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The Eternity of the World and Renaissance Historical Thought

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The Eternity of the World and Renaissance Historical Thought

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In order to develop the non-providential form of narrative history that is the ancestor of modern historical writing, Italian humanists of the fifteenth century had to free their narratives from the consideration of those first things of the distant past that are explained by the Bible. Geology and evolutionary science did not yet exist to help them in this respect. However, the science of their own day—natural philosophy—may have offered suggestions that functioned in a manner not entirely dissimilar from the way eighteenth- and nineteenth-century natural science also affected thinking about the past.

Medieval and Renaissance controversies over the Aristotelian doctrine of “the eternity of the world” have hitherto been treated as disputes restricted to natural philosophers and theologians. While eternalism—the proposition that the world is uncreated and has always existed—has been discussed as an ancient philosophical doctrine that surfaced from time to time in medieval universities and in Church Councils, the idea that it may have had an impact in other cultural arenas remains unexplored. Modern historians of Renaissance Aristotelianism and Averroism have tended to neglect eternalism while focusing on other, equally heretical Averroist doctrines concerning the unity of the intellect and the mortality of the soul (Schmitt 1983; Pine 1986; Wallace 1988; Mahoney 2000). Yet there is good evidence that with the revival of learning during the Renaissance in Italy it became common to discuss the possibility that the world is eternal. Among the popular Averroist philosophers of the Renaissance, there existed a cohort of university professors who were committed to teaching eternalism in their classes in natural philosophy. There was also a larger group of people who, although not academics, and not necessarily embracing the eternity of the world, were willing to contemplate its implications. Eternalism even provoked a creationist reaction in the early sixteenth century, helping to create a market for a series of bestselling chronologies and universal histories (including Sabellico’s *Enneads* and Raleigh’s *History of the World*), and probably influencing the program of the frescoes for the Sistine ceiling.

One area in which eternalism may have had an impact on culture outside the university was in the development of historical thought—in the formation of what Peter Burke called the “Renaissance sense of the past” (1969). It has often been noted that during the Renaissance there emerged in Europe a new approach to past history that emphasized the fragility of human memory (Mommsen 1959b; Weiss 1969). The historian sought to compensate for this fragility by applying a more cautious and rigorous approach to his sources (Burke 1969; Cochrane 1981; Fryde 1983, 3-31; Kelley 1998, 130-161; Fubini 2003; Fasolt 2004, 16-25; Connell 2011). Changes in the way history was written in the early Renaissance have often been associated with changed understandings of time. Yet existing accounts of Renaissance notions of time have overlooked contemporary speculation about the eternity of the world (Quinones 1971; Wilcox 1987).¹ The introduction of Stoic and Epicurean accounts of time, including the

¹ Eire (2010) neglects the idea of an eternal past in order to focus on the hereafter

world's creation and destruction, further destabilized fifteenth-century thought on cosmogony, relativizing the issue. The essay that follows explores the idea that eternalism may be a part of the puzzle that has been missing in our efforts to explain the new historical mode of perception that took hold in Italy during the Renaissance—that place where, as Erwin Panofsky put it, “Something must have happened” (Kelley 1995, 113; Panofsky 1960).

Eternalism and the Historian: The Analogy of a Hiker (Walking Backward)

Consider the consequences for the historian of the possibility that the world is eternal. To explore the question it may help to employ what medieval and Renaissance writers would have called a *figura*—an analogy that is part-metaphor, part-allegory.² Imagine the historian as a person who walks slowly and deliberately backward in a landscape. The historian faces the present while his or her shoulders are to the past. With each step he or she progresses from the relatively recent into a more distant past. Our hiker is unable to know in advance what surprises or evidence each backward step into the deeper past will bring. Yet each step affords a longer view of the increasingly greater terrain that has been covered.

One way to describe the historian's work is to say that he or she tries to discern causal patterns in a temporal landscape such as the one described. These patterns need not be linear, and they are likely to merge or diverge or disappear over time. Crucial to the effort of the historian is acknowledgment that while phenomena of the more distant past can cause events in the more recent past, the reverse is impossible. Indeed, if our historian stops and begins hiking forward in the direction of the present he or she will encounter (and be able to write down) the things of the past in the order in which they took place.³ Now, let's try to grasp two very different situations.

² On *figura* see Auerbach (1984) and, for a famous Renaissance example, see the discussion of David in chapter 13 of Machiavelli's *Prince* (Machiavelli 2005, 83): “I want also to recall to memory a figure of the Old Testament suited to this purpose.”

³ The image of the historian as a hiker walking backward is inspired in part by Walter Benjamin's description of Paul Klee's watercolor, “Angelus Novus,” in Benjamin's theses “On the Concept of History,” completed in late April or May of 1940, four months before his death. He writes:

This is how the angel of history must look. His face is turned toward the past. Where a chain of events appears before *us*, *he* sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise and has got caught in his wings.... This storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows toward the sky. What we call progress is *this* storm. (Benjamin 2003, 392, italics in the original.)

Note that in Benjamin's *figura* both the despairing angel (the historian, or history itself) and the “us” or “we” (people in general) who believe in “progress” are blown irresistibly into the *future* looking *backward in time*. Our historian, exhibiting a cautious empiricism suitable to his or her profession (but that Benjamin's angel would find dangerously innocent), walks backward into the *past* looking *forward in time*, with the ability at any moment to walk forward toward the present and future. On Benjamin's angel, see Werckmeister (1996), Lehman (2008) and Körner (2011).

