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## ORIGEN ON TIME

Jay LAMPERT

*RÉSUMÉ* : Les concepts platoniciens d'émanation et de retour suggèrent une philosophie de l'histoire comparable à celle de Hegel, mais d'une manière purement formelle. Origène introduit dans la forme de l'histoire des événements actuels : la création, la chute et la rédaction des Écritures. Sa relecture des hypostases néoplatoniciennes — l'Un, l'Intellect et l'Âme — comme Monde, Volonté et Interprétation, manifeste comment des événements historiques acquièrent une signification transcendantale.

*SUMMARY* : Neo-Platonic concepts of emanation and return suggest a philosophy of history comparable to Hegel's, but in a purely formal way. Origen introduces some actual events into the form of history : the creation, the fall, and the writing of scripture. His rewritings of the neo-Platonic hypostases — the One, the Intellect, and the Soul — as World, Will, and Interpretation, show how historical events achieve transcendental significance.

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### I. INTRODUCTION

#### 1. *Conditions for a philosophy of time*

It is one thing to have a philosophy that says something about time, and another thing to have a philosophy that emphasizes time. A philosophy that emphasizes time would hold that the reason time deserves ontological emphasis is that transcendental or categorical or *a priori* truths emerge and develop over time, particularly the time of human events. Thus, for example, the French Revolution is for Hegel an event with transcendental significance, during which a new kind of freedom and a new kind of reason (a self-conscious kind) were made possible in the world. This temporal event is held to have changed not only human culture and human nature, but the ontology of the cosmos. Pushed to its limits, the implication is that any event might conceivably be an event with transcendental significance, redefining the ontological categories under which all succeeding events, and in a certain sense all preceding events too, have to be interpreted. On such an account, while there is nothing that exists outside of time, there are events within time which extend backward and forward throughout time, and hence function as transcendental, even as eternal, cate-

gories across time. The problem for a philosophy of time is to explain how temporally transitory events are also eternal, to show how events stand out in time without positing a standpoint outside time.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. *Christian neo-Platonism and Origen's text*

The systematic philosophers of history of the 19th Century, as well as their 20th Century deconstructive critiques, have their source largely in 3rd Century neo-Platonism. Plotinus's version of neo-Platonism describes a history of emanation and return, where the One radiates into the many: the One expresses itself in intellect (*nous*), intellect differentiates itself into souls, soul projects itself into a natural environment, and then as humans we have a responsibility to look back up the ladder that has emanated into us, and in this backward reference we actually restore the unity of the One in the end. This constitutes a scheme for a philosophy of history in the full sense, a scheme in which everything about a phenomenon consists of its place in a process of development, and in which all knowledge and self-knowledge consists of a knowledge of the world's history. However, for Plotinus, the scheme for a philosophy of history remains an ideal history. Plotinus is not interested in any actual events in chronological succession. Early Christian neo-Platonism adds at least a few actual historical events — the creation of the world, the incarnation of Christ, the last Judgment — to the scheme of emanation and return. The neo-Platonist offers a logic of history and the Christian offers some actual events. I am therefore looking at Origen, the 3rd Century Christian neo-Platonist, to see how what I have called a fully developed philosophy of time emerges.

Origen's most systematic philosophical text, written in Alexandria around 220 C.E., is called *Peri Archon* in the original Greek, translated into Latin as *De Principiis*, and hence into English as *On First Principles*.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps a more direct translation would be *On Beginnings*, or even *On Senses of Firstness*. I will not be examining here the historical influences (ranging from obvious sources in Platonism and Christianity to less frequently discussed sources in Jewish theology and traditional Egypt-

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1. The English text is ORIGEN, *On First Principles* (translated by G.W. Butterworth, 1936); NY: Harper and Row, 1966. I will refer to the text according to Book, chapter, and section. References to the Greek and Latin texts are to Paul KOETSCHAU (ed.), *Origenes Werke*, V, *Die Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller*, Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1913. I have limited myself in this paper to *Peri Archon*, though Origen's fifty page analysis of the phrase "in the beginning" in his *Commentary on the Gospel of John* is clearly relevant to the philosophy of time, as are Origen's polemics against the Stoics, Gnostics, Aristotelians, and other heretics, in his *Contra Celsus*.
  2. The idea of reading neo-Platonic and medieval philosophies of time and history as texts analyzing the same issues later analyzed by Hegelian and post-Hegelian hermeneutics is of course an old one. One could say that Schelling himself got his start with this strategy. For helpful recent examples, see Peter MANCHESTER, "Time and Soul in Plotinus, III 7 [45], 11", in *Dionysius*, 2 (Dec. 1978), p. 101-136. Also see the many related papers by Kenneth SCHMITZ, including "A moment of Truth: Present Actuality", *Review of Metaphysics*, 33 (June 80), p. 673-688. I would also like to thank John RUSSON (Acadia University) for detailed analysis of earlier versions of this paper, as well as for dozens of conversations, and I would like to thank Emil PISCATELLI (Northern Virginia Community College) for commenting on this paper at the Washington Philosophy Club, and for insightful comments on the relation between neo-Platonism and Christian theology.

tian thought), but I do want very briefly to set out five common 3rd Century problems in the philosophy of time.

