

Aristotle does the same in his *Metaphysica* where, before he deals with the subjects he wants to discuss, gives the opinions of his predecessors. His successor as leader of the Lyceum, Theophrastus, initiated a long doxographic tradition. Much later in antiquity another tradition began, that of the *commentarii*. No comments as we know them, but the bundled notes of what a reader thought about a text, found in it and observed. That was the valuable late-antique tradition of commentaries on the texts of Plato and Aristotle, by important philosophers such as Alexander of Aphrodisias or Simplicius of Sicily. We would have read the texts of *Cratylus*, *The State*, *Timaeus* and *Parmenides* quite differently without the commentaries about them that Proclus and Damascius wrote in the fifth and sixth centuries. They were thoroughly schooled men and they knew so much about what went definitely lost since then.

³ Isidore of Seville: *Epistola* XIV

In addition to the *commentarii*, we have the *corollarium*, such as the previously described *Corollarium de tempore* of Simplicius. A wreath was quite literally put around the text. Singers and actors received wreaths and so did orators and philosophers. For Cicero a *corrolarium* meant something like an allowance – a little extra – but in Late Antiquity, at the time of Boethius, it had more or less only a figurative meaning of an appendix to a text. That was, for example, also what Simplicius meant his *Corollarium de tempore* to be, an appendix to the text of the *Physica* of Aristotle about time.

Late Antiquity also saw the creation of the summaries of all that could be learned, the *encyclopaedia*. Varro was the great example for Isidore and Martianus Capella, who worked in Carthage at the beginning of the fifth century and of course Cassiodorus in the sixth century, were Isidore's predecessors. But the Middle Ages relied to a large extent on the encyclopaedic knowledge of Isidore, summarized in the twenty volumes of the *Etymologiae* put together by his friend and follower Braulio. They are written in a clear and concise Latin that still warms the heart. Here it was, that in the Middle Ages the founders of the universities found the model and structure for their faculties, the threefold literary – *trivium* – and quadruple scientific – *quadrivium* – courses.

Characteristic for Late Antiquity are also the *scholia*. Of course we find them already next to the texts of Homer, but only centuries later, especially in the scholarly world of Byzantium, were they systematically arranged and published: they are the – at times pedantic – but usually 'scholarly' series of remarks on texts that were difficult to fathom. Very often, going through the many volumes of the *Scholia in Novum Testamentum*, was I directed to the problems and possibilities of a text, at times side-tracking me, but often providing me with useful correct clues.

For Isidore this was still based on the Jewish tradition of the Midrash and the Greek *exègèsis*. Explaining or extrapolating, interpreting would be a deficient description. It was a form of delving into the text and then taking something out of it – *exègeomai* – also meant 'turning out the troops'. For us interpreting often means something the Germans call '*hineininterpretieren*', to declare what you think of it, give your opinion about how you see something in your own way. Exegesis is exactly the opposite, it had nothing to do with 'putting something into it' – *inter-pretē*, let alone expressing something like a subjective view, which would have been considered irrelevant by them; something is taken out of it, the true meaning.

Because it was quite difficult to consult texts in antiquity and because they were seldom privately owned and it was therefore not appropriate to

scribble notes in the margin, they often resorted to something that Pliny the Younger describes as being habitual for his uncle, Pliny the Elder: ‘After his meal, which he had in the afternoon, light and frugal, such as people used to do in former days (...) he liked to recline in the sun, if there was some free time, then a book was read to him and he made notes and excerpts. For he read nothing without making excerpts. He also often remarked that no book was so bad that it could not be useful in some way.’⁴ He who reads a text carefully makes notes of the most important aspects and keeps them together: the *acnnotationes*.

It was not only the way of reading and learning that changed; the meaning of philosophy became quite different in Late Antiquity than in previous centuries. Parmenides, Plato, Pliny, Plutarch and Plotinus belonged to the ancient tradition in which the fierce desire for wisdom was also a sober science. But already Porphyry’s biography of his teacher Plotinus, is riddled with all sorts of miraculous events. The great philosopher, who himself was so averse to anything to do with such things, comes to the fore in this biography as a kind of miracle worker.

After Porphyry, Jamblichus wrote the biography of Pythagoras and he emphasizes the miraculous powers of the philosopher in being able to look far into the future; the sage foresees earthquakes, storms and pestilence and he can even be in two places at the same time.⁵ In the language of Late Antiquity the meaning of philosophy shifts from a scientific knowledge of how ascetic life is to the miraculous knowledge of how it should be lived, a kind of piety. In Late Antiquity philosophy is often a form of turning away from knowledge and science. Lactantius was one of the first to rail against science: why the need to know the reason the water in the Nile rises or whatever the scientists want to find out? From the time of Eusebius, with whom we started this study, the church used an effective weapon against philosophy and science: the episcopal power supported by the state. Eusebius declares that the investigation of natural phenomena is superfluous, that the mind should not focus on such futilities and that the knowledge of it was unreliable and wrong.⁶

Ambrose of Milan, at times as fierce and fanatical as John Chrysostom, denounces, in his speech about faith the stupidity of the world – *stulta huius mundi*, which considers those who believe ‘as idiots’ and he ranks the faithful above the sages and scientists; the *rusticus*, the simple peasant above the *philosophus*. He turns against the gymnasia and all the nonsense

⁴ Plinius Minor: *Epistolae* III 5 (10).

⁵ Jamblichus: *Bios Pythagorikōs* §§ 92, 135-136, 142.

⁶ Numerous quotes to be found in R. MacMullen: *Christianity & Paganism in the Fourth to Eighth Centuries*, p. 88, nt 31.

they teach, their idle chatter and bragging. The unimaginative believer is by far preferable to someone who teaches *dialectica* and they who *copiose disputant*.⁷ Augustine lends his authority to this kind of opinion. He frequently ridicules science and those foolish Greeks who wasted their time searching for the elements of nature should be considered nitwits by a good Christian.⁸ For Clement of Alexandria and John Chrysostom the words *philosophia* and *philosophos* were given the connotation of a pious and ascetic life.

The way in which Isidore worked was in accordance with the manner of reading and studying in Late Antiquity. He had a text read out to him and he took notice – *notare* – of the important aspects. He tried to get to the deeper meanings of the words – *verborum* – to come to the point – *rerum* – and to penetrate by means of the word into reality. This led him to the meaning or purpose of what was put into words. He wanted to express their real meaning clearly and concisely. The best way to clarify this result lay in his spirited and appealing use of the Latin language and his attempts to render this knowledge manageable and usable.

And his books were used. Bede knew and quoted his *Synonima*, *De natura rerum*, *De ortu et obitu Patrum* and the *Etymologiae*.

b. *Etymologiae*

Why did Isidore, a busy ecclesiastical leader and counsellor of the court, trouble himself with producing a summary of all knowledge? The Greek philosophers were also striving for a comprehensive overview of the available knowledge. The Romans adopted this idea and Varro, Pliny the Elder, Suetonius, Aulus Gellius and Nonius Marcellus put together synopses. For his own encyclopaedia Isidore made use of the works of two predecessors, the second book of the *Institutions* of Cassiodorus Senator and the work of the leader of the last pagan circle of philosophers and scientists in Rome, Martianus Capella. But in addition, his erudition is very diverse: in addition to the fathers of the church, Lucretius and Virgil, Cicero and Horace were quoted. Then there were the prophets and psalms, Job and Jeremias, and quite prominently the *Moralia in Iob* by Gregory the Great. When his elder brother, Leander, was in Constantinople in AD 585-586 to negotiate with the emperor, he met Gregory, who would become pope a few years later. Leander and Gregory would continue to write to each other, a remarkably confidential and sensitive correspondence. The last letter, dated August 599, is from Gregory, full of friendship and

⁷ Ambrose of Milan: *De fide* 1.3.71f & 42f.

⁸ Augustine: *Enchiridion* IX 3 en XVI 5.

sorrow. After the death of Leander, Gregorius wrote his masterpiece *Moralia in Iob* and precedes it with a detailed dedication to his deceased friend.

The first incentive to take on this enormous task seems to be the promise to his friend, the king. It took many years to accomplish this task which from then on circulated in several versions. It was also quite practical, with rules about behaviour and practical descriptions.

The strongly moral side of the work corresponds with the philosophical doctrine that lay behind it: the Stoic. Previously Isidore had written his books *Differentiae* and *Synonyma*. The first book dealt with the *differentiis rerum*, the different, distinct things. It still shows

an attention to detail, to the focus on multiplicity and diversity that roots it firmly in the ancient world, the work free as yet from the stand-offish attitudes and generalisation of later years. In the other book the advice given by Fronto to his pupil, Emperor Marcus Aurelius, is adopted: to attempt to find several words for one and the same thing. The wealth of words will also enrich one's opinion and interest in things. In the vision of the Stoics and Isidore, tracing the origin of words will lead to the truth of things, '*etymologia est origo*'. That was his philosophical motive for undertaking this work: to penetrate into reality, to expose the truth of things.