First, let's say that our backward-stepping hiker believes that at a certain point he or she will come up against a fixed barrier beyond which there is no deeper past. This is a situation of relative security for the hiker who won't have to worry about falling from a cliff and also for the historian as an investigator of causes, since once the barrier is reached the possibility disappears that more remote but as yet unidentified causes still lurk behind the hiker's shoulders. This first situation, involving a belief in a point *ne plus ultra*, is analogous to that of the historian who believes that the world was created at a definite point in time.

Compare a second situation in which the same backward-stepping hiker comes to doubt the existence of a barrier to his or her backward progress. The temporal landscape not yet traversed possibly recedes into infinity. Now there is no secure knowledge concerning causal patterns. There could always be causes that arose in the deep past that resulted in the patterns now evident but that are unknown and unknowable. Human memory is exposed as feeble and short-lived. In the expanse of time possible causes of the phenomena already observed are infinite. Once the belief in the barrier is challenged, the attendant limits no longer exist and the situation is analogous to that of a historian who contemplates the possible eternity of the world.

It is interesting to ponder the sort of historical writing that would be appropriate to the loss of certainty concerning the beginnings of things. If the world is eternal and was not created at a known point in time, the historian confronts the likelihood that in the past there have been great failures of human memory. What is required is a more careful sifting of the data that survive. The historian will also need to draw a sharp line along time's axis between the historically knowable of the more recent past and the unknowable of the very distant past. The historian will usually work on the knowable side of the line. The most immediate consequence of eternalism is the realization that very little of the past survives in knowable form.

The portrayal of the historian as a person engaged in a search for causal patterns may raise hackles in some quarters. There are historians today, who, as a matter of method, condemn the search for causes as a procedure that is inevitably "teleological." It is indeed true that the writing of causal history can blur into teleology, whether because of the survival of Christian expectations, as Karl Löwith once argued (1949), or because teleological forms are embedded in the discursive practices of writers competing for the assent of readers within a combative discipline. But most historians would accept that there is a difference between teleology and etiology, and that the latter is the real business of history. Aristotle helped to codify the distinction in a way that Renaissance writers of narrative history seem to have understood. In his discussions of change, he separated teleological or "final" causes from "material," "formal," and, most importantly for the scientist and historian, "efficient" causes.⁴ One way of describing the conceptual revolution that took place in historical writing and a number of other fields during the Renaissance, is to say that serious attempts were made to distinguish "efficient" from "final" (or teleological) causes.⁵ This is the message of Machiavelli's (2006, 215) famous announcement, in chapter 15 of *The Prince*, that he aims "to follow the effectual truth of

⁴ Aristotle, *Physics* (194b17-195b30) and *Metaphysics* (983a24-993a27). (For classical authors particular editions and translations are given only where translations have been quoted.)

⁵ The contributions in Nadler (1993) suggest that the historical thought of the early Enlightenment should be studied with a view to causation.

the matter” (*verità effettuale della cosa*), where, to my knowledge, it has never been noted that the vernacular *effettuale* is an unexceptionable rendering of the Latin *efficiens*. Implicit in Machiavelli’s idea of “efficient truth” is its separation from a final cause. The possible dependence of Machiavelli’s *verità effettuale* on Aristotle’s *causa efficiens* is another indication that a flexible Aristotelian worldview shaped many of the innovations of the Renaissance.

Let us return to our description of the historian as a person walking backward into an unknown past, looking for causal patterns in the terrain already crossed. While eternalism encourages more careful study of what remains, it also requires that the historian *select a strategic point* at which to commence a causal narrative. Our imagined walker has to choose when to stop walking backward and to begin retracing the ground covered. The historian is free to choose any point at which to start, but the choice will be made with knowledge of the evidence already gathered. A changed outlook similar to the one suggested here may be observed in an often-noted difference between Giovanni Villani’s chronicle of Florence, written in the first half of the fourteenth century, and Leonardo Bruni’s *Histories of the Florentine People*, completed in 1442. Villani (1990-1991, 1: 3-6), in a manner typical of the creationist worldview of the Middle Ages, situates his account of Florence against a Biblical chronology that comprises Nimrod, Noah’s Flood and the Tower of Babel (Clarke 2007). Bruni’s (2001-2007, 1: 6) history, which is generally considered the first historical narrative in the Renaissance style, rejects the “popular but fantastic opinions” found in Villani, and starts with an account of the city’s founding that is supported by Bruni’s original reading of Cicero. In Bruni’s work the choice of a starting-point is very much the author’s, and the determinative factor is his understanding of the evidence.