### 3. *Five Third Century Problems of Time*

*Whether the world begins and ends in time.* Some argue that the world has no beginning in time (Aristotelians), some that it has a beginning but no end (Platonists, drawing on the *Timaeus*), and others that it has a beginning which is somehow non-temporal (Philo, the First Century Jewish neo-Platonist, from whom Origen, and Origen's teacher Clement, draw extensively). However, just saying that the world begins in time does not mean that one is emphasizing time as an ontological category. Indeed, if the beginning of the world involves the beginning of time, the cause of that beginning would have to be outside time, which subordinates time to something else. But if the beginning of the world occurs within time, we have the familiar question of what the cause of the world was doing before He created, and why He chose that time rather than another time. The awkwardness of these questions forces us to look for a different sort of interpretation of the problem of the beginning of the world. On my reading, the idea of the beginning of the world in time has to be interpreted not as a particular dated moment, but as a characteristic of all time, namely that there is a way in which time can be comprehended as a totality with a single principle of unity.

*How real is worldly time relative to the eternal?* Plato's doctrine that being is eternal whereas time is a characteristic only of becoming dominates much of 3rd Century thought. Plato's phrase "time is the moving image of eternity" is in fact ambiguous. It may entail that time is *only* an image, and therefore unreal. Boethius (*Consolation of Philosophy* v.6) and Augustine (*Confessions* Book 11) later take this approach, arguing in different ways that time exists for the soul only. On the other hand, it might entail that worldly time is an instance of a Platonic Form of time, i.e. a form of the before-after relation (as Simplicius suggests in *On Aristotle's Physics*). Or it might entail a positive assessment of time as the medium in which the One is gradually expressed (e.g. Plotinus *Ennead* 3.7).

*The role of the soul in the measurement of time.* Aristotle says that time is the measure of movement (*Physics* 218b). This measurement scheme needs a reliable counter, and the soul is the best candidate (*Physics* 223a 15-28). Augustine later argues that time exists *only* in the soul. But there is another way to think of the role of soul in time, and that is to think of soul not so much as that which subjectively experiences time, but as that which objectively projects itself forward in time, namely through acts of will.

*Past-now-future: Points vs. continuities.* The Stoics argue that since the Now vanishes as soon as it arises, only past and future are real (Plutarch, *SVF* II, 519). Augustine, on the contrary, argues that the present does exist, but past and future do not, on the grounds that they do not exist now. Both of these implausible conclusions about which points exist and which do not rest on the assumption that time consists of points. Aristotle argues that time is rather a continuous stretch, on which past, pre-

sent, and future are only potentially divisible points of reference (*Physics* 222a 24-222b 8).

*Providence and the unfolding of events.* The idea that time measures not just a succession of distinct points but the unfolding of the inner purpose of events is expressed in the Stoic doctrine that “things which are to be do not suddenly spring into existence, but the evolution of time is like the unwinding of a cable ; it creates nothing new but only unfolds each event in its order” (Cicero, *SVF* II, 944). The idea of unfolding truth gives some sense to the doctrine of Apostolic succession (the doctrine that at any given time there is one and only one head of the church, and that any dogma spelled out at the beginning of church history is inviolable), a doctrine that without this sense of unfolding history would seem implausible in the extreme. What unfolds in church history is not only an event but an interpretation.<sup>3</sup>

The 3rd Century problems of time thus exhibit time in relation to three spheres : time in world events, time in acts of will, and time in interpretation. While Origen’s *Peri Archon* is not neatly divided,<sup>4</sup> these are also Origen’s three primary topics of concern : the problems of the beginning of the world, the beginning of acts of will, and the beginning of interpretation. The first involves God’s creation, the second involves the fall of man, the third involves the method for reading scripture. Together they fit into a dialectical analysis of time. We will move from seeing time as driven by a succession of momentary occurrences, to seeing time as purposive continuity referring forward and backward, to seeing time as the interpretative focus that telescopes whole histories around single events, bunching time up around certain nodes, and giving transcendental significance to events immanent in time.

## II. FIRST CAUSE OF THE WORLD

### 1. *Beginnings beyond time : “never not”*

Origen’s text begins with God the Father, Christ, and the Holy Spirit. God is the “first principle of all things” (1.1.6), therefore indivisible, therefore incorporeal. But although God’s firstness means simple unity, Origen says, we cannot believe that “God the Father ever existed, even for a single moment, without begetting his wis-

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3. Henri CROUZEL argues that “In Origen’s view the history of the Church is co-extensive with that of the rational beings”, (*Origen* (translated by A.S. Worrall), San Francisco : Harper and Row, Publishers, 1989, p. 219). Crouzel’s idea is that the past is the history of the pre-existent souls of Christians, the present is a history of the daily life of Christians, and the future is a history of the resurrection of Christians. In my view, the emphasis on Church history here does not divert attention from philosophical to theological concerns, as it might in other contexts, but rather situates the issues of human community and temporal systematic in a unified framework.

