

The Potent Nonentity: A review of Eva Brann's *What, Then, is Time?*

Torrance Kirby

Time, Augustine claims, is so ordinary as to be impossibly difficult (*Conf.* XI.14). This is the paradoxical theme to which Eva Brann returns often (one is tempted to say "time and again") in her remarkable, recently published volume *What, Then, is Time?* Time, the "potent nonentity," proves to be as elusive a quarry as the Sophist himself. The inquiry begins with a high sense of wonder peculiarly fitting in this of all philosophical quests. The inner experience of time and its foundation or ultimate ground, constitute the heart of this investigation. Brann employs an extended, highly elaborated aporetic approach to the search for a definition. So numerous and complex are the $\pi\omicron\omicron\upsilon\iota\omicron\iota$ encountered that this Protean beast is not pinned down with a definition until well into the closing chapter of the book. The investigation as a whole is composed in the form of a diptych with one larger panel devoted to the study of various selected texts or "presentations" by philosophers who, in Brann's estimation, "have written most deeply and most engagingly about time." A second smaller panel contains the author's own "reflections" on the matter. She is careful to point out, "study and thought, though not of necessity incompatible, are by no means the same" (159). This book is worthy of the most careful reading with both ends in view.

The predominance of the prolegomena in this investigation is consistent with the spirit of much contemporary, postmodern inquiry. Brann's approach is underscored by the splendidly post-revolutionary claim that her purpose is "not to change the world but to interpret it!" Viewed in another light, however, the methodology of this book is resonant with the very best ancient authors, and its hermeneutical approach reminiscent of Aristotelian sci-

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ence. The first part of the book, a study of earlier philosophical "presentations" of time, constitutes a "history" such as one finds at the outset of many of Aristotle's treatises. Brann's study of the attempts of her predecessors to define time is thus by no means any ordinary history. Her extensive review of the preeminent contributions to the hermeneutics of time clarifies wonderfully the question concerning time and enables the reader to make the great ascent from mere study to thought. In the "reflections" of the second part, Brann proceeds intrepidly to face the question "what, then, is time?" head on.

Discussion of the "lispings" efforts of predecessors (*Metaph. A.1*) in this chase turns out to be a daunting task. The relevant texts range "from the hard to the hellishly hard," as Brann puts it. As in an Aristotelian "history," the texts are selected with a view to clarification of certain key facets of the problem of definition. Four crucial theories about the nature of time are addressed through the study of four pairs of philosophers. The originality of Brann's approach is striking. The unexpected pairings - Plato and Einstein, Aristotle and Kant, Plotinus and Heidegger, Augustine and Husserl - prove to be both inspired and illuminating. An important element of Brann's purpose in this approach is to demonstrate that the larger questions about the nature of time are themselves by no means "time-bound." By pairing the authors in this way Brann ensures that the problem of definition predominates over less important considerations. The first approach to the theory of time, as exemplified by the arguments of Plato's *Timaeus* and Einstein's Special Theory of Relativity, proposes that time is "external," namely that time refers to external motions of which it is the measure, as in the case of a clock's measurement of the diurnal rotation of the sun. (The consideration of time as the "externality" of history and its movements is mercifully ruled outside of the present inquiry.) In the cosmos of *Timaeus*, time is the very intelligibility or "numbering" of the external motion of the visible heaven. As Brann puts it, this identification of time with phenomenal motion continues to

"bedevil" the discourse of physics. Einstein displays little interest in the essential nature of time, but is absorbed rather by the question of quantifying time owing to complications arising from the implication of temporality in locomotion. After the fashion of the hunt for the wily Sophist in the Platonic dialogue of that name, the consequence of this initial "presentation" of a definition of time is to introduce a dichotomous division - namely between time in the world and time in the soul - which is of considerable use to Brann in advancing her own quest for an acceptable formulation. The boundaries have been narrowed considerably by the exclusion of merely "external" time as a fallacy.