Eternalism Ancient and Medieval

Through most of its history the idea of the eternity of the world was treated as a proposition that regarded matter and physics, rather than time and chronology. The proposition that the world is eternal has usually been linked to Aristotle and the Peripatetic school (Sorabji 1983, 193-318). Daniel Graham (Aristotle, 1999, 166), in his commentary on Book 8 of *Physics Book VIII*, concludes: “Aristotle has a deep-seated distrust of infinity. He will allow a line to be potentially divisible *ad infinitum*, but not actually to be so divided. He rejects an infinitely extended universe, an infinitely large body, and infinite space. He seems to reject infinite series of all kinds. But he allows and endorses infinite time.” Aristotle makes his position clear in *On the Heavens*, where the argument is structured as a rebuttal of Plato’s account of creation in the *Timaeus*. Since Aristotle treats similar issues in Book Eight of the *Physics*, in the Middle Ages it became a standard exercise for natural philosophers to attempt to square the two texts in a manner that was logically elegant. Thus Aristotle’s position on the eternity of the world was shown to coincide with his belief in the eternity of the circular motions of heaven, and with his belief that the prime mover is contemplative rather than active.⁷

⁷ See Aristotle, *On the Heavens* (1.10-12, 279b5-283b20), *Physics* (8.1-10, 250b11-267b25), and *Metaphysics* (12.7, 1072a23). Sedley (2007, 167-204), offers an elegant but not entirely persuasive

Although Averroës famously claimed that *all* of the ancient philosophers were eternalists, Peripatetic eternalism was by no means universally accepted, even though the doctrine commanded respect and generated intense interest in other philosophical schools. The Stoics argued that the world is continually being consumed in fire and reborn, and the Epicureans argued that the world, like all things, will perish. The strength of the Peripatetic argument for eternalism was underscored by the fact that middle neo-Platonists, like Taurus, and later neo-Platonists, such as Proclus, undertook inventive re-readings of the *Timaeus* that attempted to show that, appearances notwithstanding, Plato too was an eternalist. Responding to these neo-Platonist readings, the sixth-century philosopher John Philoponus reasserted creationism as Plato's genuine doctrine (Proclus 2001; Philoponus 2005).

The Judeo-Christian tradition also offered substantial and enduring resistance to eternalism. The attempt to fit the Biblical account of creation within the intellectual frameworks of ancient philosophy and historiography became a major focus of the writings of Philo of Alexandria, Origen, Eusebius, and St. Augustine, who directly attacked philosophical eternalism in the *City of God*, developing what would become the standard Christian arguments against the doctrine.⁸ Augustine was followed by Boethius and later by John Scotus Eriugena, and creationism remained a cardinal point of Christian doctrine, as indeed it still is (Dales 1990, 3-26).

In the high Middle Ages the notion of the eternity of the world became controversial once again. Modern historical scholarship, in work that began with Ernest Renan and continued through the writings of Fernand Van Steenberghen and Richard Dales, established how eternalist arguments were discussed by Averroës, Avicenna and Maimonides; how they were brought to new prominence in the Latin West with Peter Lombard's *Sentences*; how *creatio ex nihilo* was affirmed as a doctrine of the Church at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215; how eternalist teaching was revived at the University of Paris by Siger of Brabant, Boethius of Dacia and John of Jandun; how St. Thomas Aquinas became involved in the controversy; and how this teaching prompted two famous condemnations of eternalism and a number of other Aristotelian doctrines as heretical by Bishop Étienne Tempier of Paris in 1270 and 1277.⁹ All of these natural philosophers, in accordance with an emphasis established by Averroës, treated eternalism in arguments that were dependent on the impossibility of creating substance *ex nihilo*. Thus, in Peter Lombard's *Sentences*, eternalism appears only as a question concerning the impossibility of creating substance, and, following his lead, the preponderance of medieval discussions appeared in the context of commentaries on Aristotle's *Physics* that

revisionist approach to the traditional view of Aristotle as an anti-Platonist. For an indicative thirteenth-century treatment see Fioravanti (2004).

⁸ For the argument that Philo believed that creation took place in two stages, see Wolfson (1947, 1: 306-10), but compare Sterling (1992). For Origen and Eusebius, see Grafton and Williams (2006, 133-177). Augustine (1955, 323-326), Guitton (1955).

⁹ Renan (1882), Van Steenberghen (1938), Dales (1986, 1988 and 1990), Elders (1990, ch. 10), Bazán (2000). For the Fourth Lateran Council, see Tanner ed. (1990, 1: 230). Tempier's condemnations appear in Denifle and Chatelaine eds. (1889-1897, 1: 486-487 [n. 432, December 10, 1270] and 1: 543-558 [n. 473, March 7, 1277]). See also Aertsen, Emery and Speer eds. (2001).

were devoted only to the nature of matter, but not yet to questions of time (Colish 1994, 1:303-342).¹⁰

Orosius Against the “Eternalist” Historians

If medieval philosophers were not attuned to the temporal consequences of eternalism, neither were contemporary writers of history. When medieval historians were interested in questions of time and eternity, the eternity that counted lay only in the future, not the past (Morrison 1990, 196-244; Eire 2010). Thus, even as philosophers of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries attempted to reopen the question of eternalism, medieval historians like Otto of Freising adhered strictly to a creationist model developed seven centuries earlier by Augustine’s disciple Paulus Orosius of Braga (Morrison 2002).