4. *Ibid.* Crouzel argues throughout that Origen is not a systematic philosopher but an experimenter and a mystic. It is true that the received text of Origen’s work has been corrupted by early editors and critics (Rufinus and Jerome in particular), it is true that *Peri Archon* is repetitive and sometimes seems disorganized, and it is true that Origen often insists that some of his conclusions are uncertain and await further debate. On the other hand, my view is that the test of whether Origen is a systematic philosopher is whether a systematic reading of his texts can solve philosophical problems.

dom" (1.2.2). Thus firstness has built into it a secondness, an act of beginning, an expression, namely Christ. This second, the "firstborn" (1.2.1) does not include anything that was not already in the first (1.2.13), and is in no way less than the first (1.3.7). This expression of the first must then consciously reflect the Father, namely as the Holy Spirit. This too follows from the first (1.3.4). The creation is not like an "emanation of particles", which implies division, or like one thing changing into another thing, or like the generation of something from nothing (4.4.1). It is rather a "becoming", as a father becomes the father of a son (4.4.1).

Most of this is common neo-Platonism. What I want to focus on is the idea that "there is no time when it [the image of unity, or the Son of God] did not exist" (1.2.9). We are dealing here with non-temporal creation, a beginning that was "never not" (e.g. 1.4.3, 2.3.5, 3.5.2, 4.4.1). Creation is "begotten beyond the limits of any beginning" (1.2.2). But how can the world be begotten but not begun?

The simple answer seems to be in Origen's suggestion that we disregard any hint of "temporal significance" in the phrases "never not" or "always" (1.3.4, 4.4.1). But how exactly are we supposed to remove the time-element from the concept of "never not"? At least in connotation, "never not" has a different sense than "always", or even "always already". As a method of canceling out the temporality of the beginning, the function of "never not" is to drive the moment of beginning backwards beyond any given point. In short, the only way to think of the timeless elements of the beginning is to think of a temporal regress and to push it back infinitely. But isn't this strange? God begins his creation, but then cancels the createdness of that creation. Or better, creation is an activity whose nature is to be repeated without end.

As ongoing activity, the timeless beginning is always active, it has always already made itself known, and creations always already have a prior history leading up to them which had never not yet begun. And of course the same goes for the end: whatever the purpose of creation, it has never not yet been completed. Nevertheless, these beginnings and ends that push backwards and forwards infinitely along lines of events depend somehow on those lines of events. We have to see how beginnings fully *in* time make up the sequence across which timeless beginnings are pushed.

## *2. Time and difference : the end is like the beginning*

The beginning of the Trinity is timeless, but the beginnings of diversified individuals are beginnings that do occur in time, and they need to be explained. Why does God create them? It is one thing for God to create direct expressions co-existent with Himself, but why would he create lesser beings separate from Himself? This is a question difficult for any neo-Platonist. It is even worse for Plotinus, whose first principle is the One. How could the One produce a second? If the one is truly one, how can manness come out of it? The only hope of a solution for either Plotinus or Origen is to reverse the question, to start not with the pre-creation state of the One, but with the already created diverse individuals and to ask why these are here now. The only explanation of why differentiated beings are created is that they deserve to be.

The diversity of the products of the first principle is in a sense an embarrassment. The first thing Origen wants to explain is why this diversity of temporally distinct things is only temporary. Even now, he says, the diversity makes up an "immense animal held together by the power and reason of God" (2.1.3). And in the end, the unity from the beginning will be restored. When all are "subjected to Christ", "the last enemy will be destroyed" (1.6.2, citing 1 Cor. xv 24-27). Origen identifies this "last enemy" not only as Satan, but also as death, and as diversity itself. Hence in the end "there will no longer be any diversity" (3.6.4). And in so far as diverse things are finite and finite things have ends, or deaths, death itself will die, and ends will end in the end. Further, in order for the end to end diversity, that would have to have been prefigured before the beginning of the diversity (1.2.4). In theological terms, the Word prefigures the resurrection. In eschatological terms, the soul is immortal through its nature (4.4.9). In cosmological terms, "the end is always like the beginning" (1.6.2 and elsewhere).

The doctrine that the end is like the beginning is difficult to interpret. On the surface it seems that the destruction of diversity should mean that at the end of time the diversity of the world and its temporal changes, namely everything in between beginning and end, is erased, as though it never happened.

But while Origen occasionally seems to argue for this exact identity of what there is before the beginning of the temporal world and what there is after the end of it, on important points he describes a difference between the two states. For example, while souls have no bodies at all before the temporal world they will have spiritual bodies afterwards (2.3.7).<sup>5</sup> The end of time is the time for souls to go back to the "lecture room" (2.11.6), to undergo gradual improvement. In short, the end is more a matter of reestablished harmony than of undifferentiated unity. But now what does this mean for the identity of the end with the beginning, given that the end *does* include a kind of diversity that was not present at the beginning. It means first of all that just as Origen described the beginning by pushing back infinitely *through* time, so when he declares that the end is a destruction of time, what he is doing is referring forward through time. The mutual reference of beginning and end does not then entail their strict identity, and does not cancel out the time in between; it entails rather a theory of the double movement of time forward and backward. The beginning-end identity makes us think the harmony at the end as the starting point for our own time. In thus "contemplating the beginning from the end" (1.6.2), we are to think about the process by which diverse things aim at inner unity. We are to think of the final goal of harmony as the cause that pulls our imperfect temporal world towards it. The beginning of diversity is a consequence of the end-results of diversity. Causality works in reverse.