This return to the origins of words and things led to a very original juggling with analysis and analogy, differences and similarities, synonyms and combinations and to one of the most surprising reasons for writing the *Etymologiae*: the attention to language. While in the streets and on the market the rough language of the Visigoths could be heard and in church and chancellery a kind of mixed language was used, Isidore attempted to discover the purity of the words.

And why should not we also entrust the writer of an encyclopaedia with a considerable degree of personal curiosity, a desire for knowledge? The curiosity concerning countries and peoples, animals, plants and stones that characterised the scholars of antiquity still flourishes in Isidore's work. After all, we simply have to take a look at his *Etymologiae*.

The first five books contain what would later be called *trivium* and *quadrivium*. However, it immediately crosses the boundaries of the seven *artes* also dealing with medicine, rights and categories of time. These first five books can more or less be considered an initial phase in which the necessary scientific knowledge is acquired to be able to proceed with a proper study.

This 'proper study' begins with three books (books 6-8) on religious matters: the bible, the church, monks and laity, the Trinity, liturgy and

heresy and many other aspects. Is it merely an image of the mediaeval world? But he also deals with the Sibylline books and the god Faunus. It is the inhabitants of the world of Late Antiquity who have as yet been unable to say farewell to the classical world of their ancestors and within the new Christian world of bishops and basilicas remain loyal to the altars in their houses and to the *lares*, the house gods.

Then follow six books (books 9-14) about worldly matters, twice as many as about religious matters. About man, nature and the soul. The animals, quadrupeds, snakes and fishes, birds and insects. The earth, nature, mountains and seas. They are just indications, the multiplicity of it can hardly be encompassed. The last part of the *Etymologiae* – books 15 to 20 – is about civilization, the material culture, the cities and their monuments, the buildings, fortresses, burial places, storage sites and military encampments; it deals with the land and its agricultural uses, its dimensions and several trade routes, the different kinds of money, weights and measures, war and weaponry, festivities and public games, the homely pleasures. We read about handicrafts and their techniques, about loading ships, lifting loads and decorating buildings. We are informed about mosaics, paintings, beautiful robes and jewellery, headdresses and silk, cloths and boxes; the kitchen and kitchen tools, furniture and cutlery. We get to know about carts and whips and all sorts of other subjects. It is a pleasure to read, and that in Isidore's crystal-clear, sometimes formalized Latin. The whole world of Late Antiquity is spread out for the last time, with everything medieval man no longer knew or no longer wanted to know about.

It is still Latin civilization with its Greek background. Take for instance the formulations in the first book on historiography. '*Historia est narratio res gestae.*' History is the story of what happened. A clear definition in Latin, but immediately followed by the Greek view: to write down the facts in order to be able to trace their meaning. And then the still living command of Greek: '*Historia* is derived from the Greek, *apo tou historein, id est a videre vel cognoscere* – that means to come to understanding by looking at something.'⁹ No one in antiquity would write a historical work unless he had somehow been present at what had to be described. That last sentence is a bit farfetched, but Isidore's conclusion is, and he expresses it candidly, that eyewitnesses are more reliable than testimonies based on hear-say. For a believing Christian, the idea that it is better to observe something personally with your eyes than that to accept what you are told, is more something that belongs to antiquity than to Christianity.

⁹ Isidore of Seville: *Etymologiae* I 41, 1-2.

The text certainly offers more than a mere dry enumeration of facts. So for example in the very first book the types of historiography, *de generibus historia* are clearly arranged and treated. It is surprising in the first place because all things described in Latin are invariably preceded by the concept in Greek. What the Greeks call *ephemeris* is 'diary', in the Latin *diarium*. Even more fascinating is the fact that Isidore uses a philosophy of time as a foundation for the division of history. Days, months and years yield diaries as well as *Kalendaria* (monthly accounts) and *Annales* (yearbooks). The difference, according to Isidore between *Annales* and *Historia* lies in the fact that the *Historia* are about times we have experienced, while the yearbooks, *Annales*, are about those years that lie behind us. So Sallust wrote *Historia* while, Livy, Eusebius and Jerome wrote *Annales*. With the same ease with which Isidore cites the fathers of the church, he deals with the great authors of antiquity. When he deals with the differences between *historia*, *argumentum* and *fabula*, the content he uses is based on a tradition leading back to Aristotle. 'For *historiae* are things that have truly happened; *argumenta*, are things that have not happened but could well have happened, while *fabulae* deals with things that have not really happened and cannot possibly happen as they are contrary to nature.'¹⁰

The way of thinking and judging of Isidore is quite original and remarkable. Perhaps this can be made clear by pointing out a difference, a distinction made by Isidore himself in his *Differentiae*. Augustine belonged to the rich tradition of the *enarrationes*. His *Enarrationes in Psalmos* are commentaries on the text. Isidore does not write commentaries, neither does he raise questions concerning a text. He stood within the tradition the Jews called *Midrash*, the Greeks *exègèsis* and the Latin authors *expositio*: he explains where the text is about. The text has priority for him, he absorbs it and then explains it. For Isidore, reality has three layers and so there are also ways to penetrate reality. For him, reality is temporary and literal, *historice*. But time and words have a meaning, *tropologice*, especially a moral one that can be judged. Finally, this reality is mysterious, *mystice* and behind word and time lies the truth of the spirit.

c. Words and wisdom

Probably the last work Isidore wrote was *Sententiarum libri tres*. In the philosophical tradition, the Latin *Sententiae* were collections of statements, opinions and wisdoms. In Greek they were somewhat

¹⁰ *Ibid.*: I 44, 1-5.

disdainfully talked about as *doxai* or *gnōmai* or the genre was referred to as *képhalaia*, main points from the argument. In the time of Isidore a sort of extract of some of the works of Augustine with about two hundred statements were in circulation gathered together by Prosper of Aquitaine. Better known at that time were the *Apophthegmata*, statements of the desert fathers statements, which were, soon after also available in Latin translations. That was the background of Isidore's last work; in the future there would be the great scholasticism tradition of the commented doctrines, especially the *Sententiarum libri IV* by Peter Lombard which would be in use for quite a few centuries.

What is fascinating is the entirely idiosyncratic manner in which Isidore stands within this tradition, he was the last to do so. In his own book he explains, and it is a striking example of his etymologically inspired way of thinking, that the true word and meaning of what is said, is not to be found in the literal texts, but within its own meaning. It is the deeper meaning of the words of the wise which touches and grips. *Sententiae* express the sentiment – *sententiam*. True wisdom does not lie in words and cannot really be put into words either, but it expresses itself in words, but especially in the feelings it invokes in the reader. This is not meant in our present day emphasis on feelings, but the wise were considered wise because they tried to express their feelings – of compassion, of love and willingness to help – In words. It was not the words, but the feeling that counted.

Unlike speaking with authority alone and expecting no contrary reaction, as would later be the case during the Middle Ages, Isidore still belonged to the tradition of the ancient world and he explicitly opted for the conversation and the mutual consultation, the *collatio*. The way in which an abbot would converse with his monks about rules and texts.

It is remarkable that through this attitude the personal aspects, the exposure of yourself, would also come to the fore. In some places in his *Sententiae* Isidore interrupts the text with a reflection, a confession about his own shortcomings and sins. The construction of the *Sententiae* in three books is based firstly on the truth and knowledge of the faith, secondly on its moral and personal consequences, and finally it opens the way out of daily existence to harvesting the enduring fruits of a virtuous life, the *fructus aeternitatis*.

Isidore was the first person to use the word *microcosmus* as a kind of reflection of the Greek concept for the overall order – *kosmos*. The Greek word *mikros*, 'small' could have been translated into Latin with *parvus*, 'slight'.

He still held on to the idea of coherence, the connection between everything, universe and man, an idea belonging to antiquity. Man is both insignificant in comparison with that awesome 'all', as a part of it and thus a part that participates in that awe-inspiring whole. The creation found its completion only in the creation of man. He even goes a significant step further: 'All things under the sun' were made for the benefit of man, but man was created for his own sake.¹¹

It is one of the many statements which make Isidore's thinking so wonderfully specific and almost empirical, anthropocentric and optimistic. Compare it for instance with the *Moralia in Iob* written by Gregory the Great when he was an old man. The contrast between that dark and gloomy work and the much lighter colours of Isidore's way of thinking is immediately apparent. For the Roman, God scourges this world, saturated in sin and the Spaniard Isidore opposes this with his simple joyfulness: ●*rare et operari* – pray and work well.

