

Covenant, Promise, and the Gift of Time

George Pattison¹

Received: 18-02-2018 / Accepted: 15-05-2018

If we categorize religions according to whether they give greater prominence to time or to space, the role of “promise” marks a religion of covenant as clearly a religion of time. Yet the future is unknowable and can only be present to us as a field of possibilities. How far do these possibilities extend? The question directs us back to the nature of time, a question that became concealed in the course of Western philosophical development or that was answered in terms of time's nullity. Modern philosophy (Levinas) has, however, pointed to the inseparability of time, language, and responsibility, thereby giving to time a positive content in terms of the ethical responsibility that, before God, we have for one another.

Keywords: time, covenant, promise, eschatology, possibility, immortality, the other, language, responsibility.

Space, Time, and Covenant

For much of the twentieth century, a widely influential typology of world religions made a broad division between mythical and historical religions. The former were religions that had never known or that turned

1. Professor, University of Glasgow, United Kingdom
(George.Pattison@glasgow.ac.uk).

away from what Mircea Eliade, a leading proponent of this view, called “the terror of history” (Eliade 1954, 139-62). Their primary characteristic was a cultic life centred on the annual liturgical return to the primordial time in which the gods made the earth and established human tribes and customs. Everything subsequent to that time was perceived in terms of decay and degeneration, a falling away from original purity and vigour. The latter, essentially Judaism and Christianity, accepted the linear movement of time and the ultimate impossibility of any kind of return—although, as Eliade pointed out, elements of myth continue to inform Jewish and Christian liturgical practice. Essentially, however, Judaism and Christianity look to history as the primary medium in which God is revealed to human beings and in which human beings are to work out the meaning of their God-relationship. Here, it is not the past, the time of origins, that receives primary emphasis but the future, the time in which God’s Kingdom will come, whether through human works or divine intervention.

This typology closely correlates with another, favoured by Paul Tillich amongst others, that categorizes religions according as to whether their primary forms of thought are focused on space or time. Those that privilege space are likely to insist on ethnic purity and on the ontological link between people and sacred ancestral land. This was an especially urgent question for Tillich in the context of the Third Reich and its ideology of “blood and earth.” In this context, Tillich could, in the case of Judaism, distinguish between what he saw as the authentically biblical prophetic call to historically enacted justice and the alien “pagan” emphasis on the promise of land, a particular land, in which alone the Kingdom of justice can be fully realized (Tillich 1959, 31-9).

These differences given can be extended to a further difference—namely, that between religions that find expression in visual representation and those that believe the Word to be the only adequate

expression of divine will. Inevitably, however, the distinction has to be once more qualified in the light of the fact that alongside the stricter monotheistic ban on images in Judaism, Islam, and some versions of Protestant Christianity, a visualization of the biblical inheritance has repeatedly taken place in Catholic, Orthodox, and some Protestant traditions). In these terms, it is no accident that the religions of the land were perceived by the biblical authors as essentially cultic and idolatrous, a critique that would later be extended to the mythical religions of the Hellenistic and Roman periods.

Such typologies have declined in popularity over the last thirty years, not least because, as we have seen, the complex lived reality of religious life makes it hard to find examples of the “pure” forms to which such phenomenologies give normative status. Nevertheless, they can still serve to focus significant questions. Not least, they can help sharpen the question as to what the most appropriate form of imagining and symbolizing the truth of a religion is, in which a historical covenant is a defining feature and therefore also the ideas of promise and futurity implied by the idea of covenant. Perhaps, the most concise statement of this future orientation of the promise is found in the revelation to Moses at the Burning Bush and God’s self-naming as “I will be who I will be” (Exodus 3.14). The promise that lies at the basis of the covenant with Israel is a promise reaching out into time that is not yet.