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5. It is difficult to know exactly what Origen thought was going to happen in the soul's future. Cf. Henry CHADWICK, "Origen, Celsus, and the Resurrection of the Body", *Harvard Theological Review*, XLI, 2 (April 1948), p. 83-102.

### 3. *The gap that time falls into*

In addition to all the things that were never not, Origen is quite clear that the world begins to exist "at a definite time" (3.5.1). His basic argument for the beginning of the world is that God can only "comprehend" a finite world (1.9.1). And since only something with a beginning and end is finite, the world must have a beginning and end (also 3.5.2). For the finite world, Origen does not let the beginning drift backward in time into the "never not", but on the contrary defines the beginning as a moment "before everything else", a point at which things exist "when before they did not exist" (1.9.2). The beginning is an instant, a now-point without a predecessor, but with at least one successor. From that point on things and events are numbered, measured, bodily, temporal, and in all ways finite, limited, and incomplete. Now, since whatever is created was once not, there can be nothing in its nature to guarantee that it always exists. Hence whatever is created in the first moment can be changed, and this entails at least potentially a second state of the world, and therefore a second moment in time, which entails a third, and so on. In short, anything that might once not have been is incomplete, and as the gaps within it are filled, time spreads from points to continua.

Now here is the surprise. Since the world had a beginning in time, and since God was never not creative (1.2.10), God must have been creating before this world began. That is, before the beginning of this world, there must have been prior worlds ; and after this world, more worlds (2.3.5).

### 4. *Worlds before and after*

The reason Origen had for positing a beginning to the world was that God could not comprehend a single infinite world. Now he says there are an infinite number of finite worlds. How can God comprehend them all ? If we presume that Origen is not just contradicting himself in an obvious way, we have to think of the whole issue differently. The problem of the relation between within-world time, which cannot be infinite, and relations between worlds, which can be, is the problem of reconciling the fact that we comprehend events only by organizing them into local orderings with at least provisional starting- and ending-points with the fact that times stretch back infinitely into the past. To put the matter in this way secularizes the theory somewhat, treating all comprehensible events as in a sense the beginnings of a new world which make successions comprehensible from that point onward, while at the same time potentially referring back still further to prior beginnings and ends. But all that we can say so far is that the infinity of past time is at once affirmed and blocked, and that the finite world's simultaneous continuity with, and incommensurability with, the infinite, takes place in temporal moments called "beginnings". Or in other words, certain temporal moments have the dual character of being *within* a certain series, and of being at the threshold *between* two or more temporal series.

There is a particularly messy question concerning whether souls cross the boundaries between worlds (2.9.7). Other questions, concerning whether there will be



more worlds even after the Resurrection, whether Christ is crucified in every world (2.3.5), whether several worlds can be exactly alike (2.3.4), and so on, are all awkward. The big question is whether the succession of worlds together end in a more final end than the kind of end that is followed by a beginning.

At one level, Origen is just involved in a temporal regress that he is trying to deny, and no answer to any of these questions is likely to succeed. Nevertheless, there is something correct about what he is trying to do here, and something unavoidable about the mess he finds himself in. The problem is to articulate what sort of principle could circumscribe all times within a single totality. Origen's sense of the end of the succession of all worlds, a time when God will be "all in all" (1 Cor xv 28, one of Origen's favorite passages), a "period when all things are no longer in an age" (2.3.5), suggests a kind of super-world. At one point he says that the perfect, post-end world is "contained" within the limits of this world (2.3.6), but at another point in the same passage he reverses the containment relation, and says that the perfect world contains all the imperfect ones. What can it mean to say that a period after time contains all times and yet is separated from those times by time? It has to mean first that all times are guaranteed in advance to be related to all others in before-after relations. This guarantee cannot be founded on any particular succession of events, and the standpoint from which all events can be seen as a unified development can never be fully achieved as long as more events are still to come. The post-end container thus idealizes a standpoint in principle for synthesizing all times and beginnings into one sequence. Yet at the same time our time does contain this perfect totality. For the unity of times before and after this time is already present now, though only by virtue of the fact that this time now is projected toward a future which ends the uncertainty of the present and begins our own looking back over our history. In sum, the doctrine of the last world or of the container world represents the idea of a standpoint within time from which to survey time as a whole. Our time sends us toward a timeless standpoint, yet a standpoint whose relation to us is a temporal one.

The theory of multiple worlds on the one hand allows time to be understood as an unbroken and orderly succession, every event bounded by predecessors and successors. But on the other hand it creates knotted points in the borders between worlds, reversals in the ends that precede time and the beginnings that follow them, and unresolvable ambiguities in the relation between the unification of time and time itself. Time both refers to, and blocks, a timeless world overlooking all times. Time locates each event in an order that is both a mere succession of moments and a transcendental standpoint.