Before proceeding to the presentations of internal time, Brann examines a pair who propose highly speculative accounts of the generation of time out of space. Hegel's dialectical exposition of the genesis of time out of space is put forward by Brann as possibly the most profound of all treatments of "external" time. For Hegel, time from its first genesis as a pure Becoming, behaves like incipient spirit (*Geist*): "Time is the Concept itself that is *there* and which presents itself to consciousness as empty intuition. For this reason Spirit necessarily appears in time, and it appears in time just as long as it has not grasped its pure Concept, that is, has not annulled Time" (*Phenomenology* ¶ 801). Through a discussion of Bergson's mission to suppress "extensive space" in favour of "intensive time" Brann effects a transition to the second principal stem, viz. internal time or "time in the soul," which is the general focus of the remaining three pairs of texts in the series of presentations.

With her examination of the theories of Aristotle and Kant, Brann arrives at the second crucial stem of the dichotomous division of time into the categories "external" and "internal." Although for Aristotle motion is properly the "substrate" of time, while conversely for Kant time is itself the ground of motion, both philosophers are "driven" to relate the notion of time to a "psychic counting." As Aristotle says, "time is the number of motion" where motion is understood as disclosing continuous magnitude. The

"truth" of time resides in the numbering or counting soul that measures the before and after of this magnitude. Time, according to this presentation, is no longer viewed as an independent, "substantive" reality or but is rather reduced to the status of an accident or predicate which exists "for thought." For Brann, Kant's treatment of time displays a deep affinity with Aristotle's on this more general level. The internal sense of time, however, represents much more in the Kantian metaphysics than ever dreamed of by Aristotle. For Kant this psychic counting is perhaps the most intimate characteristic of humanity. Indeed Brann shows that Kant's treatment of time is most accessible when the *Critique of Pure Reason* is viewed as "a new founding of human nature whose centre is time" (55). Appearances may be removed from time but not the reverse, which reveals that time, for Kant, is prior in the order of knowing; the apprehension of change is understood to depend upon the *a priori* intuition of time. In one of numerous penetrating aperçus scattered throughout the discussion, Brann draws attention to Kant's nonetheless restricted view of our ability to know ourselves as temporal beings by reminding us of his low opinion of music. This, in turn, is contrasted with Leibniz's opposing exaltation of the unconscious counting of the soul in music as "a pleasure given to us by God so that we may know of him; in music soul is revealed to itself and God to it" (*Principles of Nature and Grace* ¶ 14).

In the subsequent paired "presentations" of Plotinus and Heidegger, the inquiry proceeds to consider the "ground" of temporality—that is, of some higher, possibly transcendent source of this inner sense of time. Thus the dichotomous division of the "hunt" advances to a new level of precision. For both Plotinus and Heidegger, as Brann shows, time constitutes the "deepest condition" for humanity. Plotinus identifies time with specifically "human" being in its manifestations of a peculiarly ecstatic nature, by the human's attempt to escape the element of its temporal fallenness. The Soul's very "appetite for things to come" (*Enneads* III. 7.4, 34) keeps her in her fallen state. Temporal being strives for sal-

vation, viz. the overcoming of temporal "dispersion," through union with the eternal hypostasis above. Happiness, understood as "the flight of the alone to the Alone," is thus altogether outside time, for it is no mere mood or emotion, but rather a fundamental possibility for the soul, that of an undispersed present even beyond being (*Enneads* I. 5.7, 15). Time is made explicable through eternity, its original ground. Although radically distinct from Plotinus with respect to virtually the entire substantive content of his thought, Martin Heidegger at least shares with Plotinus the supposition that temporality is the key to understanding human existence. As a being whose essence is its existence, this ultimate ground is for Heidegger not the transcendent eternity of the Plotinian Primal Hypostasis, but rather the temporality of human being itself, *Dasein*. The discussion stemming from this remarkable dialectical pairing of Heidegger and Plotinus is particularly illuminating.