In his *Seven Books of Histories against the Pagans* Orosius argued that even as the Roman Empire was crumbling the world had constantly improved since the advent of Christ. He included a curious and prominent condemnation of eternalism at the beginning of this work.¹¹ Here, Orosius writes that “nearly all men who have been given to writing, among the Greeks as among the Latins...wish it to be believed, in their blind opinion, that the origin of the world and the creation of mankind were without beginning” (2003, 1:10; 1964, 5). Although the work’s most recent editor argues that this opening passage is presumably a condemnation of the pagan historians Polybius and Posidonius who believed in cycles, there is in fact no mention of cycles here (Orosius 2003, 1: 9, n. 2). What Orosius states is that the pagan historians on whose works he relied were nearly all eternalists. Arnaldo Momigliano (1966) argued that concepts of time had little impact on the way history was written by the Greeks, but clearly Orosius thought otherwise.¹² For Orosius, Herodotus, Thucydides, Polybius, Sallust, Livy, Tacitus and other pagan historians that he used as sources were complicit in an eternalism that had allegedly spoiled their writing of history.

Orosius enjoyed an extraordinary success in the Middle Ages. His *Histories* stated that they were commissioned by Augustine in conjunction with the latter’s composition of the *City of God*. Orosius’ reputation was further enhanced by a surviving letter of recommendation written by Augustine to St. Jerome on his behalf. The letter was written when Orosius was still young and had not yet written the *Histories*, and it has been argued persuasively that Augustine was actually disappointed and found the *Histories* repellent, although medieval readers would not have known that. (Mommsen 1959a) Instead, they found a strong endorsement of the *Histories* (“Orosium virum eruditissimum collaudamus...”) in the *Decretum Gelasianum*, “On authorized and unacceptable books” (*De libris recipiendis et non recipiendis*). This document supposedly drawn up in 494 under Pope Gelasius I, was only in circulation from the

¹⁰ Bynum (2011) offers a wide-ranging discussion of concepts of matter in the later Middle Ages, but little concerning its relation to time.

¹¹ On Orosius see, above all, Mommsen (1959a), with further useful treatments in von Mörner (1844), Fainck (1951), Lacroix (1965), Corsini (1968), Fabbrini (1979), and Herzog (1980). Löwith (1949, 174-181), offers a brief account of what Orosius was trying to do.

¹² The argument is taken further in Möller and Luraghi (1995).

seventh century. In Latin Christendom it functioned like an early “Index” of canonical and heretical works.¹³ In subsequent centuries the *Seven Books of Histories Against the Pagans* became the most widely read non-Biblical historical text of the Middle Ages (von Den Brincken 1957, 80-85). According to a checklist published in 1961 there are two hundred forty-five surviving medieval manuscripts of the *Histories*, which even acquired a nickname, the “*Ormista*,” thought to be an abbreviation of the Latin title *Or(osii) m(undi) (h)ist(ori)a* (Bately and Ross 1961). As Theodor Mommsen wrote, “There is no doubt that the practicing historians of the Middle Ages were more apt to read *The Seven Books of Histories* than *The City of God*” (1959a, 348; Marrou 1970). Orosius’ reputation reached a highpoint in the early fourteenth century, when Dante placed him in the tenth canto of the *Paradiso*, where he is described as “smiling in a small circle of light,” among the learned doctors, “that defender of Christian times whose [writing in] Latin Augustine used” (10.118-20). Siger of Brabant, whose eternalism was condemned in 1277, appears in the same group of learned doctors in the *Paradiso*, for reasons related not to Orosius but to the presence of Aquinas (Toynbee 1902). Orosius also found a place in Boccaccio’s *Amorosa visione* (V. 65 [1974, 20]).

The Renaissance Critique of Orosius

One way of interpreting the new Renaissance approach to historical writing is to see it as a sustained attack on the prevailing creationist, providentialist history inspired by Orosius in the Middle Ages. “The revenge of the ancients,” one could call it. With Petrarch, as is so often the case, a change becomes apparent Orosius was an important source for Petrarch, particularly in the *De Viris Illustribus* and the *Rerum Memorandarum Libri*. A letter in which Petrarch gives his initial response to the Black Death refers dramatically to Orosius’ six ages of history: “Consider that I am bewailing not something inconsequential, but the 1348th year of the Sixth Age, which not only deprived us, but the entire world of nations, of our friends...” (*Familiars* VIII.7 [1975, 416 and 419]). Yet Petrarch also became the first in a long line of humanists to catalogue both the factual and programmatic failings of Orosius. Babylon was founded by Nimrod (following Augustine) not Semiramis (so Orosius), says Petrarch (Crevatin 2004, 149). Orosius’ criticism of republican Rome was a source of complaint to Petrarch, especially since Orosius denounced the cruelty of the Punic Wars, which Petrarch instead considered the heroic period of Roman history (Crevatin 2004, 148). In the *De Viris Illustribus*, Petrarch’s treatment of Adam as the progenitor of so many exemplars of human virtue stands in marked contrast with Orosius’ description of the “first sinner” as the author of the “miseries of mankind” (Fubini 2003, 98-99). What is so striking about the “Augustinianism” of Petrarch (and of subsequent Renaissance culture) is that it stripped

¹³ Published in Migne (1844-1864, 59: 161) and discussed in Mordek (1977-1999, 3: 624-625). The weak manuscript tradition of the *Historia Sacra* of Sulpicius Severus, which would be recovered in the sixteenth century and judged superior to Orosius’ history, is probably related to its not being listed in the *Decretum Gelasianum*.