##### 5. *Why this now?*

Directing the question of time to the question of the beginning of the world helps to exhibit the relation between local times and the totality of times. But it does not resolve the problem of why differentiated substances existing in time should be created in the first place. The only explanation of a differentiated world that Origen can give is that God is induced to create multiple beings as a punishment for their sins (1.8.2).

The question of how the world begins is thus transformed into the question of why individuals will to fall differently. The beginning of time is the result not of impersonal cause but of personal agency.

### III. FIRST AGENCY OF THE WILL

#### 1. *The will to time*

Origen sometimes describes Christ as the will of God's mind (1.2.6). Creation in general is a kind of decision. In order to consider will as the first principle that begins the world, we do not necessarily have to think of God anthropomorphically as a person who decides what the world will be. We could instead think of the world as containing projects, decisive moments, histories with momentum, and so on, and think of the temporal world as the system of these purposive unfoldings. To talk of creation of the temporal world in this context would be to talk of willing subjects choosing to fall into specific bodily actions at specific times.

Souls become negligent (1.4.1, 2.9.6, 1.5.3), Origen says, and because of this vanity receive bodies (1.5.3) as punishment (1.8.1) and thus begin a history of decline (3.5.4) which descends to complete evil and materiality if not reversed by another act of will (1.8.4). Before actually deciding to fall, he says, all rational natures must have had an equal capacity for good and evil, otherwise they would not deserve praise or blame (1.7.2, 2.6.5). The problem for this account is obvious: if souls are scrupulously made all the same, why would they fall differently?

The scriptures speak of "invisible enemies" working against us (3.2.1). Does that mean that these enemies make some of us sin? Origen's answer is to say that the demons do not begin our sins, but that we "supply the occasion and beginning for our sins and the hostile powers spread them if possible endlessly" (3.2.2). Acts of will are the starting-points whose inevitable consequences spread forwards into a temporal future. Of course this still does not explain why souls fall differently; it only describes how histories emerge from souls that are already marked by a first difference. And worse, if a soul's life begins because of something it does during that life, then the fall is explained only by the history that results from it.<sup>6</sup> To test this interpretation, we must analyze Origen's philosophy of will.

#### 2. *Will: image, impulse, judgment, and movement*

All living things have souls (2.8.1), which means that they "move from within themselves" (3.1.2). The soul's movement begins with images, which includes thoughts, memories, and other perceptual contents. The image then "calls forth" the

6. There is something clearly correct about Antonia TRIPOLITIS's statement that according to both Origen and Plotinus, "the soul had its origin outside of time, in the realm of the intelligible or divine" (*The Doctrine of the Soul in the Thought of Plotinus and Origen*, New York: Libra Publishers, Inc., 1978, p. 141). Nevertheless, it is hard to see how the soul's responsibility for that origin could be other than something it does during its temporal life.

second faculty, namely the “impulse” to actualize the image “in an orderly manner”. Origen’s example involves a spider which first imagines weaving a web and consequently wants to do so. Modern rationalists usually hold that an image is neutral, and can equally give rise to desire or repulsion, but Origen says that the very nature of the image entails a desire for the imaged object. Now, Origen says, we cannot help our impulses, but we do not have to assent to them. Here reason or judgment accepts or rejects the image according to a rational contemplation of good and evil. Once reason has assessed the best image to pursue, the faculty of “choice” lets us use our power of movement by ourselves, and because of this, we are deserving of praise or blame (3.1.20).

The seductress can therefore be resisted, especially with practice (3.1.4). The element of practice and of the graduated degrees of judgment and the possibility of improving one’s habitual resources and perseverance is the time element in will. Good judgment refers will forward through time toward the actualization of good images whereas mistaken judgment backslides forward through time. But how do we know in the present what is good? If we have already got bad habits, how can we ever start making judgments that are not just excuses for more indulgence?

### *3. Pharaoh’s hardened heart and the regressive history of deeds*

Why does scripture say that God hardened Pharaoh’s heart (3.1.7)? Didn’t that rob him of his free will? It is of course out of the question for God to blame someone for His own actions. There is only one solution. Pharaoh must already have been so “completely disobedient” that he already would not have done the right thing even if God had not prevented his heart from choosing the right thing. God’s hardening of Pharaoh’s heart simply codifies Pharaoh’s previous decisions (3.1.8). The decisive moment of an act of will does not take place in the present, but has always taken place in the past. Like all of Origen’s first principles, the agency of the will is regressive: Pharaoh’s heart is hard now because of earlier decisions; the earlier decisions express still earlier decisions, and so on. This regressive deferral to past choosing might seem like the worst possible philosophical problem to be stuck with. On the other hand, there is no way out of it. A theory of will cannot avoid the problem of regress; the question is how to handle the problem.

The point to start with is that the regress of responsibility means that an act of will is not an isolated moment but a history of deeds. Pharaoh’s hard heartedness consists of his inability to break out of his habit of destroying Jews. In other words, it consists of his failure to make the judgment to resist the images that normally come into the mind of a Pharaoh. How does one learn to filter out the errors of the past? Through education. What is education? For Origen, education is rehabilitation — punishment for past misdeeds.

