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Nishida Kitarō—Self-determination of the Eternal Now (June 1931)

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1

When St. Augustine inquired into the meaning of the fullness of time in response to St. Paul’s statement, “But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth his Son,”¹ he explained that what is meant here is that time ceases to exist.² Divine Nativity must require that something like “time” comes to an end. But according to Meister Eckhart, yet another meaning applies to what is called “the end of time.” If we were able to retrieve and draw into the present moment all that has occurred and is likely to recur in a span of time, say, several millennia, then this would count for what is known as “the fullness of time.” As “the eternal now,” this is the situation within which, for example, I see things and hear sounds; it is that situation within which we can say that I know all things clearly and anew through God (Meister Eckhart, *Von der Vollendung der Zeit [On the Fullness of Time]*).³ In *Timaeus*, Plato states that when the Creator considered the impossibility of bestowing eternity upon his creations, he created a “moving image of eternity,”⁴ and that this image is time. It seems that what Plato has in mind here concerning eternity is that which can be neither created nor destroyed, that is, that which transcends time, which, being eternal, is that which does not change and *is* at both the beginning and the end [of time]. Perhaps we should even consider that, in the eternal, there is neither past nor future but only the present, and that past and future are situated within the present, so that anything that transcends something like what we call “time” should not be thought in terms of the “temporal.” What is thought as the “eternal now” (*nunc aeternum*) must be thinkable as something like what Eckhart described as the result of the elimination, at a point within the present, of the infinite past and the infinite future. This must mean that, as on the first day of Creation, God continues to create the world even now and that time is always beginning anew.

But what is the true nature of time, and how are we to think it? We can think time as an endless procession of the infinite past into the infinite future; we can think it as a linear progression. And yet, while the the future is that which has yet to come, and although the past is that which has already appeared, because it is that which has already passed, it becomes all the more thoroughly impossible for us to know the past *of* the past.⁵ It is only by focusing on the singular present that we have recourse to knowing past and future. We can assume that when we unite with the past through memory by taking the present as our focus and foresee that which has yet to come, there arises the relation, past-present-future. That is, perhaps we can think that, within the present, there is both that which has already passed and that which has not yet ended *as* the past, that there is that which has yet to come and yet is already showing its edge, that there is that which is present but already in decline, and that that which we call the relations of time result from the anti-present⁶ itself being a passage of the past into the future. But in order for us to know that which changes, there must be that which does not change; in order for us to think something like the infinite past and the infinite future by taking the present as our focus, there must be that which suffuses the infinite past and the infinite future. Following Augustine, we can reject the idea that anything like what we call “past,” “present,” and “future” exist; rather, what

¹ Paul the Apostle. *The Holy Bible*, King James Version, Galatians 4: 4. Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2000, p. 1413.

² Nishida cites Augustine’s *Homilies on the Gospel of John*, Thesis 31, Argument 5 [CONFIRM/COMPARE CITATION].

³ Nishida’s footnote: [ENTER]

⁴ Plato. *Timaeus*: 37d5, Trans. Donald J. Zeyl, in *Plato: Complete Works*, Ed. John M. Cooper. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1997, p. 1241.

⁵ In “Absolute-contradictory Self-identity,” Nishida thoroughly reprises this argument concerning the flow of time in slightly different form [QUOTE/CITE]:

⁶ A rather unconventional and apparently neologistic construction: 「否現在」, literally, “no-present,” or “contra-present.”

exist are the “past-present,” the “present-present,” and the “future-present,”⁷ so we can say that the present contains past-present-future. But to say that time is situated in the present must be to negate time itself; when time is thinkable as obtaining in several senses, this must be what “time” *is*. Time must be an infinite flow and, moreover, its vector must be that of the flow of eternity, which is incapable of touching upon the Absolute; it must be thinkable as that within which we are unable to return to even the previous moment, so that when we think that which is thinkable as the infinitely distant goal of time in terms of its being embedded in several senses of time, time must become that which is retrievable. Time is not simply something like a series that has uniform direction. Rather, the goal of time must be to get outside that which it includes; in some sense or another, it must get to the outside of that which is determined as the cognitive epistemological object.⁸ The edge of time must be that which vanishes moment by moment, and therein lies the sense of the impossibility of a return of time to eternity; therein lies the meaning of the impossibility of grasping the present. We must think with Augustine that time is embedded in the present and, moreover, that when we think time in this sense, that which we call “time” ceases to exist; time is a matter of contradiction in and of itself. How, then, can we say that this manner of time determines itself?

⁷ Here, Nishida uses the terms 「過去の現在、」 「現在の現在、」 and 「未来の現在、」 which literally mean, respectively, “the present *of* the past,” “the present *of* the present,” and “the present *of* the future.” The copula 「の」 serves the same function and has the same meaning as does the classical 「的、」 which Nishida frequently uses in such constructions as 「自己的限定、」 「矛盾的限定、」 and 「自覚的限定」. Because I prefer here the hyphenated construction, this is a rare instance in which I’ve pushed poetic license with the author’s texts, albeit well within reason. Likewise, the construction 「過現未」 is an abbreviated construction of 「過去現在未来」 in which Nishida uses no copula, so that we can read this either in the literal sense of “past-present-future” or as “past, present, *and* future.”

⁸ 「対象的に限定せられるもの、」 as opposed to the material object 「客観」. Cf. William Haver on the 「客観・対象」 distinction in *Ontology of Production*, “Glossary,” “Object (*kyakkan* and *taishō*)” entry, p. 196.