Eschatology

The statement that “promise” and futurity are an integral to the idea of covenant may not be self-evident. Sometimes it seems that the historical foundations of covenantal communities function like the time of sacred origins in Eliade’s account of mythical religions. Liturgical celebrations of Passover or the Christian Eucharist seem to involve just such an eternal return to origins on the parts of Judaism and Christianity respectively. Yet, without wanting to enter into too much detail, it is

also clear that in both cases the past is valued and even, as it were, re-lived, because of its relation to what must be done now, in the present, in our orientation towards the future, whether that is next year in Jerusalem or, for the weekly Christian communicant, the tasks that await him or her in the week ahead.

But if time in the mode of futurity really does enter into the defining structure of covenantal thought, then it seems that this generates a peculiar set of problems for imagination and symbolization. Hegel's dictum that the Owl of Minerva first flies at dusk and that a period of world-history can only be understood from the point of view of its conclusion would seem to apply also to visual representation (Hegel 1991 [1821], 23). We can only depict what has been and, even then, only to the extent that it has a residual continuance in the present, in what "is." We cannot depict what has not yet come to pass, or, if we do, we can do so only with images drawn from our experience of what has been and what is. Even when the apocalyptic fantasies of a Hieronymus Bosch revel in producing images of creatures never seen on earth, they are, nevertheless, only recombinations of elements actually experienced and known in worldly life.

In this regard, Bosch's paintings reveal a widespread tendency to think eschatology in the mirror of protology and to see the promised future as the return of a golden age of the past, whether in pagan or biblical forms. Other artistic examples of this tendency are the

Northern Renaissance theme of the "land of cockaigne" or the luminous pastoral sunsets of Claude Lorraine that so fascinated Dostoevsky.

Kierkegaard's widely quoted saying that life is lived forwards but understood backwards sums up what he saw as a fundamental epistemological challenge to German Idealism, which, in his view, was unable to account for the future-oriented freedom of the living human

subject. This saying, in its own way, echoes Hegel's comment on the Owl of Minerva. However, Kierkegaard sees this situation of having-been—what Jankélévitch would call *passeité*” (Jankélévitch 1974, 60)—as defining the essential limitation of idealist thought. Why? Because in order to see the human subject as an object of “knowledge,” it is necessary to imagine this subject as having reached a state of completion. Only so can we know “what” it is. Thus, the orientation of traditional philosophy towards the quiddity, the essence, the “what” (*to ti estin*) that defines the identity of the subject under consideration in such a way that its temporality is consigned to its mere contingency. Thus, for Kierkegaard, when philosophy describes the human being as having an immortal soul, this is to see the human being in the mirror of the past—that is, in terms of an endowment contemporary with its coming into existence and that continues as a defining element of its way of being across all temporal permutations. But, as he saw it, the question of immortality cannot be solved by such a naturalizing movement, because immortality is an essentially existential question: Will *I* be immortal? What will my immortality mean to me? How can I live my life so as to attain a truly blessed immortality? (Kierkegaard 1991 [1846], 173)

Crucial here for Kierkegaard was that the existential question of immortality cannot be answered by simply identifying “immortality” as an essential attribute of human beings, because immortality itself is meaningless apart from consideration of the kind of immortality to be enjoyed—whether, it will be the blessedness promised to the saints or ...? The mere extension of life into an after-life says nothing as to the meaning of that life, and neither preachers nor artists should waste their efforts on depicting such an after-life: the point is solely and exclusively the demand to do justly, love mercy, and perform the works of love that the Bible commands as the sole basis of blessedness—in time and in eternity.

Future and Possibility

Philosophically, Kierkegaard conceded (as he had to) that we cannot *know* whether such a future life awaits us. What is important, however, is that it can become an issue for us and, as such, an issue that has implications for the whole way in which we understand ourselves and our life in the world. A creature that is “like the beasts that perish” and a creature made for an eternal heavenly life are two very different kinds of creatures. The insolubility of the question thus throws a veil of ignorance over our basic possibilities of self-knowledge. How can we know whether we are angels or monsters? At best, we see “in a glass darkly,” but we are not yet what we shall be, and the truth of our being will only ever become manifest “in the end.”