We do not really even know the title of his philosophically most important work. In most manuscripts we find the title as *libri etymologiarum*. But in the correspondence with his friend and colleague Braulio of Zaragoza we come across the title *libri originum*. Personally he informs the king, Sisebut that he intends to dedicate a book to him about the origins of many things – *opus de origine quarundam rerum*. In the book itself he explains, rather succinctly, the Greek word with the sentence: '*Etymologia est origio*.'¹²

●On the subject of value and truth of words there is a longstanding discussion within the world of philosophy that probably started with Heraclitus' comment: 'The name of the bow is *biós*, his work is death' (as opposed to life: *bios*).¹³ A student of Heraclitus, Cratylus, became the teacher of Plato. The conversation between Cratylus and a pupil of Democritus, Hermogènes, about the relation of words to things and reality is described by Plato. Cratylus believes that words represent the true nature of things. At least, that is what Plato makes him say, whereas the statement about the name of the bow clearly indicates that this is not what Heraclitus meant. According to the school of Democritus words are names, randomly given by people at one thing and another. As Hermogènes says, just as an owner can give his slaves names to his liking.¹⁴ This argument is repeated by Isidore, which does not automatically mean that he has read the

¹¹ Isidore of Seville: *Sententiae* I 11, 1.

¹² Ibid: *Etymologiae* I 29.

¹³ D.K. 22 B 48.

¹⁴ Plato: *Cratylus* 384d.

text of Plato's dialogue. In all probability Isidore relied mainly on the six books of Varro *De lingua Latina*.

The text of caput XXIX of the first book of the *Etymologiae* is succinct: *Etymologia est origio vocabulorum*. Etymology is a Greek word, derived from *etimos*, really true, *etumotès*, word derivation. The Latin word *origio* chosen by Isidore has a much wider meaning: the origin; what something originally was and what used to be the value and meaning. It determines the origin or the original meaning of words and names so that we know what they actually mean. Aristotle calls this *sumbolon*, Cicero *adnotationem*. *Sumbolon* is used by Aristotle in the meaning of treaty, agreement. An odd instance of this form can be found in Plato's symposium: the agreement between people to be able to recognize something as real.¹⁵ The given example is the broken tile whereby the stranger is recognized as a guest or friend because he possesses one half of a broken tile that fits the other half kept by the host. In Rome this was known as the *tessera hospitalis*. The Greek word suggests a closer bond than the somewhat official indication used by Cicero: the making of comments on something, notes. Cicero considered for a moment using a neologism which would be closer to the meaning of the Greek word, *veriloquium*, but considered that word too bizarre.

Isidore adheres to the simple idea that knowing what a word or name originally means will usually contribute to the understanding of the meaning of that word. The example that he gives in his text that '*homo*', 'man' is derived from '*humus*', fertile soil, is both right and to the point. It keeps both philosophical views defended in the *Cratylus* open: the origin of the words – *origio* – says something about the essential value or meaning of those words – *vis verbi* – and it gives us at the same time insight into what the issues are – *rem* – for and what things really are. On the other hand, the possibility remains open that words and names were given by people simply in a haphazard way. In this way Isidore created one of the most famous problems of scholastic philosophy: the contrast between realists and nominalists.

A rather popular book in the Middle Ages was the *Liber rotarum* of Braulio. In many manuscripts we see concentric circles and figures with *MUNDUS – ANNUS – HOM* written in the middle. Again and again the connections and similarities between world and reality, time and tides and man are being put in pictorial form. They date back to antiquity and rely heavily on the *Timaeus* of Plato and *De Mundo* of Aristotle. Once given, the schedule can be expanded and applied again and again. The shown

¹⁵ Plato: *Symposium* 191d.

connections are very suggestive. The human body is constructed in accordance with the quadruple elements: the earth is the flesh, water the blood, air the breath and fire is represented by feverish warmth. The body can also be compared with the quadruple structure of the world. The head, after all, is likened to the sky, the two eyes correspond to the two celestial lights, sun and moon, the chest with the lungs is like the air found under the high sky whereas the belly and intestines are compared to the sea; everything flushes through. Both legs and feet are hard and dry like the earth.

In this way of reasoning many things can be connected to each other; they have their place and there is order. Etymology too is a useful help. For example each of the seasons – *tempora* – is connected to a certain composition of the body fluids – *temperamento*.

Man is thus seen as a world in miniature, a microcosm, in the translation of Isidore: *brevis mundus*. At the same time, ‘man’, ‘time’ and ‘world’ remain connected, in accordance with the ideas of antiquity which provided duration and sustainability. At first glance it seems that Isidore’s view of ‘time’ is practically identical with the philosophy of time as presented by Augustine in the eleventh book of his *Confessiones*. But there is a remarkable quirkiness in the text that Isidore devotes to time in *Sententiae* 1, 7. As can be expected the beginning is almost obligatory: of all things in this world time is the least tangible, sliding past us and constantly trickling away, In its unstoppable free fall it takes everything with it like rainwater whirling down a drain. Also the idea that fragments of past, present and future reside in expectations and memory can be found in Augustine’s work where it is expanded more fully than in Isidore’s – with the exception of expectations of the future.

For Aurelius Augustine the future remained obscure and impenetrable, but Isidore gives a lot of attention to the possibilities of taking a look at what is to be and being able to get an idea of what is still hidden in the darkness of time to be, the *praenuntiatio futurorum*. For, after all, weren’t there prophets and prophecies, even in pagan times? Indeed, part of the future is already discernible. It is written in the stars and the earliest philosopher of Western tradition, Thales of Miletus, was already able to predict the solar eclipse of 585 BC. And did not Aristotle write that Thales, through his knowledge of meteorological matters, could predict a bad harvest and then bought all olive presses in the area because he had foreseen that this would be followed by a period of abundance. For God, all moments in time are present at the same time and He can thus provide us with a glimpse of a future that is still unknown to us in impenetrable

darkness. The past and the future *are* for Him and are real – quite different from our living in the present that intangibly glides past us.

With this, a Neoplatonic notion about divine sustainability and eternity enters into thinking about time. For Augustine the rectilinear time is opposed to the round, circular time and he chooses for the *via recta*. Isidore leaves much more room for the circular idea sense of time, the recurring of tides, seasons and years; the ecclesiastical year with its recurring festivals, the enduring circle of debilitating work, of sowing and mowing; the regular course of the stars and constellations in the firmament and the rising and setting of the sun. Precisely there, where Augustine sees the breaking point of the circular time, the absolute *novum* of the resurrection from the dead, Isidore adds a method of calculating the date of Easter. The Christians in Alexandria wanted a date that differed from the Jewish Passover, and during the first few centuries this led to many heated disputes about the correct calculation. Isidore leads the date of the commemoration of the resurrection from the dead all the way back to the orbit of the moon and the circular year, so that also this absolute break in the normal order – that extreme limit of life and death – was once more included *in orbe*, in the circular order of time.

For Augustine the presence, – *praesentia* – of past, present and future lay in expectation, involvement and memory, which in their turn had their place in the soul. For Isidore too, earth, time, body and man are above all beyond reality and the real presence can only be found inside. But this leads back to Him, the only one who has duration and sustainability and forever *is*. For Isidore, time, temporality, is also a kind of returning to the eternity of God. The endurance of time can, according to Augustine, be found nowhere else than within the soul, that little spark of eternity that desires to leave its temporal shackles of transient flesh and to return to the eternity of God.

For Isidore, abiding in time, durability, remains preserved in the temporary. The past remains present in things, words and people. The origins pointed out in his *Etymologiae* preserve the presence of the true reality. In the present we do not merely perceive rectilinear time through which everything glides past, but also circular time that keeps returning constantly, continually passing days, months and years. Nature's eternity and also our insignificant transient unreal world is a reflection of the majestic arrangement of the whole and as a part of this is permanently included. The ecclesiastical year with its feasts and daily liturgy is a sign of the sustainability of the temporary, of being included in a large, sustainable whole. And even the dark and impenetrable future is present in

the predictions and omens, and also in the expectations that we may cherish and whose fulfilment inevitably approaches.

CHAPTER TWELVE

BEDE THE VENERABLE

a. The Venerable

Why Bede? Nothing in his life seems to give rise to include him in this book. Born about AD 672 near Jarrow he was admitted into the monastery there when he was still a very young boy and where he remained for the rest of his life. In fact, apart from some time in the nearby monastery in Wearmouth he never travelled beyond York. Spending his life reading and writing, he died in his cell in AD 735 when he was sixty-three years old. He had not travelled into the world and had done nothing, not even preached a sermon, outside the walls of his monastery. He wrote quite a lot, but much of it is hardly worth looking at. Only his *Historia ecclesiastica gentis anglorum*, a brilliant book, is still extremely fascinating. It is as captivating as *Beowulf*, the epic of his unknown contemporary, and it is full of evocative descriptions of contemporary characters and compelling stories about human kindness and inhuman deeds.

Is that book, therefore, the reason to include him in this book? No. There are several more aspects of Bede's work to examine. I will mention five of them.

Most traditional books dealing with the history of philosophy begin with Thales of Miletus in the sixth century BC and allow the philosophy of antiquity to end with Boethius in the sixth century AD. Then a new chapter opens with the medieval history of philosophy, both Arabic and Christian, and the latter invariably starts off with the apologists, then come the Church Fathers and the several directions of scholasticism. In this representation the chronology is violated, because we go back four centuries in time and begin once again with descriptions of contemporaries, pupils and teachers. First, we are told about the declining and dilapidated 'pagan' philosophy of antiquity and subsequently we are directed to cast our eyes on the light of the rising sun – the new Christian philosophy. If Bede is looked at in this light then we can see that an injustice is being done to him from both sides.