In chapter four Brann arrives at her final pairing of Augustine and Husserl with the observation that no two philosophers are both further apart and closer together. Through an examination of their discourse on time as a temporal "stretching" of the soul (*distensio*, as Augustine puts it), the argument—for it is indeed an argument—acquires a distinctly sharper dialectical edge. The coincidence of identity and difference in their thinking about time is uncannily appropriate to their strongly dialectical approaches to the quest to define time. According to Brann, while Augustine sifts through the phenomena in search of existence and while Husserl neutralizes existence in order to find the phenomena, both look within themselves for the phases of time, that is to say, for past, present, and future. For both philosophers, Brann argues, the problem of "inter-nal" time is not to be referred to a higher ontological ground for resolution, as is the case with Plotinus, for example, but rather time is to be understood as arising out of and discerned within the soul or consciousness. Brann's argument on this point is open to some dispute, at least with reference to Augustine if not to Husserl. Perhaps the device of pairing the presentations has led to a down-

playing of Augustine's affinity with Plotinus. It is common among contemporary existential readings of Augustine to de-emphasise his dependence upon Neoplatonic metaphysics. He begins his presentation on time with the "in principio" of Genesis I, the revelation of the divine creative activity understood as totally beyond the temporal, narrative realm of human existence. In making his transition in *Confessions* from Book X on memory to Book XI on time, Augustine shifts gears as it were from looking within at the phenomena of consciousness to looking *above* at the higher ground of the life of the soul, *ab interiora ad superiora*. The Creator, who is altogether above the flux of becoming, is understood nevertheless by Augustine to be present, knowing, and active within the temporal realm.

While temporal human existence, dispersed or "distended" as it is through phases of past, present, and future, is to be contrasted absolutely with the undivided existence of "the One," Augustine finds nonetheless within the soul as *imago dei* a positive image of the activity of God in creation. The enigma of the human experience of time is thus referred by Augustine to the exemplar of the Trinity for resolution. In the psychological image of the Trinity—*memoria, intellectus, et voluntas*—Augustine finds a model for his reflection upon the experience of time as at once continuous and without extension. He points to the chanting of a psalm as a potent revelation concerning time. He reflects upon the recitation of a song that he knows, Ambrose's hymn *Deus Creator Omnia*. The song is stored in memory, an already completed whole which the soul intends to sing. Before singing, the soul's expectation possesses the complete song. As the soul sings, the relation of expectation to memory shifts syllable by syllable until the entirety of expectation has finally become a memory of the song as completed, as having been sung. Memory, presence, and expectation are united *in the song*. Through the singing of praise, itself a mode of confession, Augustine begins to see how the timeless and the temporal become one. Through song the soul is enabled to think the divine object *in the image*, and this, Plotinus cer-

tainly would regard as the most extreme absurdity. Thus, by "collecting" ourselves, we can escape from our temporal constitution into God's "standing Now," as Brann puts it, into eternity.

Brann concludes the part devoted to presentations of time with an extensive and complex analysis of Edmund Husserl's phenomenological treatment of internal time-consciousness. The text of Husserl's *Zur Phänomenologie des inneren Zeitbewußtseins* we owe, Brann tells us, to Edith Stein's supererogatory editing of various manuscripts and notations. By way of a background sketch, Brann offers a helpful introduction to Phenomenology itself and looks at the influence of Augustine, William James, and Franz Brentano on Husserl's reflections upon time. Husserl is particularly engaged with the problem of integrating the phases of time. Brann claims that he in fact "solves the problem of relating the present, the moment of primary perception to its immediate retentional past and protentional future by giving a model for the orderly sinking away of perceptions and their intertwining with present consciousness" (160). With Husserl, the presentations have in a certain sense come around full circle. Husserl brings his account of time to completion by reconstituting "external" time in the form of an absolute temporal flux which transcends the temporal phenomena of internal time-consciousness and which is, moreover, the underlying principle which sustains human subjectivity. As Brann concludes, Husserl's ultimate temporal flux is "a very nearly inarticulable *final fact*" (156).