Heidegger would criticize Kierkegaard for thinking time in relation to a pre-modern idea of eternity (Heidegger 1963, 497), but it is clear that, for Kierkegaard, it is precisely the question of eternity that confronts us with the need to take seriously the thorough-going temporality of human life on earth. But this also means that there will be a necessary limitation on our capacities for self-representation—that is, for conceptualizing, portraying, or even dramatizing the reality of human being. Our essential possibilities have a quality of “not-yet” that eludes all representation. There is a moment in the film *Russian Ark* that illustrates this well. In it, the Marquis de Coustine comes across two boys looking at an El Greco portrait of the apostles Peter and Paul. He asks them whether they read the gospels, and when they admit that they do not, he asks how they can possibly understand the human possibilities revealed in El Greco’s painting. I am perhaps over-interpreting at this point, but I take it that the point (at least, my point) is that what the gospels reveal is precisely how the human being is essentially future and therefore also essentially unknown and still-to-be-discovered.

Ancient pagan thought also understood that there might be limits to human knowledge. Plotinus knew that in relation to the One, everything we might say could only ever be a matter of “so to speak,” whilst Plato’s daring thought that the good was “beyond being” suggests also that it is beyond anything we might call knowledge, or, if it is knowable, it is knowable in a way that is distinct from all other ways of knowing. But what Kierkegaard and the modern focus on the intrinsic temporality of human life opens up is, I suggest, something rather different from such epistemological and ontological limits on human self-knowledge. The difference is, very imprecisely, that for the Platonic tradition the limit has a kind of objectivity that is independent of human subjectivity. We can go so far towards the sun, but will always fall short. It will always be above or beyond our reach. For the existential tradition, however, the limit is internal to our own being, and it is in our self-relation that it comes most urgently into view, as in Kierkegaard’s concern for an eternal happiness that could not be assuaged by assurances about the immortality of the soul. Eternity is not external to the human being, but the human being is a synthesis of time and eternity in such a way that the difference goes right to the heart of human identity itself.

Let me recap. If human life is inherently and essentially temporal, even (I would say) eschatological, then there is an inherent and essential limit to our capacity for self-representation. But are there, might there be, other ways of thinking time than those that have been dominant in the Western philosophical tradition and that could allow for such representation? This is not just a question calling for some new avant-garde initiative that would, as it were, bring time into view for the first time (something at least some twentieth-century avant-gardists hoped to do), but it is or may also be a question inviting a new orientation in hermeneutics that would facilitate the retrieval of the testimony to temporal life that is certainly to be found in great works of philosophy,

art, and literature of the past. Where are we to look that we might see time, our time, the time of our lives?

The Concealment of Time

One response to this question is to take the negative path of learning to see how dominant modes of representation have served to conceal the lived reality of time. This would be a case of what Heidegger called a destruction of the history of philosophy (Heidegger 1963, 43-4). This destruction reveals how even in what philosophy has genuinely revealed about human life in time there is also always an accompanying distortion or concealment. In many respects, the study of Heidegger's own thought can serve as an eminent training in such thinking. However, it is also arguable that even Heidegger perpetuates some of the most persistent assumptions about time that limit our insight into its true potential meaning, a point to which I shall return.

Examples of how time became concealed even in thinking about time can be seen in the cases of Aristotle, Plotinus, and Augustine. For Aristotle, the question of time is a question as to how time can be measured. But, he argues, time can best be measured by tracking the distance covered in the movements of the heavenly bodies. "A day" is a unit of time, but, in the Aristotelian perspective, a day is the time taken for the sun to make a single circuit of its path through space. Thus, space becomes the measure of time, and time itself eludes observation. Indeed, the decision to set the question up in terms of cosmology already distances it from the lived human experience of time (Aristotle 1930, 217.b.29-224.a.16).