After death, Origen says, each soul’s sin determines the character of the fire it will burn in. This is not a tormenting fire, but a kind of “conscience” to “accuse and witness against itself”. This self-witnessing (or self-consciousness) brings to “memory” a “history of its evil deeds” (2.10.5). In this “lecture-room for souls” (2.11.6),

we are instructed gradually in principles of judgment and ultimately will have received "better precepts" (3.6.9). When does one learn to become self-conscious of one's history?

We must not expect a quick fix. At no point is progress guaranteed (3.1.5), but somewhere in the future is the precept that would have let us make our present judgment properly. The future contains that which we will be taught as a result of the punishment we receive for not having been taught it yet.<sup>7</sup> No doubt it will be a long time before we can discern which events in our history to resist and which to repeat. Meanwhile time is passing. Isn't there something a moral agent can do even now, caught up in his history, to rejudge that history from within, to make a fresh start, to transform the error that is history into the present that is the future, in short to constitute a self-caused self-conscious judgment of his own history?

#### 4. *Self-causality*

In order to judge between the good and bad in the history of our deeds, we have to read that history forward into their just outcomes. But of course that forereading could end in error if we desire the wrong outcomes (2.11.4). That is, if we desire physical or intellectual pleasures, we will foresee killing Jews or studying Plato respectively, and we will pursue them without realizing that such pleasure is punishment in God's eyes. The first thing we have to learn about our own futures is what we in the future will finally desire that future to be like.<sup>8</sup> In short, it is the history and future of our own judgments that we must be making a judgment about. Judgment is self-caused because the history of judgments is the subject-matter for the judgments that begin our lives as agents.

Everyone, says Origen, desires to know the meaning and purpose of mysterious events, from the meaning of the Trinity and the cause of evil (4.2.7) to the reason why we have so many hairs on our heads and not more (2.11.5). This wonder is not idle curiosity but the will to know our place in history so far. Will here is not the indeterminacy of a choice that could go either way but a self-determination that succeeds if it makes an accurate interpretation of one's place in history. Will is in the end a matter of interpretation. To know what to do a person has to know how close he is to the end of his history, so that he can know whether his desires are to be fol-

7. For Jean DANÉLOU, the issue here is to explain why Christ did not come earlier than he did, and his answer is that we had first to prepare for and deserve it (*Origen* (translated by Walter Mitchell), New York: Sheed and Ward, 1955, p. 119). But clearly to deserve it, we must have been able to know the right way to prepare in advance. At the very least, we must have been able to know that the past had to be overcome, which is to say that we must have been able to regard the past as a Fall: "The principle of the Fall is the same law that we saw operating in the theology of history when the Jews refused to leave their past behind them. The spirit stands for progress, and by definition evil is the refusal to accept progress" (p. 213). The Fall is justified as a form of preparation. But it will take human freedom to break the repetitions of the past for the sake of progressive history. (See also Mircea ELIADE, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1954, p. 132.)

8. The education that prepares us to know what we knew before is after all the return to *Nous*. Jean TROUILLARD, referring to the "antinomies" of priority in Plotinus, shows how the conversion of the future into an origin is a kind of rupture (*La Procession plotinienne*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1955, p. 45, 61-63, and elsewhere).

lowed or not. We first looked at time as a history of events, but we found that the time of events could only be understood as a history of purposes ; we now find that a history of choices can only be understood as a history of interpretations.

We never quite get out of the problem of the regress of grounds for acts of will. There is no time in the distant past at which Pharaoh made a bad choice that he can be held responsible for. On the other hand, his "present" decision is a bad interpretation of his future, and in that sense his past is not adding up. In fact, this does provide a way of blaming Pharaoh for his act after all. The consequence, though, is that he is blamed less for a problem of choice than interpretation. We have now to investigate this third beginning.

#### IV. FIRST AUTHOR OF INTERPRETATION

In order for time and responsibility to emerge out of willed ends there must be some measure for transforming the finality of the future into new beginnings in the present and significant continuations of the past. That measure, Origen suggests, is the gospel correctly interpreted. If we learn how to read scripture, in particular how to read the fulfillment of prophesy in later events, we will know how to interpret the future of our history.

##### 1. *Divine origin of scripture*

Origen's proof of the divine authorship of scripture is threefold. (a) Scripture has had more "success" in gaining followers in less time than Greek philosophy ever had (4.1.1). (b) The Jews are still waiting for their Messiah, and waiting — the stagnation of time — is a sign of falsity. (c) The prophesies of the Jews are fulfilled in the New Testament (4.1.3). On all three arguments, divine authorship is proved by the way in which history is being rewritten. Forget that we were first Jews and Egyptians and Greeks. The new text replaces all that, but the interpretation of the new text reveals the author who was the true author of history all along. To trace the text back to the original author therefore involves rereading the old by the new. It involves seeing the old text as having a double meaning which in different ways refers backward and forward. The beginning of the world's production is a word, and the subsequent time of the world is comprised of the succession of words which fall into the interpretative openings opened up by the first word.