Pagan philosophy during Late Antiquity is far from being an exhausting and tiresome repetition of old ideas. On the contrary, in the various Neoplatonic schools, such as in Alexandria and Athens, philosophy flourished with many surprising and decisive twists and fundamentally new ideas. Injustice is also done to Christian philosophy if we consider its ideas as something completely new and original. If we consider all the apologists, the great Greek Fathers of the Church such as Origen, Clement of Alexandria, and in the Latin West Ambrose of Milan, then we have to ask whether the main theme of their work is anything other than the intertwining of the ideas of Plato, Aristotle and the Stoics with the fundamental principles of the Christian faith?

If we were to divide the philosophy of Late Antiquity into a declining 'pagan' and a flourishing 'Christian' branch, the dynamics and great tensions that played an important part within the thinking of that period would not be recognized and understood. The daily reality was so much different, the ways of thinking so much more interwoven. In houses and monasteries in Egypt, codices from the fourth and fifth centuries were discovered. Within these books, editions of Thucydides were found, together in the same volume as the Bible book *Suzanna* by Daniel; another codex shows the text of Cicero's speeches against Catalina concluded with a Hymn to the Blessed Virgin. Within another codex appears a rather obscene comedy by Menander followed by the letters of Pachomius with monastic rules for monks.¹

When Augustine lay on his deathbed in Hippo Regius, the city that had been besieged by the Vandals for many months, the eighteen-year-old Proclus arrived in Athens in AD 430. A few years later he became the leader of the Academy, which he would remain until his death in 485. His successor, Marinus, wrote about his life and thinking. The philosopher acted as a kind of faith healer and healed incurable patients. He especially helped afflicted souls to break the earthly shackles that bound them. Proclus' contemplations on the *Timaeus* of 'the divine' Plato is one of the most profound writings of antiquity. His influence on the thinking of many following generations of philosophers and theologians, whether Christian or not, is extensive. With the death of Augustine came the end of the development of thinking in the West, but only a few months after his death ships from all over the Empire set sail to the metropolis Ephesus, where in AD 431 the important Church Council was held in which the gathered participants dared to declare a virgin to be the mother of God. The womb of a woman had borne and given birth to God!

¹ B. Nongbri: *Gods Library*. Yale UP 2018, p. 209.

What did that actually mean for the way man and woman were thought about in antiquity and how did that affect the relation between body and soul?

A second reason to pay attention to Cassiodorus Senator, Gregory the Great, Isidore of Seville, the Venerable Bede and Boethius is what Peter Brown and others have shown us: Late Antiquity lasted longer, much longer than had hitherto been assumed. And although the period was indeed less well-known and less studied in comparison with the Athens of Plato and Aristotle, or the Rome of Cicero and Seneca, it is by no means of less importance.

Much of what antiquity bequeathed us often originates from the very end of Late Antiquity. How would Roman law have reached us if it had not been collected, commented upon and published, as late as the sixth century? It was not the pure Attic of Plato nor the skilfully rhetorically-formed language of Cicero that could be heard for a thousand years in the West. The Greek of the classical authors was lost and what remained was the later vernacular, the *koinè*, in which the New Testament was written.

Instead of the Latin of Cicero came the language of the vernacular sermon – *sermo humilis* – and the often incorrect Latin of Late Antiquity – *sermo rusticus* – which was spoken and written in churches and monasteries, in the streets and marketplaces – in fact everywhere, and for centuries thereafter at the universities. If one were to consider that the use of language also determines the style and content of thinking, one can only conclude that it was detrimental to philosophical accuracy. The outrageous manner in which a great thinker like Augustine sometimes misunderstands concepts and definitions prescribes the fate of this legacy from Late Antiquity; the language became the corrupted Latin ‘world language’ of the civilized West. The *elegantia* of Latin had gone and was replaced by a language lacking in style in which the *vulgus* could also follow what was written and spoken.

The number of illiterates increased during Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages; those who could read, the *litterati*, seldom read any works of a scientific or philosophical nature – no tragedies, verses or treatises, but mainly prayers, liturgical texts and moral tracts. Quite a few sang, especially the psalms, in that language, but these *psalterati* often knew neither notes nor letters.

Apart from the law and the language, it was the organization of the late Empire that was retained: its method of taxation and its collection, the roads, the registration of landownership, the chancellery, the urban centres and its culture of writing. Medieval Christians were not following the

Christian faith as it was in antiquity, but its content and form were determined by the defining church councils of Late Antiquity and the ecclesiastical hierarchy dating from the time when the Empire came to an end. And also its philosophy was that of Late Antiquity. It was not the Stoics of ancient Athens, but the Stoic rules for living adapted by Ambrose for the church that retained their influence into the Middle Ages. Not the philosophy of Plato himself, but the interpretations of his work by the Neoplatonics during Late Antiquity continued to dominate philosophy in the West. It was not the philosophy of Aristotle himself, but the way in which Porphyry and Boethius had distorted it during Late Antiquity, that played a part within scholasticism.

● One of the crucial themes of my book has to do with the interconnection between thought and the language in which it was thought, spoken and written. There is no doubt that Alcuin, at the court of Charlemagne, apart from writing and speaking in Latin, still thought in Latin. And yet something essential had changed: Latin was revived by him and other scholars of the Carolingian renaissance, revived because it was no longer a living but a dead language. It was no longer the mother tongue but a language learned at school and the language of scholars. Neither was it any longer a language which could be heard in the streets. Germanisms were also penetrating Alcuin's somewhat contrived Latin. In his surroundings he heard Germanic or Romance languages and dialects, but Latin only within the chancellery. Even as a church language, Latin was not automatically present everywhere. Bede writes that only half the residents of his monastery, meaning monks and not villagers or citizens, knew any Latin.

When we realize that even Plato, who spoke civilized Attic, had difficulties with the archaic Ionic of Heraclitus, we can appreciate that the linguistic leap from Cicero via Plotinus or Proclus, to Augustine and other philosophers seems an enormous jump. And yet, it was not a jump; it was a slow and very gradual development to which no one paid any notice.

So what actually did happen and when and why exactly? Looking for answers to these questions will, apart from any clear answers, lead to the discovery that decisive moments in history often occur unnoticed at the time. We have practically forgotten Isidore of Seville and consider great the names of Aristotle and Augustine when indicating the sources of Thomas Aquinas' thinking. Thomas himself mentions Rhabanus Maurus, his teacher, the man who uncovered for him the richness of the thinking of Isidore of Seville.

When the civilisation of antiquity had reached its apogee, literacy was a prerequisite for an experienced thinker. A training in and a thorough knowledge of *grammatica* and *rhetorica* was required for the study of philosophy. Jerome still stated that in his youth he abhorred the Bible in Latin because of its lack of style.

The flawed Latin of late antiquity is an indication of a breach in a long tradition. At the end of the sixth century Gregory of Tours still wrote his *Historia Francorum* in a Latin which according to the rules of language and style and spelling was far from perfect and full of errors. At the same time this epic text is written in an exceptionally entertaining and lively language and refers directly to previous traditions, especially that of Virgil. A slightly later contemporary is Venantius Fortunatus, who had had a completely classical schooling in Ravenna and having fled Italy because of the Longobards used his neat Latin at the Merovingian court in Metz. Just compare these works with the woeful Latin of Fredegar's *Chronicon* and its *Continuationes* written around 727 in the abbey of Saint Denis in miserable Latin.

This decline comes to a halt in an exceptional way. In AD 597, sent from Rome by Gregory the Great, the monk Augustine appears with forty co-workers in England to establish and spread Christianity in that region. They are rapidly quite successful and seventy years later, in AD 668, another pope sends two remarkable scholars to the British Isles: Theodore and Hadrian. Theodore was a Greek, born in Cilicia, who first studied in Athens and then in Rome, in complete accordance with the classical curriculum, and with perfect command of both Greek and Latin. Hadrian was born in the Roman (then Byzantine) part of North Africa; he had been a monk in Naples and also had a command of Greek and Latin, which was most exceptional at the time. In Canterbury they founded one of the first Christian universities – if we may define it as such – and made the courses trilingual: Anglo-Saxon, Greek and Latin. Grammar, geometry and algebra, astronomy and music were part of the curriculum. Bede regards them as his teachers and in the beginning of the eighth book of his history he clearly states that they taught both spiritual and profane sciences and philosophy.

Bede forms the link between the loss of Latin a century earlier in South Gaul and Italy and the regaining of Latin in the Carolingian Renaissance a few decades after his death. Perhaps it was because Bede was admitted to a convent in infancy that Latin was his mother tongue. He learnt Latin naturally, at the awakening of his sense of language; it was not something learned later on through the study of grammar. His writings, and they are many and varied, are absolutely exceptional for the time in which he lived.