For Plotinus, against Aristotle, the problem is precisely that time cannot be measured and that temporality is a kind of rebellion against the eternal order of timeless mathematical relationships that are the standard of both being and knowledge. Time is therefore inherently marked by a tendency towards non-being and escapes knowability

(Plotinus 1930, 222-38). Plotinus' argument is reformulated in more psychological terms and with a marked theological and soteriological interest in Augustine's meditation on time in Book 11 of the *Confessions*. Augustine is searching for traces of God in time and memory, which leads him to ponder whether time is indeed capable of revealing the presence of the divine being. But what is time? As Augustine quickly discovers, the past no longer is, the future is not yet. This is not just an epistemological problem, since, for Augustine as for Plotinus and for the Platonic tradition generally, being and knowledge are two aspects of a single reality. Thus, the unknowability of time reveals its ontological nullity. In psychological terms, to live in time is to be exposed to the constant possibility of annihilation. Our need, therefore, is not to "know" time but to be saved from time, and, Augustine believes, we can be saved from time, because God is in himself timelessly eternal.¹

Heidegger himself acknowledges that various religious sources, including Augustine and Kierkegaard, were philosophically necessary in preparing for the phenomenology of time that he undertakes in *Being and Time*. However, as previously indicated in connection with Kierkegaard, Heidegger does not believe that evaluating time by reference to eternity is either desirable or possible. The kind of being that we are is a being that exists in time as thrownness towards death. Our only recourse is not to appeal to a timeless God, but, as Heidegger puts it, to "run towards" the nothingness of time as that is revealed in death. But it seems legitimate to ask whether, despite removing eternity from the analysis of time, Heidegger has really thought time in a manner that is true to its own proper temporality. Is nothingness the best that we can say about time? (See Pattison 2013)

1. Augustine's *Confessions* are available in innumerable editions. These comments refer to Book 11, uniform across all editions.

One Kierkegaardian term that Heidegger took over was that of “the moment of vision.” In Kierkegaard, this is expressly related both to the New Testament idea of the *kairos*, the fulfilment of time in the coming of the Messiah, and the eschatological “moment,” the “atom of time” in which we shall, as Paul puts it, be “changed,” putting on immortality. Heidegger rejects the religious aspects of this concept (i.e., the appeal to eternity), but he believes that we can nevertheless speak of a privileged moment that is able to give meaning to temporal life—namely, the moment in which we resolve to run towards death. This is a moment of truth, the revelation of pure temporality, but, as I have suggested, it is thus far solely the revelation of what is in itself null.

The Other

There is something missing in Heidegger’s account, and this, I believe, is connected with what many have seen as another missing or, at least, deficient element in *Being and Time*—namely, the role of the other. Heidegger certainly acknowledges *Mit-sein*, being-with, as a basic element of human being-in-the-world and some of his commentators have taken his few remarks on this as nevertheless sufficient for the development of a robust account of ethical relationships. I am more sceptical and do not see anything in Heidegger’s account that really requires us to look to ethical responsibility for and to the other as a defining element in human life.

It is this deficiency that Levinas, for one, seeks to make good when he speaks of “time and the other,” asserting that “time is not the fact of an isolated subject on its own” (which he sees as being the case with Heidegger’s account of thrownness towards an always singular death as the measure of time) “but the relation of the subject to others” (Levinas 1983, 19). When we realize the relation to the other, death, of course, remains as the end of our individual lives on earth, but we are not (he says) obligated to see death as simply “annihilation”—a mystery, indeed, but not of itself an annihilation (Levinas 1983, 20).

Levinas does not spell this out at this point, but we might say, for example, that though I must die as a centre of subjective self-consciousness, I will in some sense remain for some time in the memories of those with whom my life has been shared. So death is not simple, unqualified annihilation.