To see how the time of the text doubles, we have to consider the position of Biblical hermeneutics that Origen is most well known for : the distinction between the literal and the figurative meanings of the scriptures.

##### 2. *Literal and figurative interpretations*

Scripture is a text with "hidden" meaning (1.Preface.8). For example, passages that seem to imply that God has a material body must be read for their "deeper [or spiritual] meanings" (1.1.1, 1.1.9, 2.4.4). Interpretation is like a treasure hunt with

wisdom beneath the ground, and it is only with God's help that we know how to break the surface barrier (4.3.11). This last point shows just how tricky interpretation is ; we need God's help to break the code of the text, but that help itself is in the text. The danger is that the text that explains how to break the code of the text may itself be written in that very code.

We need a test to decide which statements in the text should be taken literally and which should be taken spiritually. The test of interpretation is whether a literal understanding would lead to a contradiction. Some are logical/rational contradictions. Stories about the world being created in six days, or about evil resulting from eating an apple are so "silly" that any "reasonable man" would agree that they represent only a "semblance of history, not actual events" (4.3.1). There are also physical contradictions, as when Adam hides from God's sight, and utilitarian contradictions, as when Mosaic laws tell people not to do things they would never have done anyway (like eating vulture) (4.2.9, 4.3.2). It is in temporal contradictions that we find the most complex cases of scriptures that cannot be taken literally. God did not literally "walk in paradise in the evening" (4.3.1). Likewise the law that people should sit all day long on the Sabbath, if taken literally, would imply a world too motionless to be possible (4.3.2). We find that "among the narratives which appear to be recorded literally there are inserted and interwoven others which cannot be accepted as historical, but which contain a spiritual meaning" (4.3.1, also 4.3.11). This principle is worth quoting at length :

The divine wisdom has arranged for certain stumbling blocks and interruptions of the historical sense to be found therein [on the surface of the text], by inserting in the midst a number of impossibilities and incongruities in order that the very interruption of the narrative might as it were present a barrier to the reader and lead him to refuse to proceed along the pathway of the ordinary meaning : and so by shutting us out and debarring us from that might recall us to the beginning of another way (4.2.9).

There is much to be said about barriers and interruptions in the relation between temporality and literalness. Indeed, the problem of literalness is exactly the problem of what can count as "actual history". And this is the problem of the points of actual history at which spiritual or transcendental interpretations are inserted via textual interruptions into the sequence of temporal events. Or in other words, what figurative interpretation does is to introduce a new rationality of history — not to abandon history in favor of a Platonic realm, but to give history a double sense.

### 3. *Two of everything*

The Old Testament makes promises of bodily rewards. But just as Pythagoreans think of numbers not physically but intellectually, we must read the book the other way (4.2.5, 2.11.4). Because the book can be read in two ways, it is "two books" (4.2.4). The first book "admonishes" those with "child souls" to desist from crimes (usually procreational crimes). This book is the surface text, the "bare letter", which vulgar people call the book itself. The second book announces spiritual doctrine to "those who are already departing from the letter" in the direction of the "living voice" and the "cities without" (4.2.4). The distinction between the letter and the living

voice is not a distinction between language and something else, but between two forms of language ; not a distinction between time and something else, but between dead time and living time.

The readers of the second book are headed to the second city, which is found in the “other Israel” (4.3.7). The idea is not to take the material world and apportion half of it to another world later on, but is rather to create an entire parallel earth. In a strange way, the second city gives a clue to where the worlds before and after the temporal boundaries of our world (2.3.6) would lie. They lie in interpretation ; they lie in the narrative ; they lie in language.

For the other city lies precisely in the same events that our cities lie in — not that the difference between worlds is “only” a difference of subjective interpretation, but that every event happens in a double world. This is also what prophesy consists of — not a paranormal true guess about the future, but the doubleness of interpretation. Prophesy is just the description of events in the world as events “over there”. It is a distancing of events in relation to ourselves, so as to regard events as happening eternally instead of transitorily, as living history instead of history incessantly dying away. The two worlds are composed of one and the same series of events, and both the eternal are the transitory senses of time must be found in that same series.

#### 4. *Actual history. The only case study : Jewish history*

The history of the Jews plays a special role in Origen’s text. On the one hand, this history is the content of those narratives in the scriptures that Origen thinks require special interpretation. Somewhere in the connections between the parts of this narrative lies the double history of our double world. In so far as historical narrative is by definition that which is to be overcome by Christian interpretation, every narrative of actual history is in that sense narrative of Jewish history. On the other hand, all history of the Jews is to be reinterpreted as a merely *preliminary* and prophetic version, not to be taken literally, of an eternal order, namely the order of Christianity.<sup>9</sup> Christianity also has its events, but Christian history is already no longer factual history, but has passed into the atemporal order. The history of the Jews is not yet history, and the history of the Christians is no longer history, and the moment between, the moment in which scripture is written, is the moment in which interpretation goes in the two directions. One understands the meaning of prophesy “at the same time” as one knows Jesus, Origen says (4.1.6). The sameness of the time of the two meanings points to the paradox of time that we have seen before. If the later text decodes the earlier one, only thereby conferring spiritual meaning onto its predecessor, then it gives those earlier texts their prophetic status retroactively ; the old texts did not in themselves have the power to foretell anything, but only got the power to have foretold events after those events occurred. They did prophesy, but only after

9. Gerard E. CASPARY argues that Origen’s allegorical exegesis is always an act of spiritual warfare against the Jews (*Politics and Exegesis : Origen and the Two Swords*, Berkeley : University of California Press, 1979, p. 20).

they turned out to be true. They did come before Christ, but they did so only after Christ provided a way to interpret them.