The man himself is also exceptional: he never travelled and did not hold any high function. 'I always liked reading', he explains, 'and writing books'. His style is lucid and clear, concise without being halting. On the contrary, he enjoys telling his stories and does so very well and engagingly. The author of *Beowulf* must have been his contemporary and the masterly work of Bede can be compared to it.

According to David Knowles: 'Half a dozen of the best stories about English history originate from Bede – the martyrdom of Alban, the arrival of Augustine, the story of Cuthbert the shepherd boy, or the hermit from Farne who was warmed by the seals, the history of Hilda and the poet Caedmon. And also with regard to characters: everything we know about the kings of Mercia and Northumbria, about Wilfrid of York, about the Abbots Benedict and Ceolfrid and many others, comes from Bede. Once one has picked up Bede's book, it is difficult to put it down again.'² Bede is unusually erudite and also a master of his material. His wisdom, which he applies in the service of the burgeoning Christianity in his country, is still firmly rooted in the Latin tradition of late antiquity. His judgments are balanced and to the point and his Latin is engaging and lively. But he was the last one to use Latin as a living language.

One of Bede's stories is of exceptional philosophical importance and it is a blow inflicted on Western philosophy, being a tale like Plato's about people in a cave, in a philosophical attempt to interpret reality. A story that puts the relationship between time and eternity into words and is the most important theme of my own book and the source of its title: *Boundaries of Being*.

The story can be found in the second book which begins with a short biography of Gregory the Great. He died, says Bede, in the second year of the reign of the emperor Phocas – in AD 603. In faraway England the Byzantine era was still used as a temporal hub, (a common enough literary device) in Bede's time. 'In the second year of Phocas' reign, he passed from this life and entered the true life of heaven – *Secundo autem eiusdem Focatis anno transiens ex hac vita migravit ad veram, quae in caelis est, vitam*.'³ Then he tells us about the funeral, on 12 March, in the portal of the sacristy of Saint Peter's. And he quotes the epitaph – which with the grave itself, has now vanished – with the well-known honorary title *Dei consul*, consul of God. Noteworthy, of course, is the difference in style, the pure stylized Latin in contrast with the somewhat coarser language of Bede. But there is also the simple conception of Bede: Gregory has

² D. Knowles: *Saints and Scholars*. Cambridge 1962, p. 20.

³ Bede: *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* II 1.

journeyed from the false life here on earth to the true life in heaven. The inscribed epitaph was:

Receive, O earth, the body that you gave,
 Till God's life-giving power destroy the grave.
 Over his heaven-bound soul death holds no sway
 Who steps through death into a fairer day
Suscipe, terra, tuo corpus de corpore sumtum,
Reddere quod valeas vivificante Deo.
Spiritus astra petit, loeti nil iura nocebunt,
*Cui vita alterius mors magis ipsa via est.*⁴

This text stands at the crossroads. An ancient Roman would still have found a complete statement of belief here, while in the words of Bede it has already become a medieval-sounding Christian testimony of faith.

Bede will certainly have quoted this epitaph as it contains a remarkably long account of the conversion of England on Gregory's initiative. Which gives Bede reason to tell a story about this event. Why did Gregory send forty monks to that distant and virtually unknown corner of the earth? Because once, when he was not yet a pope, he walked in the Trajan's market through groups of slaves on sale. – In passing I would like to indicate that in Gregory's time in Rome, which had been nominally Christian for nearly three centuries, the slave market was still fully operational. – *'Heu, pro dolor'*, exclaimed the astonished Gregorius. The strapping figures with long blond hair seemed to be angels from heaven to the small Roman and he asked where they came from. When they turned out to be called Angles, he decided that he would bring the true faith to these angels when he was able to do so.

b. 'And we, who may we be?'

'Who is man?' is a question that was asked constantly from Plato to Plotinus during antiquity. The famous metaphor, the myth of the cave, is Socrates' answer to the question: 'Tell us, who is man?' And seven centuries later, Plotinus comes back to it again and again: 'And we, who are we? – *Hèmeis de, tines de hèmeis*;⁵

That question concerning man is a substantially different from ours. During antiquity the question about mankind was raised within a greater context, as a microcosm of the great natural order. Since the Renaissance,

⁴ *Ibid*: Translation: Leo Sherley-Price. Penguin Classics, 1968.

⁵ Plotinus: *Enneads* VI.4, 14.

the self-conscious human has become its own centre and yardstick. And during late antiquity and the Middle Ages hardly anyone inquired about man. God is the centre and the souls are shimmers of that immense light. The souls can move further away from the eternal light and be lost as dead cinders in the ashes, or be taken up again into the fire from which they originate.

During late antiquity, a light seems to fade away and a world disappears. Arthur Schopenhauer believed light was '*das Erfreulichste der Dinge*— the most enjoyable of all things'. For things become visible in the light. It shows the opaque objects and reveals the transparent. World and reality only manifest themselves because light falls on them. The beginning of modern philosophy, the requirement that thought and things appear before us '*claire et distinct*', takes the light as the starting point of sensing reality and thinking.

Over the centuries much has changed and is gradually changing in the philosophy and ontology of antiquity, but during late antiquity gaps appear. The foundation of the concepts of *kosmos* and *phusis* for example is weakened and falls away. Then there are essential matters for the philosophy of antiquity, which in late antiquity are looked at with indifference. The beauty of the body, cupidity, the feverish desire of *erōs*, the pursuit of truth, the unprejudiced approach to knowledge and science, the distant respect for life and reality, scepticism and enjoyment as fulfilment of life – and many more aspects, fades into the background and disappears. And finally, body and life, love and living escape the minds of this era.

Bede died in the presence of an eyewitness who shared his art and love of storytelling. Bede knew that his end had come, but that he had not yet finished his last task, the translation of the Gospel of John. 'His pupil, Wilberch, told him, "Beloved master, there is one sentence left unwritten." He answered, "Well, write it down". A short time later the boy said, "Now it is written." And Bede said: "Very well, now it is finished. You have voiced the truth. Now take my head into your hands, because my only longing is for the holy place to where I was always absorbed in prayer. From there I can call on my Father for the last time. And while he was held upright, sitting on the pavement of his cell, he sang, "Honour to the Father, the Son, and the Spirit," and gave up the ghost.'⁶

The whole arrangement of experience was so different then, than in ancient times. So much was already lost. The world and reality of Bede was the silent and darkening world of his lonely monastic cell. The world

⁶ D. Knowles: *Saints and Scholars*. p. 21.

outside, with boats, wagons and carts, the women and their regional clothes, the sun and the sea, travelling farther and farther away, wars and farming – it had definitely been absorbed into the background, had all lost its meaning for those inside the monastery. Continuation of contacts with that world outside would prevent the deepening of faith and understanding.

Bede's mind was far removed from experiencing the world, and he had also distanced himself from his body.

Macrina, the sister of Basil the Great, refused to see a doctor about her tumour, partly because she did not want to uncover her breast for a man but also because the body was a hindrance in the contemplation of God. Her sister Gorgonia did not want to be helped by nurses after an accident for the same reason. These events are told by men, their brothers, Gregory of Nyssa and Peter of Sebasteia. And they praise the behaviour of their sisters as being exemplary. In the same period, at the end of the third century, Plotinus did not give permission for a picture of him to be made because he was ashamed of his body.

Anyone who thinks about the clothes people wore in Late antiquity will notice that both men and women were covered from head to toe and that there was nothing to be seen of any of the nudity common in previous centuries. In Late antiquity the shape of the body disappeared under formless attire. In the dwellings of the same period an increasing need for screening off from the outside world and privacy is clearly identifiable. Archaeologists show us how partition walls were put in formerly large halls and public spaces. Private rooms, such as the monastic cell, are in vogue while the large public spaces such as the theatres and especially the thermal baths are in decline. The latter are replaced by closed off spaces for bathrooms and latrines inside the houses.

●ften this development is exclusively attributed to the rise of Christianity. But the philosopher Hypatia, murdered by Christian fanatics at the end of the fourth century AD, threw her pads with her menstrual blood into the face of a suitor to teach him the kind of filthy flesh he was courting. Heraiskos, a holy man was immediately struck with a severe headache, whenever he heard a woman talk about being in 'her days'. But in the time of my grandmother it was still common for women who had their period not to go to the butcher's shop or the florist and neither did she work on preserving fruit and vegetables in that period.

●nly because in the fifth century when the Christians formed the organisation where much was documented do we have so many examples of their hatred against the body. But in the silenced pagan majority of the

population there was no difference. The female friends of Jerome, although ladies of the highest Roman nobility and pleasing in the eye of God, must have stunk. Melania the Elder reproaches a deacon for washing his hands and feet. She is sixty years old and never washed any part of her body apart from her fingertips. Her friend Paula claimed that 'a clean garment must be covering a filthy mind'.

