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## Summary

I want to sketch a conceptual and historical analysis of such terms as “time” and “eternity”, to restore them to their original set of implications in Dante’s *Comedy*, Petrarch’s *Triumphs* and Machiavelli’s *Prince* and *Discourses*. We do derive the concept of eternity from our notion of time, imagining eternity as a very long time, extended to infinity. But in classical and medieval philosophy, starting from Plotinus, eternity (*aion*) is identified with *zoe*, life, while in Boethius it is defined *plenitudo vitae*. Time is instead a hemorrhage of life, a loss of fullness. In this sense it is *aegestas*, poverty, need, constantly chasing after fulfillment, which, in earthly life, just flickers for a moment. Far from having a duration, an extension in time, eternity is, therefore, as un-extended as a geometrical point. It is in a “point / in which all times are present”. Even Petrarch’s “the three parts of time” (past, present, and future) coincide in eternity. In Machiavelli, the concept of eternity vanishes altogether, and we are left with the time of human history, the time in which individuals are irrevocably immersed during the brief span of their existence.

**Key Words:** Eternity, history, Dante, Petrarch, Machiavelli.

*Para Carlos Gatti Murriel and Jorge Wiese Rebagliati,  
con afecto y admiración*

1. Dante describes his journey in the afterlife as a path «from man’s time to divine eternity» (*Paradise*, XXXI, 38),<sup>1</sup> a trip not unlike that which Aeneas and Saint Paul had carried out «with flesh corruptible / with all his senses, to the immortal realm» (*Inferno*, II, 14-15).

The meaning of the phrase («from man’s time to divine eternity») seems to be clear. But is it? Do we know what «eternity» meant in ancient and medieval philosophy and culture?

<sup>1</sup>For the English translation of the *Divina Commedia* I use *The Divine Comedy*, translation by Mark Musa, in *Portable Dante*, New York, Penguin Books, 1995.

Do we really understand Dante's idea of God «in his eternity, beyond all time» (*Paradise*, XXIX, 16)?

In order to clarify a number of theoretical and philological implications that are generally overlooked, I'll try to answer these questions through an elliptical comparison among Dante's *Comedy*, Petrarch's *Triumphs* and Machiavelli's *Prince* and *Discourses*. My task will be to sketch a conceptual and historical analysis of such terms as «time» and «eternity», to restore them to their original set of implications and to brighten up the colors that have been lost or altered in the course of centuries. In this way, we will be able to measure the distances between Dante, Petrarch, and Machiavelli.

Let's start with what in my view represents the first effect of distortion in our ordinary way of thinking, We do derive the concept of eternity from our notion of time, imagining eternity as a very long time, extended to infinity. Between time and eternity exists, however, a diametrically opposed relationship. Ever since Plato's *Timaeus* (37 A 6-7), in fact, time depends conceptually on eternity. It is considered an «image [or icon] of eternity in movement.» If we look at the meaning of the Greek *aion* and of the Latin *aeternitas*, we will see that initially *aion* meant life at its peak and, therefore, not an infinitely long time. Plotinus in *Enneads* (III 7-11, 44) explicitly defines *aion* as *zoe*, life, that moment when each of us reaches his *telos*. It is what makes him or her develop his/her capabilities. Furthermore, if we consider one of the best known texts that formed Dante's and Petrarch's thought (still, a text not yet investigated from this point of view),<sup>2</sup> that is Boethius' *De consolatione philosophiae*, we if read in book V, paragraph 6, we shall find a question concerning the meaning of eternity (*Quid aeternitas igitur sit consideremus*). Boethius' definition, which has become canonical, is worth analyzing: *Aeternitas est vitae interminabilis tota simul et perfecta possessio*.<sup>3</sup> Eternity is a stable possession of a never-ending and simultaneous life. It is *plenitudo vitae*, the complete opposite of time, which is instead a hemorrhage of life, a loss of fullness. In this sense it is *aegestas*, poverty, need, constantly chasing after fulfillment, which, in earthly life, just flickers for a moment. One of the Boethian passages, whose meaning often returns in Petrarch's *Triumph of Eternity*, can be found in *De consolatione philosophiae* V, 6: «There is no being that, placed in time, can simultaneously embrace the entire space of his life; on the contrary, it is clearly not yet able to grasp what tomorrow will be, while he has already lost that which was yesterday, and even in the life of today he can not stop his life for more than a fleeting and fugitive moment (*in illo mobile transitorioque momento*).»

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<sup>2</sup> See the old, but still interesting book of R. Murari, *Dante e Boezio*, Bologna, Zanichelli, 1905 and, more recently, the text by L. Obertello, *Boezio e dintorni*, Firenze, Nardini, 1989. Marginal in relation to our specific topic, but nevertheless intriguing is the volume by F. Masciandaro, *Il problema del tempo nella «Commedia» di Dante*, Ravenna, Longo, 1976.

<sup>3</sup> Severinus Boethius, *De consolatione philosophiae*, V, 6, It. transl. and commentary, *La consolazione della filosofia*, Milano, BUR, 1999.