In the Second Part of the book, titled "Reflections," Brann purports to *finally* face the question "What, then, is time?" (The claim that the "Presentations" are a mere exercise in "study" and that only now, in the final pages is she going to roll up her sleeves and get down to the serious business of "thought" seems not entirely ingenuous. Already a good deal of hard thinking has gone into both the pairing itself and the ordering of the pairs, all of which serves to advance the quest for a definition.) The reflections proceed with a consideration of certain formal similarities between

time and the faculty of imagination - here, once again, is the Sophist and the wedding of Being and Nonbeing. Brann shows that images present a relatively constant picture, viz. Being and Nonbeing in *fusion*, while time, on the other hand, is a flux of "Being as passing over into Nothing and Nothing as passing over into Being" (Hegel, *Phil. of Nature* ¶ 259). Time and imagination are thus connected with one another through the way Being is related to Nonbeing in both temporal process of becoming and in images. As might well be expected, Brann offers a fascinating comparison of these concepts by building upon her previous exploration of the faculty of imagination.²

There follows Brann's own interpretation of the phases of time together with their appropriate faculties: past and memory, future and expectation, present and perception. Throughout, she draws upon the foregoing presentations of time by the philosophers which provide both the categories and a vocabulary which enable Brann to penetrate the question deeply and swiftly. This section of the book is a wonderful demonstration of the dictum of Bernard of Chartres who claimed to be able to see things far off by virtue of "standing on the shoulders of giants." In an interesting and frequently amusing section Brann proceeds to analyse various "time pathologies" as forms of "phase-fixation." Here we have an opportunity to reflect on aspects of time's "brutal tyranny," e.g. the contemporary idolatry of novelty, a fixation on the "just now," the trivialising of the past in nostalgia or the future obsession of the IT phenomenon. Brann even reviews cures for these time-induced pathologies such as that offered by Nietzsche in his teaching on the Eternal Recurrence of the Identical. Brann counters this frantic cycle of reincarnation with another, much more attractive option, namely the concept of *Aevum*, as manifest in the sempiternity of the angels in heaven or, alternatively, in the fictional temporality of the novel. All of this is delightful. Brann recommends the cultivation of "aeternity" as at least "a partial relief for our temporal ills."

In the last chapter of the book Brann moves closer to the final struggle with the definition of time by way of a *via negativa*. Here time is finally unveiled as the potent, indeed tyrannical, non-entity. The revealing is apophatic. Time is *not* external motion, *not* is it an abstraction from process. It is *not* a power or force, *not* a "fungible substance" (i.e. time is not even money!). Time is certainly *not* a mere linguistic usage. As Brann succinctly puts this point, "Language can guide thought but it cannot constrain it." (Brann notes in passing how neatly the distinctions of philosophical inquiry concerning time seem to turn up in the problems of linguistics.) Time is *not Dasein*. Whereas Heidegger regards human finitude as ultimately expressed in the fact our mortality, that our existence is "destined" to end, Brann counters optimistically that human finitude is better sought in the fact that we *begin*, "we do not temporalize ourselves; we are born temporal." Time is no determinate being; it is *not* perceived by the senses, it is without external effects, and elusive to insight. Time is therefore a *non-entity*. Though apparently nothing, time's "not-being" is nonetheless very powerful (although, be it noted, *not* "a power"). "*What, then, is time?*" Here the argument finally shifts from marked *apophasis* to a more kataphatic note. The affirmative definition comes in nine-fold form (a touch which no doubt would have pleased Pythagoras). It is not this reviewer's intent, however, to spill the beans. In order to reap the full benefit of Brann's final, dramatic unmasking of Time—to be altogether "present" as it were at the capture of this elusive beast—readers are well advised to follow the leader of the hunt herself along the trail through all its intricate twists and turns. And who indeed are the intended participants in this quest? Brann recommends her book to anyone who longs to learn about time by pursuing the quest described above, to aficionados, to students who seek to come to grips with some of the primary texts on time, and finally to teachers who might be on the look-out for some tips on selections for a syllabus on the interpretation of time. This is an unusually difficult book whose author challenges the reader to "take

note" and whose rewards are proportionate to the investment of careful, punctuated *attention*.

NOTE:

I. See Eva Brann, *The World of the Imagination: Sum and Substance* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1991).