In Bede too we come across remarkable examples of this aversion to body and life. After Queen Aethelthryth entered a nunnery, she never washed again, except before each of the three main church festivities as the last of the nuns in the dirty bath water. When a deadly tumour grew on her throat and jaw, she thanked her Redeemer for this gift, a sign that she would soon be redeemed; moreover, it prevented her yielding to the temptation to adorn her neck with necklaces or other vain frills.⁷

When the Irish monk Columban died in November 615, Jonas of Bobbio wrote that 'the others remained behind in the dying flesh and sang the song of the passing of the world's vanity.'

Bede tells us that it must have been in the winter of the year 627 that King Edwin deliberated with his counsellors and nobles about the fate of the country. Finally an unnamed person takes the floor and says to the king: 'Your Majesty, when we compare the present life of man on earth with that time of which we have no knowledge, it seems to me that it is like the swift flight of a single sparrow through the banqueting-hall where you are sitting at dinner on a winter's day with your thanes and counsellors. In the middle there is a comforting fire to warm the hall; outside, the storms of winter rain or snow are raging. This sparrow flies swiftly in through one window of the hall, and out through another. The short period of time that it is inside, he is safe from the winter storms; but after a few moments of comfort, he vanishes from sight into the wintry world from which he came. Likewise, man appears on earth coming from the darkness, is briefly in the light and warmth and then again disappears for ever into the darkness from which he came, knowing nothing of what preceded him, nor where he is going. Thus, your Majesty, I consider human life on earth.'⁸

Vita hominum praesens in terris – human life on earth. *Praesens* can be understood as 'now', 'present' or 'being present'. The *praesentia* is being present here and now, in the present tense. Our presence is then not subjected, as in the ontology of antiquity, to the sustainability of the order, but to the short moment of being here briefly. Cut off from duration and

⁷ Bede: *Historia* IV 19 (17).

⁸ *Ibid*: II 13. Translation p. 127.

durability, we are literally left outside in the cold and abandoned. If the advice to the king through this story is accepted and followed, salvation is sought in something supernatural, something that surpasses our reality.

Being present is a particularly limited form of being: it has nothing to do with what is elsewhere but only that what is here, now, is present. The restriction is both ontological and temporal, that is to say only if I am somewhere, I am present (ontological) and this being present must be in the present, now (temporally). Reality is diminished; it becomes small like the cell of Bede and is restricted to the short while of the present. The word initially expressed that which was there before 'I am' – *prae-sum*. In classical Latin, *praesentia* represents the presence, the immediate effect. *Praesens* then emphasizes a kind of intensification of reality, on what is going on now. *In re praesenti*, at the place where it happens, in the act, now. *In rem praesentem venire*, to join at a specific time and place. Livy uses *praesentia* or *praesentium* to indicate the present conditions: 'being present at the moment', 'instantaneously', 'immediately'. Romans used phrases such as *praesentia pecunia*, 'ready money', or Cicero *praesentia preces*, 'immediately after the offense'.

In each case *praesentia* appears to express a reality in which something happens instantaneously, immediately and in full force. This intensification of reality, that forceful aspect of the immediate, vanished in Late antiquity and the word received the double limitation familiar to us: not elsewhere; only here and without duration or durability, but 'just for a moment', 'a short while', 'the all-too-short'.

In the years after Bede, the meaning of the word has condensed even more. We can now say for instance: 'The press was present at the presentation', meaning: 'it received attention' 'Present arms', meaning: 'take on a certain position with your rifles'.

As the opposite of the *praesentia*, the being of man on earth for a fleeting moment, Bede puts and compares it with – *ad comparationem eius*, 'time that is unclear to us – *quod nobis incertum est, temporis*'.

Here time, time as temporality, has become the defining, fundamental aspect of philosophy. Time is uncertain; it escapes us. Certainty is only that which is presented to us for a brief moment, the *praesentia*, the present here – that short-lived non-existing short-coming. In the story of the king, the word 'time' crops up three times in a few sentences. ● Opposite this 'now-for-a-moment', there is the 'uncertain' time – *incertum (...)* *temporis*. Then follows the word which clarifies the present: *tempore brumali*, 'winter's day'. And on that winter's day appears, just for a moment, the frightened sparrow. It is present, with us; it briefly has something to do with us. In that 'briefly here' – *citissime*, the flash

between appearing and disappearing, the moment that we are hardly aware of is gone and before we see it, our life takes place. Bede turns the story back and repeats the opening words: *Ita haec vita hominum* – ‘such is human life’. Bede clarifies his position by three restrictions. *Tempus, spatium, modus*.

First of all, *tempore*, the short time of the present, between the wintery cold and the dark and silent winter of death. Bede qualifies this as *spatio*, the very short time, the limited space. As early as Augustine, time appears as temporary and as ‘in between’. The word of Augustine for Bede becomes even more frightening and more restrictive; between the sudden and unexpected appearances out of the cold void and to disappear once more almost immediately. Time as spacing, our human life as something that is present for a brief moment between the lines. The narrow spacing between *mox de hieme in hiemem regrediens* – suddenly out of the winter and quickly back into the winter, the moment that escapes us. ‘*Ita haec vita hominum ad modicum apparet*. – This is how man’s life appears for ‘just a little while’. The word used, *modus*, is after time and space, an even more oppressive word. The Latin word *modus* we know now – for instance as the ‘mode’ of dressing, the fleeting manner in which something comes forward, is dressed up. *Servorum modo* says Cicero, the way, for example, in which slaves behave. A *modus* is not something in itself; it is the way something is shown for a short time. Hegel defines *Modus* as ‘the outwardly appearing appearance, a mere style and manner’.⁹

Life of man here and now on earth is not essence, but only appearance. Elsewhere there is the real life. Bede describes the vision of the blessed Fursey, who was taken up by the angels during his lifetime and saw below – *inferior* – the world as ‘a dark valley deep below him – *vidit quasi vallem tenebrosam subtus se*’. Above him he sees four fires purifying the souls. For those without sin the flames separate, the sinners, however, are scorched or burned by them. As Fursey had once given money to a sinner, and had therefore come into contact with evil, his right shoulder and chin were scorched. Back on earth he retained these signs in his flesh for the rest of his life.¹⁰

Human life is like being in a dark valley, the valley of death, the vale of tears. Bede also coined the saying: ‘We live in the certainty of death, and in the uncertainty of its hour – *eo quod certus sibi exitus, sed incerta eiusdem exitus esset hora futura*’.¹¹ Bede gives this sentence as an

⁹ G.W.F. Hegel: *Werke in zwanzig Bänden, Wissenschaft der Logik* 6, 193. ‘*die als Äusserlichkeit gesetzte Äusserlichkeit, eine blosse Art und Weise*.’

¹⁰ Bede: *Historia* III 19.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

explanation of the bible text: ‘Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.’¹² But Matthew refers to the coming of the kingdom, and thus life here. For Bede the kingdom of God is to be found elsewhere and here there is only the valley of death.

The nunnery of abbess Ethelburga is a world filled with miracles. ● One night the little boy Aesica dies from the plague, but three times he calls out the name of the sister who cared for him. Even before the light of the morning dawned she was also allowed to leave this earthly life and was taken up into the eternal light. ● One of the nuns called a few times for someone to extinguish the lamp in her room. She saw an increasingly brighter light that put all earthly light in darkness. And before the sun appeared she went there.

Sister Torthgyth, who had lived for many years in humility and devotion in the nunnery, had been tormented for nine years by a debilitating illness. This was given her because of the benign providence of our Redeemer, so that by this prolonged suffering here on earth, she was able to do penance for her wicked sins, which were possibly caused by ignorance and negligence. In a vision she saw how a human body was being lifted into the heavenly gate by the angels dressed in shining white linen and the body shone like gold. This turned out to be her mother superior, Ethelburga, who was ‘released from the chains of her flesh’ three days later.

Torthgyth had to live on for another three years following the death of her beloved Ethelburga. ‘She had wasted away through her ailments to such an extent that she lay paralyzed and unable to speak in bed, but one day she opened her eyes and said: “I am so glad you have come; you are most welcome.” And after an interval as if she were waiting for an answer, she seemed a little displeased, saying, “This is not happy news”. And after being silent once again for a while, she spoke for the third time: “Well, if it cannot be today, I beg that it may not be long delayed.” Then she kept silent for a short time as she had done before and ended: “If this decision is final and unalterable, I implore that it may not be delayed beyond the coming night.” When she had finished, those around her asked her to whom she had spoken. “To my dearest Mother Ethelburga”, she replied; and from this they understood that she had come to announce that the hour of her passing was near. So after a day and a night her prayers were answered, and she was delivered from the bonds of her flesh and illness – *soluta carnis (...) et infirmitatis vincula* – and entered the joy of eternal salvation.’¹³

¹² Matthew 25, 13.

¹³ Bede: *Historia* IV 9-10.

c. The untimely night

Always had man been living for a short while, between the darkness from which he and everything else originated, and the darkness into which he and everything would vanish. For Empedocles this was a process of continuous change in which everything appeared and disappeared, but was not lost.¹⁴ Nothing was ever lost and ceased existing; ‘nothing’, did not exist as yet. The divide was made between reality and unreality. That what was empty or void, what had no reality was unreal, but still not ‘nothing’.