from the African Father's works the accretions of nine centuries of Orosian interpretation.¹⁴

If one were to ask which of the ancient historians suffered the most with the revival of learning, the answer would most certainly be Orosius. Leonardo Bruni's *Histories of the Florentine People* (written between 1415 and 1442) challenged the Orosian thesis of a divine convergence with the birth of Christ under the rule of Augustus (Fubini 2003, 99-100, 114n7). Biondo Flavio attacked Orosius' argument that things had improved after the Empire became Christian. In his *Decades* (written between 1439 and 1453), Biondo stated that the fall of Rome was the greatest disaster that had ever happened to humanity; he distinguished himself from Orosius by choosing Alaric's Sack of Rome in 410 as his starting point, picking up where Orosius had ended (Cochrane 1981, 34-40; Fubini 1968, 544; Hay 1959). Where, in previous centuries, Orosius would have been the standard fare, the historians that the teacher Giovanni of Prato recommended to the young Piero de' Medici for a basic survey of ancient history were Justin, Diodorus Siculus, Herodotus, Livy and Caesar (Verde 1973-2010, 2:370-371). When Francesco Vettori sent from Rome, for Niccolò Machiavelli's approval, a list of Roman historians he was reading, Orosius was conspicuously missing.¹⁵ By the mid-sixteenth century it became common to openly criticize Orosius; writing good history meant taking Orosius as an example of what *not* to do. When Onofrio Panvinio composed an outline of the historians who had written on Rome he originally wrote that Orosius was "unworthy of the name of historian," although a later draft called him "a worthy of the Catholic church."¹⁶ Justus Lipsius declared that Orosius wrote "things disgraceful to legitimate history." Scaliger decided Orosius knew no Greek, and Isaac Casaubon bewailed the man's "astonishing ignorance of Roman affairs, with which even Baronius concurs."¹⁷

It is interesting to consider the decline in Orosius' fortunes in the light of his condemnation of the pagan ancients as eternalists. As we have seen, Orosius' salvo was most likely prompted by the failure of the pagan historians to tell the story found in Genesis. For intellectuals of the early Renaissance, however, when Orosius began to slip, eternalism was a lively, contemporary issue. No one today scratches his head, wondering what was "eternalist" about Livy or Sallust or Herodotus or Thucydides. But the Renaissance reader of Orosius is likely to have wondered what the passage intended, and if by writing history in the fashion of Livy, he was in some way a heretical eternalist.

Italian Averroism

In the fourteenth century Averroist eternalism became surprisingly popular south of the Alps. In the wake of the thirteenth-century Parisian condemnations the teaching of Aristotelian natural philosophy migrated from France to northern Italy, where it

¹⁴ In general on Augustinianism, but without a discussion of Orosius, see Bouwsma (1990, esp. 44).

¹⁵ Vettori to Machiavelli, November 23, 1513, in Machiavelli (1984, 421).

¹⁶ Ferrary (1996, 46 n. 32): "indignus historice nomine," but "de catholica ecclesia meritis," as noted also in Fubini (2003, 87).

¹⁷ Lipsius (1585: 218), "legitimae historiae ... dehonestamenta." See also the criticism on 263. For Scaliger, see Robinson (1918, 161). Casaubon (1614, 93): "Taceo rerum romanarum ignorationem aliquando mirificam: etiam Baronio teste non semel."

flourished for three centuries under the broad (and not always accurate) label of “Averroism,” particularly in the universities of Bologna and Padua (Nardi 1945; Maier 1966; 251-278; Kristeller 1990). As Kristeller noted, a contributing factor to this migration was that Italian universities were not under the same kind of ecclesiastical control as in Paris (1956-1996, 1: 575-576). Monfasani (1993) argues that in the Italian universities the absence of Ockhamists, who were numerous in northern European universities, enhanced the appeal and prestige of the Averroists. Within the Italian universities the Aristotelian-Averroist philosophers lectured and wrote under professional norms that afforded great leeway when it came to a doctrine such as eternalism. Teaching of this kind was permitted so long as the professor made clear to his students that he was discussing a specialized problem inherent to Aristotelian natural philosophy, and so long as the professor affirmed that his teaching had no wider implications with respect to Church doctrine. It was perhaps inevitable that the continued teaching of ideas known to be heretical should have generated excitement and had wider influence among the elites educated at these universities (Grendler 2002, 284ff).

Evidence of Averroist influence in Padua is provided by Petrarch’s famous invectives *On His Own Ignorance and that of Many Others* and *Against a Physician*. In the second of these Petrarch wrote of his adversary, “If you could, you would dare to challenge Christ, to whom you privately prefer Averroës” (2008, 29; see also 67-69, *et passim*).¹⁸ The charge was probably exaggerated, but it demonstrates the extent to which Averroist teaching had taken hold at Padua. And the phenomenon was not limited to Padua and Bologna, it spread throughout northern Italy. In Florence in the early 1400s Rinaldo degli Albizzi, the son of the city’s *de facto* political leader who would soon succeed his father, engaged in a disputation with Maestro Giovanni Baldi de’ Tambeni, a professor in the Florentine Studio, on the question of “Whether the science of the pagans is contrary to the catholic, Christian faith?” The debate covered the standard Averroistic propositions of the eternity of the world, the unity of the intellect, and the mortality of the soul, and it shows the extent to which these ideas had penetrated Florence’s mercantile ruling class.¹⁹ In the very years in which Florence’s mercantile ruling class began to provide for the instruction of its youth in humanist Latin and in Greek, and in the years in which the *all’antica* style became fashionable in the plastic arts, there was also great interest in Averroistic and Aristotelian natural philosophy.