But there is another paradox. For all the elegance of the fulfillment of the prior text in the posterior (the fulfillment of history in the future), the Jews who preserved the Old Testament scripture did not of course believe that the meaning of the prophecies were revealed in Christ's word. For the New Testament to update the Old is to deny that the latter stands on its own. If prophesy is the spring whose unwinding the Stoics identified with time, it would seem that history is being annulled again at its completion. Time has to be "vomited" out of the hearts of the ignorant once the secrets of the parables are revealed (3.1.13). Indeed there are some passages when Origen goes so far as to suggest that *none* of the historical narratives of scripture actually happened (4.2.9, though other passages make exceptions, 4.3.4).<sup>10</sup>

All of this indicates the blockage that Origen's philosophy of time runs into at the question of how the past has significance for the present. That the past does have transcendental significance is of the essence in Origen's theory : that the past is also blocked out of existence by its very capacity to give eternal meaning to the present is just as essential. This might make it seem that Origen's philosophy of time fails, i.e. that at the point where he wants time to have significance it disappears into the eternal, and at the point where he wants time to disappear in the eternal the eternal itself turns out to be nothing but a temporal unfolding of events. But my argument is that this failure is what *should* happen to a philosophy of time, that time is ontologically significant just when it is both an indicator of transcendental categories and an infiltrator into those categories.

##### 5. *The last reversal : time becomes, and infiltrates, the eternal*

What *is* in the eternal world that correct interpretation of historical narrative leads us to ? And why should historical narrative be a good way of encoding what is in the eternal world in the first place ? The answer to the second question is that "the principle aim [of scripture] was to announce the connection that exists among spiritual events, those that have already happened and those that are yet to come to pass" (4.2.9). Particular personal histories may be a code, but what they encode is still history, still an order and connection of events.<sup>11</sup> It is because the eternal realm is still a

10. Harry Austryn WOLFSON says that "Origen lays down the rule that the literal sense of Scripture is to be rejected only when it is irrational and impossible [...]" (*Philo*, Cambridge : Harvard University Press, 1948, p. 159. See also John M. RIST, *Eros and Psyche ; Studies in Plato, Plotinus, and Origen*, Toronto : University of Toronto Press, 1964, p. 200.) It may be that it was Origen's intention to maintain a clear range of scriptures that do not require allegorical interpretation, but it is difficult to see how to prevent allegorical interpretation from encroaching on all texts.

11. There are only so many ways to solve the relation between the temporally changing and the permanent aspects of reality ; we could assert separate realms of reality for temporal and eternal entities, or we could assert different levels or hypostases of time-relations, or we could hold that time does not matter, or we could hold that the eternal is constituted within the temporal. I would not be able to do justice here to Paul C. PLASS's article "Timeless Time in Neoplatonism", *The Modern Schoolman*, 55, November 1977, p. 1-19, but in general, he is looking for the neoplatonic solution in the last of the possibilities above, as I am. See also Peter MANCHESTER's equally complex and valuable "Time and Soul in Plotinus, III 7[45], 11", *Dionysius*, 2 (Dec 1978), p. 101-136. For an excellent examination of the second of the above possibilities,



historical realm that historical narratives of the Jews is a fitting surrogate. Hence, for example, the personal narrative of Abraham fathering Isaac should be in each detail of the narrative a representation of the order and connection of the history of the One eternally expressing itself in an image. The temporal order by which Abraham sleeps with Hagar before Sarah represents the conceptual order by which one must study Greek philosophy (the foreign harlot) before one can understand religion. In exactly the same way, the French Revolution, the life of Frederick Douglass, and maybe even the publication of this journal are all rearranging the structure of the eternal realm. The point is that the eternal realm has the same history in it as the temporal realm ; in a way it is just as temporal as this temporal realm. The difference is that interpretation of the eternal realm is that interpretation of the temporal realm which exhibits the universal significance of each event. The philosophers of history whom I referred to early in the paper as having a fully developed philosophy of time are content in saying that there is in the end just one realm of events with both transitory and transcendental significance. What distinguishes Origen from these philosophers is that Origen is not content when his search for the transcendental realm has not left the temporal behind. Origen at some level wants out of time, even though every step he takes toward the eternal carries time along with it. I think perhaps Origen is right to be discontented. While there is no way out of time, time itself, with its peculiar reversals, interruptions, and bunchings up into beginnings and ends, constitutes blockages, the only appropriate response to which is the desire to transcend history, to begin the world again.

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which shows that it might be the same as the fourth, see Robert S. BRUMBAUGH, "Time Passes : Platonic Variations", *Review of Metaphysics*, 33 (June 1980), p. 711-726.