For Plato and Aristotle, reality lay in ‘order’; it had meaning and coherence and was sustainable. This world and all other worlds had always been, are and would always remain the *kosmos*, this ordering of a reality that was made neither by gods nor men but was, is and always would be.¹⁵ Time is for maturing, for coming to fruition, for harvesting, for becoming grown-up or for giving birth or for dying. Time as temporality, with a beginning and an end, was not yet *the* time, as *chronos* meant durability. Duration is, for example – (a) the period it takes for milk to ferment or a pregnancy to become full-term. From that meaning ‘time’ later came temporality, the period something takes in which we have to wait. The other meaning of duration is (b) the opposite of the time that is coming to an end: duration remains. It is steady, continuous.

For many centuries in antiquity the duration and durability, the being ‘in order’ of reality, the *kosmos*, remained the foundation of ontology. Even when life is limited to a point in eternity, an almost impossible stand for a moment, when death is approaching and time is running too short, we remain within that omnipresent order and even if everything declines and falls, it remains ‘in order’. In the period of the later Stoics, Seneca writes in his letter of consolation to Marcia: ‘Nothing will last; time will destroy everything and take it with it.’¹⁶

And we have the memorable book with annotations that the emperor Marcus Aurelius had with him when he died in AD 180 (during a military campaign near present-day Vienna) that was saved by his caring friends and later published; it was the book that led me to philosophy when I was fifteen years of age and that still torments and makes me think; in that book is written: ‘The time of man’s life, a dot – *Tou anthrōpinou biou ho men chronos, stigmē* – its essence escapes, – *hē de ousia rheousa* – the view of reality is indistinct, the entire fabric of the body is subjected to decay, the soul is a wandering thing, – *hē de psuchē rhombos* (literally:

¹⁴ D.K. 31 B 17.

¹⁵ D.K. 22 B 30/31, (pseudo) Aristotle: *De Mundo* (*passim*).

¹⁶ Seneca: *Ad Marciam* 26, 6.

spinning top, wheel of fortune) – fate is unforeseen and fame uncertain. In one word: all that is physical is something that escapes, and the soul is like a dream or smoke; life is a struggle and a place for strangers – *ho de bios polemos kai xenou epidemia*. And after that there is only oblivion.¹⁷ This is repeated dozens of times in his notebook *To myself*. And yet however transient, negligible, however insignificant and fleeting, that speck in time is the microcosm and as such a particle of the grandiose *kosmos*. The specks are whirling away and the sparks only light up briefly, but the whole is permanent. It forms even the argument for the insignificance of the temporary: Whoever dies very old or very young loses the same thing. ‘Many grains of incense fall on the same altar, one earlier, the other later, it does not make any difference – *diapherei d’ouden*’.¹⁸ Everything is taken up again in the greater whole and remains in order. Keep your eyes focused on the whole. Marcus continues to hold on to the sustainability of the *kosmos*: Even in death, nothing falls out of the ordering of the whole – *exō tou kosmou to apothanon ou piptei*.¹⁹

Not until Late antiquity did this foundation of ontology disappear, and time was thus left as temporality, being restricted and trapped between the boundaries of being. It was as if time was always shrinking with it.

Finally, with Bede, the boundaries have come closer to each other in an oppressive manner, two boundaries in the cold and dark winter night: only between them is warmth, fate and life. And for the fluttering little bird – undoubtedly for Bede, as it was for Marcus Aurelius, the symbol of the soul in her fleeting abode in the flesh here on earth – those boundaries are even more restrictive and more oppressive: a cage in which it was imprisoned for a moment.

From that narrative of the eighth century onwards, where it was put into words for the first time it became a fundamental theme in our thinking. Anton Chekov tells a story with the same theme: about train passengers, warm and comfortably huddled together in their compartment on a trip. And then the train stops, somewhere in those endless forests of Russia and one of them gets off. His dark back disappearing into the darkness. And all of them know that each one in turn will step out of this life and disappear forever too. And a chilly silence descends over the travellers.

¹⁷ Marcus Aurelius: *Ad se ipsum* II 17.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*: IV 15.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*: VIII 18.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

AT THE END

a. Everything comes to an end

‘But everything comes to an end.’ The last words of the nobleman Harry Percy, Hotspur, in the conversation with the Prince in Shakespeare’s Henry IV.

‘But thought’s the slave of life,
And life time’s fool.
And time, that takes survey of all the world,
Must have a stop.’¹

‘Time must have a stop’. That is where the philosophy of Late Antiquity ends in the story of Bede – a dead end.

In the philosophy of antiquity, neither for Parmenides and Plato, Heraclitus and Aristotle, nor for writers of tragedies such as Aeschylus nor a lyricist like Pindar, was there any such thing as time-as-temporality, as something that would run down and had had a beginning and would once come to an end. World and reality had neither beginning nor end but were durable. *Chronos* represented an image of eternity and did not mean ‘time’ yet, but durability. Nothing was gone for ever but would change and precisely because of these changes would continue to exist.² The battle of Troy lay in the past and would take place again in the future.³ The father fathered a child and then came the change – and the offspring himself again brought forth a child and in turn became a father, by which the continuous life force – *aiōn* – was continued.⁴

During Late Antiquity the concept ‘time’ arose and sustainability and durability gave way to time as temporality. The concept ‘nothing’ was connected to ‘time’. For Augustine creation was made ‘out of nothing –

¹ Shakespeare: *Henry IV part I*.

² Empedocles D.K. 31. B 17.

³ Aristotle: *Problēmata* XV 11, 3 (916a 19-39).

⁴ Heraclitus D.K. 22 B 52.

creatio ex nihilo. Nothing is as yet ‘nothing’ for Augustine; it is only a theological makeshift and the necessity of this ‘nothing’ had to do with the Omnipotence of God which, if there had been anything before the creation, would be diminished. The opposite of this ‘nothing’ is not ‘everything’ – for all ‘being’ can only be in the fullness of God’s presence and certainly not in something as unstable and subjected to time as world and reality. Opposite ‘nothing’ is ‘time’. Together with world and reality God created time. There was no ‘before’, before creation and no ‘time’. Time is ‘in between’, between nothing and nothing, the thread dangling from nothing to nothing and therefore impossible in itself and only lifted up by God – temporarily – and maintained by Him.

Apart from ‘time’ the philosophy of antiquity did not know the concept ‘nothing’ as yet. That was impossible; it could not be and it was inconceivable. Both Proclus in his commentary on the *Timaeus* of Plato and Simplicius in his commentary on the *Physica* of Aristotle repeated and quoted what Parmenides said: ‘non-being is impossible – *hōs ouk estin mē einai*.’ It is an inaccessible path that leads to nowhere, from where no message will reach us, impassable, inconceivable and impossible.⁵ And even in the dizzying speculations in the *Theaetetus*, which were considered very important in Late Antiquity, Plato nowhere uses the opposites ‘to be’ and not ‘to be’, but contrasts being and essence with the non-essential and the unreal.

The variations in emphasis and meaning of ‘time’ shift over the centuries, whereas for Heraclitus⁶ in Late Antiquity the rhythm of the cyclic renewal encompasses everything. ‘Time’ becomes the villain, the thief in the night who enforces everything to pass by, to fade and to vanish. ‘Time’, for Plato still held a picture of eternity and continuity and for Augustine it practically no longer existed: the past was lost forever, the future does not exist as yet and the present is the pinpoint of practically nothing and which disappears forever.

‘Each day (like the sun) new again,’⁷ writes Heraclitus and for Aristotle this world knew neither beginning nor end. But for Augustine the time had once begun and was focused towards the last day. His *Confessiones* end with the end of time: ‘*Dies autem septimus sine vespera est*’, But the seventh day is without evening, without evanescence – *nec*

⁵ Proclus: *In Tim.* I 345, 15 (V. 1-8); Simplicius: *In Phys.* 116, 28 (V. 3-9). D.K. 28 B 2.

⁶ D.K. 22 B 100.

⁷ D.K. 22 B 6 and B 106.

habet occasum. ‘Time’ appeared and began on the first day and will once disappear again: ‘time’ is only ‘in-between’.⁸

The distance between Augustine’s seventh day without night or ending and the story of Bede and ‘time must have a stop’ is enormous. The distance that Augustine takes from Paul’s original faith is great as well. For Paul, as it was for Plato, it was inconceivable that there would be an end. Even death is vanquished by Paul’s faith: ‘Death is swallowed up in victory. ● death where is your victory, where is your sting!’⁹ Faith is for ever and permanent: ‘For if we live, we live to the Lord and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die we are the Lord’s – *ean te oun zōmen ean te apothēiskōmen tou kuriou esmen*.’¹⁰

For Augustine it is rather more the other way round: here, in our temporary here-and-now we are more or less away from Him and our whole endeavour is *ad Te*, going up to Him once more and then, at the end of troubled times, coming to rest in Him.