There also appears to have been a change in the nature of eternalist discussions. Rather than focusing on the impossibility of creating matter from nothing, they now directly addressed the problem of how, in an eternal world, human history might have lost track of the distant past. The logical answer lay in the potential of cataclysms, particularly floods (like Noah’s) or plagues, to eliminate most of the human race. The Black Death and its subsequent visitations will have lent substance to this reasoning. (Watkins 1972; Cohn 1992)

One of the renowned professors of natural philosophy during the early Renaissance was Biagio Pelacani of Parma, who taught at Pavia, Bologna and Padua, and who died in 1416. He remained a well-known figure in Quattrocento humanist circles, since Vittorino

¹⁸ See also Petrarch’s *Senile V.2*, in Petrarca (1998, 83).

¹⁹ The text is published in part in Guasti ed. (1867-1873, 3: 601-618). Giovanni Baldi is mentioned in Davies (1998, 27 n. 133, 31 n. 144, 33n. 160, 34 n. 166, and 157). On Rinaldo degli Albizzi’s ties to Florence’s chancellor-historian, Leonardo Bruni, see Field (1998, 1112).

da Feltre and his pupils kept alive a story to the effect that Biagio refused the young Vittorino as a pupil on account of his inability to pay tuition (Thorndike 1923-1958, 4:70-71). There are records of Pelacani visiting Florence in the 1390s, and his reputation survived there well into the first half of the Quattrocento through his former student Giovanni Gherardi of Prato's *Paradiso degli Alberti*, which was set in Florence and written between 1425-1426 (Lanza 1975, lii). Alessandro Parronchi (1964, 296-312) noted Pelacani's presence in Florence and proposed, based on a study of his writings on optics, that Pelacani was a primary influence, via Paolo Toscanelli, on the Florentine artists who discovered linear perspective.

Like a great many natural philosophers, Pelacani taught the eternity of the world. In 1396 he was examined by the Bishop's Court in Pavia on the charge that his lectures on eternalism were contrary to Church doctrine. According to this record Pelacani treated eternalism not simply as a question of the conservation of matter—the approach prevalent in the Middle Ages—but rather as a doctrine with implications for historical knowledge and Biblical truth. Among the points raised during the Pavia interrogation was the charge that Pelacani declared the story of Noah bringing the wild beasts on the Ark to be an “old wives’ tale,” since “No man would dance with a lion, just as no lamb would dance with a wolf” (Maier 1966, 279-299). If the charge was true, and there is no reason to think it was not, there were deeper implications. According to the Biblical version of events, Noah and his family were the only humans capable of transmitting the early events of Genesis. If the story of the Flood was a fable (*parabola*), might not the account of Creation be an “old wives’ tale,” too? Pelacani recanted in the presence of the Bishop, he was restored to his university position, and his career seems not to have suffered (Maiocchi 1905-1915, 1:334).

Encountering in this Florentine context a personage on the order of Biagio Pelacani—an Averroist eternalist and optical theorist—the historian should perhaps feel obliged once again to nod in the direction of Panofsky's suggestion concerning a connection between linear perspective and critical historical thought. Already Lew Andrews (1995) has added notably to our understanding of possible connections between linear perspective and historical narration by showing how Ghiberti used linear perspective to enhance the portrayal of events that took place over time, including historical scenes, fictional tales and biblical episodes. Did the idea that the world is possibly eternal offer a way of thinking about the past that was akin to the “cognitive distance” that Panofsky believed necessary for the adoption of linear perspective?²⁰ According to Panofsky (1997, 65), linear perspective “entailed abandoning the idea of a cosmos with the middle of the earth as its absolute center and the outermost celestial sphere as its absolute limit; the result was the concept of an infinity, an infinity not only prefigured in God, but indeed actually embodied in empirical reality.” Linear perspective...infinity. Historical criticism...eternity?

Evidence that might “prove” a role for philosophical eternalism in the Renaissance revolution in historical thought is not likely to be found. Eternalism was a heretical doctrine to be treated with caution, particularly when it conflicted with Biblical history.

²⁰ On “cognitive distance,” see now Ginzburg (2001, 139-156) and Nagel and Wood (2010, 45-50), whose “anachronic Renaissance” existed contemporaneously with Panofsky's historico-critical one (both in conflict with it and symbiotically). Their work advances an idea broached in Grafton (1990, 1991 and 2011).