At the same time as criticizing the lack of a significant other in Heideggerian ontology, Levinas also rejects Martin Buber's location of the relation to the other in the immediacy of the face-to-face I-Thou encounter. For Levinas, there must always be a third; being-with-one-another can never be just a matter of "two," since there will always have to be a third term through which the two are related, as when two people are united in a shared undertaking, the work in relation to which their relationship takes on its specific and actual form, or when two lovers attest their love to the wider community in what we call marriage. Theologically, we might think of this in terms of being called by divine command to be responsible for the other, to be our brothers' keepers, an interpretation Levinas would not reject. On the contrary, he regards the unqualifiedly "other" "height" from which God commands us as integral to ensuring that we recognize the other in terms of their need and not just as an occasion for us to extend our subjectivity. The other is really other, not me, and my obligation to the other is not a quality of my subjectivity but something in which I am rather an object, "accused," as Levinas put it, "me" rather than "I," or a "Vous" rather than a "Tu" (Levinas 1972, 73). In this connection, we might note that Levinas was deeply stirred by and often cited the teaching of the Elder Zosima's brother Markel from *The Brothers Karamazov*: "That we are all guilt of everything before everyone, and I most of all" (Toumayan 2004). But this guilt of moral responsibility is something very different from the ontological guilt described by Heidegger and that he saw as consisting in our "owing" our lives to a source from beyond ourselves.

But how does this relate to the question of time? The remembrance of the dead that I briefly referred to earlier provides one hint. Our experience of time is in reality inseparable from how we experience our lives with others. Psychologically, it is arguable that a child's basic experience of time has to do with its experience of the absence and return of the mother, as deduced by Freud from the phenomenon that became known as "Fort-da" ("Away-there") from a child whose play consisted in throwing objects away and then retrieving them, yielding a symbolic control over the otherwise feared disappearance and unpreconceivable return of the mother. And, as Levinas pointed out, it is also intrinsic to our experience of language. While you speak, I must wait until you have finished in order to understand and respond to what you say. While you are speaking, I am, in a certain sense and at a certain level, rendered passive, waiting, not coinciding with my-self but extended beyond myself in waiting on your words, your meaning, and your claim on me.

Time, Language, and Responsibility

Levinas learned much from Franz Rosenzweig, and for Rosenzweig it was characteristic of the "new thinking" that he sought to promote that it understood the intertwining of time and language (Rosenzweig 1984, 148-51). Analytic philosophy seeks to understand propositions in ways that render their content timeless—if it is true that Napoleon lost the Battle of Waterloo, then it will always and in all possible circumstances be true that Napoleon lost the battle of Waterloo, and logic will, at best, approximate the timeless world of mathematics, but, for Rosenzweig, there is no language that is not grounded in the relational structures of call and response, what he called the vocativity of language and for which, he argued, the revelation of the divine name at the burning bush was a prime example (Rosenzweig 1937, 195). We might for comparison think of Bakhtin's category of "answerability," as developed in his early writing, where he too insists on the irreducibility

of the “I”s involved in any speech-act. Levinas would call this, or something like it, *le Dire*, the saying, as opposed to *le Dit*, “what” is said, the quiddity. And this lived time of language is, precisely, the time in which I am engaged by what Levinas spoke of as “the face” of the other.

And here we return to the themes of covenant and promise, for covenant is precisely a way of ordering time on the basis of responsibility for and towards the other. Equally, it is precisely a way of ordering our responsibility to the other in terms of time. And, because the covenant must take some symbolic form, it is also, precisely, a way in which our relation to both time and the other is woven together in the form of, normally, language. I am who I am because of what I have promised you and what you have promised me, and “what” we have promised is itself disclosed in the promise we have made. The word of promise reveals me to you and you to me, as we are, in time, coming together from separate pasts into a shared future, shared at least as far as the reach of the promise. In such an event “the moment” is no longer just the moment in which I realize that I am just a thrown nullity, but, as for Kierkegaard and the biblical sources on which he drew, a real “fullness” of time.