That remarkable dative in Paul, ‘we live and die *tōi kuriōi*,’ is best translated by Augustine’s *ad Te*. But it is understood in a totally differently manner. Right at the beginning of the first book of the *Confessiones* Augustine writes: ‘You have created us for Yourself – *quia fecisti nos ad Te* – and our heart is restless until it finds rest in You – *et inquietum est cor nostrum, donec requiescat in Te*.’¹¹ Lasting peace is only to be found elsewhere, outside this temporary unrest, in Him. For Augustine, this life here – a lot of disgust and rejection is contained in the words *hic et nunc* – is rather a desperate realization of the distance that exists between this unreality here and the actual being in God. Between this is ‘time’, the in-between that separates us and keeps us from finally coming to rest in Him. Somewhere at the end of his contemplations Augustine even describes the passing of time which will only lead to our death, dying in passing – *progressu mortifero*.¹²

However much ‘time’ is merely temporary for Augustine, hardly existing and running to an end, it is still only one side of his philosophy of time. It is the side that is turned towards us, the visible side of the moon of his thoughts, the side on which we tend to focus, because it has a future. But the other side was what Augustine carried with him from the world of

⁸ Augustine: *Confessiones, in fine*, XIII 51.

⁹ *I Corinthiërs* 15, 54-55. Cit. *Isaiah* 25, 8, *Hosea* 13, 14.

¹⁰ *Romans* 14, 7-8.

¹¹ Augustine: *Confessiones* I 1.

¹² *Ibid: Conf.* XIII 31.

antiquity. In his definition of 'time', the essence of time remains the continuity, in full accordance with the Late Neoplatonic philosophers.

The best way to observe this is through considering, for example, how little regard he had for his own identity, but that he understood and defined himself within a continuum. He observed the *communio sanctorum*, the communion of saints, its accordance with the faith, the continuity of the Church, the lasting grace of God, and he developed these observations of the continuity of history in his majestic historical philosophical conception *De Civitate Dei*. If in the course of the passing of time, history, a continuum can be identified, then this will also be in time as such.

'Time' is measuring change. Everything changes, fades and disappears; that is true, but it is precisely because of 'time' that this transience and disappearing is measurable. Only something which has a certain extension can be measured. And although time is the passing of 'what is not as yet to what it is no longer',¹³ it is still measurable and we distinguish for example of a short or a long time. Something is preserved of the past, present and future: in our memory – *memoria* – we hold on to something from the past and a little bit of what has gone by is still present. The same applies to the future that is already partly present in the expectation of it – *expectatio*. And the present, it is not an inanimate speck, but is formulated by Augustine as *contuitus*.¹⁴

Contuitus – a remarkable word is chosen here. 'Presence' is a somewhat too vague translation. In classical Latin, for example, for Plautus, it meant the look, the sight or more succinct: a contemplative observation. That is what Augustine intends to express here, that the present is not just passing by quickly, that we are not only passing by quickly, but that we are also able to dwell on it and that the present is also a form of standing still, coming to a halt. Almost desperately, he concludes this paragraph with: 'There is a lot that we do not say in the proper sense, but you will understand what we intend to express.' 'Time', that restless, intangible passing, has also something in it of standing still?

Somewhat hesitantly, Augustine writes: 'perhaps it must be said that there are three times: the present past, the present present and the present future.'¹⁵ In the 'once', 'now' and 'then' a form of presence and being present is enclosed.

Time and silence, even when nothing happens and nothing is present, are measurable. And what can be measured does exist, it remains and that implies continuity. The passing is 'time'. But – before it has reached me, is

¹³ *Ibid.*: *Conf.* XI 23, 30; XI 21, 28.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*: *Conf.* XI 20, 26.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

then with me and is then over; that is also something that goes on and on, uninterrupted and continuously. 'Time' is the constant, continuous torrent of passing moments – *exortus, processus et finis*. 'Time' is continuity, *successio* in the Latin tradition, the uninterrupted succession. 'Time' is and even the temporary is.

b. An ephemeral being

According to Hegel, the oldest word in Western philosophical tradition is *apeiron*.¹⁶ It is a word from Anaximander, the man who measured time and space, calculated the course of the stars, gave Sparta a solar clock, made maps and determined the circumference – *perimetron* – of land and sea. The usual translation is the boundless, the unlimited, but the meaning is better represented by the inexhaustible. The inexhaustible is devoid of dying or decay; it does not age – *agèrō*.¹⁷ This inexhaustible abundance continued to dominate philosophy in antiquity, including Plotinus, who characterized reality as permanently reviving. For Plotinus, matter is only a form of theft, but he also emphasizes its limitlessness.¹⁸

It is the foundation of a thousand years of philosophy, the ancient idea of sustainable order, the *kosmos*. Only in Late Antiquity did the word *kosmos* disappear. Porphyry used the word *taxis* and Augustine translated this as *ordo*.

Plato, in the dialogue with Gorgias for example,¹⁹ was already using the word *taxis* as equivalent of *kosmos*. Yet the meaning of *taxis* is quite different: the order of battle, the department, the placing in the ranks, rank, tax ordinance or the place in the ordering of the state, one's function; it contains so much less than the grandiose and purest order of all, the *kosmos*. The ordering and regularity encompassed by *taxis* is imposed and prescribed from outside; it is not independent and cannot exist on its own.

The *Kosmos* of antiquity was totally independent, it had no need of God or Creator because the order rests in the ordering and everything is 'in order'. The fact that of all people, Porphyry, one of the fiercest opponents of Christianity, changes from *kosmos* to *taxis* is ironic, because in doing so he opens the way for a God creating this world.

When in the Latin tradition the word '*mundus*', meaning this world and reality here and now, is used it is an indication of the loss of the three most

¹⁶ G.W.F. Hegel: *Werke in zwanzig Bänden. 18: Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie* I, p. 210.

¹⁷ D.K. 12 B 3 and B 2.

¹⁸ Plotinus: *Enneads* II4: 13, 31-32.

¹⁹ Plato: *Gorgias* 504b.

important aspects of the ontology of antiquity. *Mundus* is this world here, the sublunary and even the underworld, but certainly not the high, radiance of the starry sky: *mundus* is a contraposition of *caelum*. *Mundus* is also limited to the reality here and now and does not extend to everything, the 'all' or the universe. *Mundus* is also a contraposition of *universum*. And here, this earth, this reality is not at all 'in order'; on the contrary, *mundus* is the antithesis of *ordo*.

Even when the world of antiquity was over and the philosophy of antiquity had lost its foundations, Isidore of Seville, in the seventh century AD, (just like Anaximander in the sixth century BC) was working on descriptions of space and time. His *Chronicon* contained a world map, a *Mappamundi*, reaching from Gibraltar to the steppes behind India, and from the Sahara to the inhospitable regions north of Germania.

But 'space' and 'time' had become essentially different, the boundaries of reality drawn dramatically narrower. This world and reality was no longer 'in order', sustainable and pure. Reality was only temporary, an interruption and theft. The world had a beginning and would come to an end; it was temporary and lacked the durability and eternity of heaven and God. The world here and now was a short 'being here' in a swiftly passing interval, and was devoid of the 'whole'. This temporal reality was of the flesh and sin, it was not right; it missed true order and meaning.

Just for a brief flash, light illuminates our existence; only briefly can we reside here. In between the profound darkness from where we came and into which we will disappear again, the light shines on our existence. A puny match lit in a cold and immense universe.

For more than a millennium philosophy would cling on to the light of salvation and deliverance, like the king in Bede's story. In modern philosophy that light has become the light of our consciousness, our self-consciousness, which like a lighthouse throws its beam in the obscurity of matter and can only observe this dark reality when its ray illuminates it briefly and is only able to form its ideas based on these observations.

But reality is so much more spacious. Just when the boundaries of reality were drawing closer together, an immense desire arose, the craving to go further, to go beyond, to experience transcendence. Where does that desire come from? Plato did not yet long to be elsewhere and beyond this world but he craved for true being, for the light in which reality comes forth. In Late Antiquity, Christianity and scholastic philosophy changed into the desire to return the scattered sparks of our souls to the eternal light of Him who called everything into being through His '*fiat lux* – let there be light'. But perhaps the source of that immense desire is not far away

and alien to us and elsewhere, but does it originate from this fever of the short-lived, in our life full of joy, sorrow and longing?

Is it possible that the light thrown by our consciousness on the world can reveal the meaning of reality? Is it possible that the eternal light that once brought this world into the light may once show its true likeness? Is the light in which we exist the meaning of our being? Will our living and dying lead somewhere, liberate us, or is our short sojourn here all there is?

In the well-known closing verses of the eighth Pythian ode, Pindar describes us, as human beings of a single day, *ephamerói*.²⁰ Not only because we are volatile beings, fragile and transient and only briefly in this life, but because we are in essence the ones on which light, the light of day shines.

²⁰ Pindar: *Pythia* VIII verse 95.

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