Natural philosophy and history were conceived as distinct disciplines—if history may yet be called a “discipline” in the early fifteenth century. A full account of the fortunes of eternalism among the Renaissance philosophers remains to be written.²¹ Epicurean and Stoic understandings of time were also quite different from the Christian one, and they became better known as a result of the recovery of Diogenes Laertius and Lucretius (Brown 2010; Greenblatt 2011). Yet neither held the status of Aristotelian eternalism, which was less easy to reconcile with Christian doctrine, and hence more radical. Eternalism’s currency made it easier for writers to advance Christian-Epicurean and Christian-Stoic (along with Christian-Platonist) alternatives. The question of the world’s creation became central to the thought of humanist philosophers Gemistus Pletho, George of Trebizond, Cardinal Bessarion, Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola. Beneath their brightly colored disquisitions one can sometimes detect troubled humanist anxieties over what the ancients really thought (Allen 2007). After all, Averroës, like Orosius who commented on the pagan historians, had believed that *all* of the ancient philosophers were eternalists. Where the modern reader of Ficino might expect a straightforward creationist reading of Plato, matters were complicated by writers such as Proclus (2001) who argued for an eternalist Plato (Hankins 2003-2004, 2:37-38, 93-142). Pliny the Elder, whose *Natural History* became the subject of intense scrutiny in the second half of the fifteenth century, included a strong assertion of eternalism in his work’s opening pages.²² Philo of Alexandria was most certainly a creationist, but the work that occupies the place of honor in the monumental fifteenth-century collection of his writings for Federico da Montefeltro—the first essay in the first volume—was actually an anti-creationist essay of suspicious authorship titled “On the Eternity of the World.”²³ In sum, a great deal has been written about the creationism(s) of Renaissance Platonists, yet on Renaissance eternalism both in the fifteenth century, where it has gone largely unstudied, and in the sixteenth, where there has been an emphasis on unorthodox, syncretic figures like Giordano Bruno, there is much work to be done.²⁴ But what about eternalism’s impact on historical thought, as opposed to its philosophical role?

The Greek Historians and Eternalism

The great figure in the development of a new kind of history at Florence in the early fifteenth century was Leonardo Bruni. Although Bruni’s writings have very little to say about natural philosophy, after an initial attraction to Plato, he became the fifteenth

²¹ Sasso (1987) is only a beginning and follows a narrow agenda.

²² Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, 2.1. On the modalities of the text’s diffusion, see Nauert (1980), Davies (1995), Monfasani (1998), Doody (2010). On what readers might have found in it in addition to a work of reference, Renaudet (1998, 133) writes, “Le second livre, consacré à la religion, prenait aisément le caractère d’un manuel de négation antichrétienne. Le Dieu de Plin se confond avec le monde qui n’a jamais eu de commencement et n’aura jamais le fin; avec la nature éternelle.”

²³ For Lillio Tifernate’s edition (Vat. lat. 180-185), see Jaitner-Hahner (1993, 1: 365).

²⁴ On eternalism and heterodox thought, see the numerous indications in Davidson (1992). On Bruno, who argued in the *Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast* that the world is “infinitely old,” see Rowland (2008, 165), and Blum (1999). On the related concept of infinity see Zellini (2004, 77-88), and Schettino (2002) on Bruno’s concept of “minima.”

century's greatest translator of Aristotle. As he stated in his *Life of Aristotle*, it was one of the great attractions of Aristotle's philosophy that all of its parts—moral philosophy, natural philosophy, rhetoric and logic—were internally consistent. Bruni was certainly familiar with the controversial idea that the world might be eternal and uncreated, but there is no indication that he was an eternalist. In a letter to John XXIII from Bruni's early Platonist period he praised the Athenian for advancing doctrines including "the creation of the world by the one true God," that were "conformable with our faith" (Hankins, 1994, 54).

It is interesting to note that, unlike the Roman historians known to the medieval West, Bruni was the first Westerner in many centuries to avidly read the Greek historians. His work encouraged others to read the Greeks, and gave the impression of contemplating the past in ways that were compatible with eternalism, particularly when set against accepted Christian chronology. Roman historians like Justin who treated the earliest times began their histories with Ninus, the son of Belus, the first king of Assyria. Since Ninus was equated with the Biblical Nimrod, this meant that the events described by the historians who wrote in Latin began well after the date for the Creation of 5200 B.C. that had been established by Eusebius and Jerome. In short, the events described by the Roman historians could be comprised within a Christian chronology of longer duration. But the Greek historians whose works arrived in Florence after 1397 with the teaching of Emmanuel Chrysoloras offered reasons for wondering if the world wasn't really much older.

While Roman historians like Sallust and Livy were focused more narrowly on the theme of decline from past virtue or greatness, Greek writers like Herodotus and Thucydides perceived no physical limits to the world of the distant past, and they seemed to anticipate a potentially endless future. Thucydides, of whom Bruni wrote, "I can never read enough of him" (Klee 1990, 58), began his history with a statement to the effect that he found it "impossible, because of its remoteness in time, to acquire a really precise knowledge of the distant past or even of the history preceding our own period" (1954, 1.1, see also 1.21-22). Concerning the origins of the Egyptian religion, Herodotus wrote, "I am not anxious to repeat what I was told,...for I do not think that any one nation knows much more about such things than any other; whatever I shall mention on the subject will be due simply to the exigencies of my story" (2003, 2.3). Looking toward the future, Herodotus stated that he wrote his history "so that human achievements may not become forgotten in time" (2003, 1.1). Thucydides famously hoped that his work would become a *ktēma eis aiei*, "a treasure for eternity" (1.22).