But, as I suggested earlier, if time is taken to be a defining feature of human existence, then this creates problems for the representation of human reality. Although the promise binds us together in time as we go towards a common future, this future itself is, for now, unknown. One or other of us may break the promise, or circumstances beyond our control may make it impossible to keep. The meaning upon which I staked everything may unravel in time. To commit myself in a promise cannot therefore be a means of evading the intrinsic unknowability of the self.

Yet, in time—as long as I am in time—I now know myself in the measure of my responsibility to and for you. I may have no control over the outcome of this responsibility, but the responsibility itself is real. Levinas, as I have mentioned, spoke of the face of the other appealing for my help, although he by no means understood this literally. The face, in his sense, is only a “trace” of the claim that is laid on me by my being born into a community predicated on responsibility, a covenantal community. Yet the category of “face” does give us, perhaps, a hint as to how we might proceed to think about the kind of representation appropriate to representing a being whose life is hidden in the mystery of time. C. S. Lewis entitled one of his books (which had nothing to do with Levinas) *Until We Have Faces*, and this, I think, offers a suggestive programme for understanding both our inherited and contemporary representations of human being (Lewis 1956). Our philosophies, pictures, plays, songs, and poems, are, at their best sketches (again: “as in a glass, darkly”) not of how human beings are or have been but of what we might yet be, the redeemable possibility that calls from beyond all distortions and failures of historical time.

I find a powerful literary statement of these issues in Dostoevsky’s allusion to the legend of the Virgin’s visit to hell and her encounter with those whom even God has forgotten. The notion that there might be a depth of hell so deep that those confined there have been forgotten even by the eternal memory of God is one of extraordinary terror. As Dostoevsky (via Ivan Karamazov) tells the story, the Virgin is so moved by their plight that she recalls their fate to God, who grants an annual reprieve from their sufferings from Good Friday to Trinity Sunday. Of course, as narrated, it is a tale told as if it were the chronicle of an event long past, what the Virgin did “once upon a time.” But, as a narrative set in eschatological time, the eternal time of heaven and hell, it is properly understood (I think) as a parable of our responsibility in time to work and to pray that all who labour in and under time may not be

forgotten, indeed, that they may be remembered, and remembered according to the appeal of the face that they, beyond all knowing, turn to God and to us, crying “Let me be!” (see Pattison 2015, 163-72).

References

- Aristotle. 1930. *Physica. De caelo. De generatione et corruptione*. Translated by W. D. Ross et al. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Bakhtin, M. M. 1995. *Chelovek b Miire Slova (Man in the world of discourse)*. Moscow: The Russian Open University.
- Eliade, Mircea. 1954. *The Myth of the Eternal Return or Cosmos and History*. Translated by W. R. Trask. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Hegel, G. W. F. 1991 [1821]. *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*. Translated by H. B. Nisbet. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Heidegger, Martin. 1963. *Being and Time*. Translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Jankélévitch, Vladimir. 1974. *L'irréversible et la nostalgie*. Paris: Flammarion.
- Kierkegaard, Søren. 1991. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Lévinas, Emmanuel. 1983. *Le temps et l'autre*. Paris: Presses universitaires de France.
- Lewis, Clive Staples. 1956. *Till We Have Faces*. London: Geoffrey Bles.
- Pattison, George. 2015. *Eternal God/Saving Time*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Pattison, George. 2013. *Heidegger on Death. A Critical Theological Essay*. Farnham: Ashgate.
- Rosenzweig, Franz. 1937. *Kleinere Schriften*. Berlin: Schocken/Jüdischer Buchverlag.
- . 1984. *Zweistromland: Kleinere Schriften zu Glauben und Denken*. Edited by Reinhold and Annemarie Mayer. Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff.

Tillich, Paul. 1959. *Theology of Culture*. London: Oxford University Press.

Toumayan, A. 2004. "'I more than the others:' Dostoevsky and Levinas." *Yale French Studies* 104: 55–66.