In his description of Egypt, Herodotus offered an account of the past that as much as quadrupled the time comprised by traditional Biblical chronology. The most recent 10,000 years of the Herodotean chronology were supported not only with human records that had been kept continuously but also with geological evidence, since he described the silting of the Nile delta as occurring during a "vast stretch of time before I was born" that encompassed 10,000 or 20,000 years.²⁵

While Polybius' cyclical account of human institutions, often construed as eternalist, was not available in Italy in the early fifteenth century, its later recovery would provide

²⁵ Herodotus, 2.11 (2003). On Herodotus' chronology and his natural history see Vannicelli (2001), Thomas (2001, esp. 207-209), and Sergueenkova (2009, esp. 109-112). On Herodotus' reception in the early 1400s, see Fryde (1983, 26-27).

additional eternalist ammunition.²⁶ Bruni greatly appreciated Books 1-5 of Polybius, which he rewrote into Latin, emphasizing Polybius' praise of pragmatic history in Book 1 (1.2.8) and his attack on those historians writing about Hannibal who had tried to include gods and the sons of gods in their histories (3.47.8).²⁷

Diodorus Siculus was the most interesting of the Greek eternalist historians, yet his chronology presented immediate difficulties. His account stretched more than 20,000 years into the past, and his *Library of History* included a discussion of eternalism in its opening pages (Ambaglio 2008). Diodorus' history is documented as one of the very first Greek texts to be read and studied in Florence, and possibly the first Greek historical narrative to be read there. By mid-century the early books of Diodorus' history had acquired the reputation of "fabulous," as they were called by their translator, Poggio Bracciolini, who completed his work in 1449 with assistance from George of Trebizond.²⁸ In 1405 or 1406 Leonardo Bruni's older friend, Coluccio Salutati, the chancellor of Florence, included in the fourth book of his *Labors of Hercules* a long passage concerning Egypt from the end of the first book of Diodorus that he says Bruni translated for him. At this early moment, when only a few humanists were able to read Greek, and when perhaps Bruni himself had not read beyond Diodorus' first book, Salutati refers to Diodorus as "an historian of the greatest authority."²⁹

The passage in Book One of Diodorus' history (1.6.3-8.9) that discusses the possible eternity of the world appears earlier than the passage translated by Bruni for Salutati, and it must have attracted much notice. In late antiquity the same Diodoran passage on eternalism had been excerpted by Eusebius in the *Praeparatio Evangelica*, and the passage circulated in Latin not only in Poggio's translation of Diodorus but also in George of Trebizond's translation of Eusebius' work, which was done at the same time.³⁰

To paraphrase Diodorus (1.6.3), there are two views concerning the earliest periods of time. The first view holds that the universe is eternal and ungenerated, and that mankind, too, has existed from eternity. The second holds that the universe was created at a definite time, and thanks to necessity's guiding hand, the races of men, who were created separately in different places, evolved from an original bestial existence into the fine creatures they have now become.³¹ It is a virtue of Diodorus' method, also evident in his treatment of political affairs and battles, that he prefers to leave it to his readers to decide among differing accounts. He offers no direct criticism of the eternalist view, and although he seems to prefer a creationist account, he presents the creation of the world as simply "the account which we have received" (1933, 29: 1.8.1).

²⁶ Momigliano (1966) argued that Polybius' commitment to a cyclical view of history was over-rated, but compare Trompf (1979).

²⁷ On Bruni's use of Polybius, see Botley (2004, 23-40), Ianziti (1998, 377-380).

²⁸ "Diodorum iam absolvi magno quidem cum labore, eos, scilicet libros, quos fabulosos appellavit." (Bracciolini 1984-1987, 3: 104). See also Monfasani (1976).

²⁹ "Maxime autoritatis historicum" (Salutati 1951, 4.19 [vol. 2, 569]).

³⁰ As quoted in Eusebius, *Praeparatio evangelica*, 1.7.1-14 (1974, 145-151). Since George began his version of the *Praeparatio* in 1448 (Monfasani 1976, 72) and Poggio completed his translation in 1449, the overlapping passage may have provided an initial basis for George's assistance with Poggio's work. Davidson (1992, 61) suggested the importance of the Diodoran passage for sixteenth-century heterodoxy.

³¹ According to Ginzburg (1980, 153), this second view would reappear long after in the testimony of Menocchio the miller.

In Diodorus' universal history the sharp-witted humanist reader would have found much to ponder. He would have noticed that the account of creation of the universe can be reconciled with the first verses of Genesis without too much difficulty, much in the manner of Ovid's passage on creation in Book 1 of the *Metamorphoses* (Viarre 1966, 81-110). Reading on, in the section on Egypt, he would find Diodorus claiming that Moses, in order to command the obedience of his people, invented by himself the laws that were allegedly given to him by God.³² Did Moses invent other matter in the Pentateuch? Diodorus doesn't say so, but the thought must have occurred to his Renaissance readers. In a brief, entertaining series of readings in Diodorus the reader confronted the possibility that the world is eternal, a number of vastly different accounts and chronologies of the beginnings of the different civilizations and the suggestion that the earliest accounts of human history, including Biblical narrative, were contrived to serve human interests. Indeed Diodorus leaves open the possibility that all of accounts of early human history may possibly be a mass of fictions. As he writes with pleasant irony, "[I]t seems evident that the writers of history are, as a class, a quite recent appearance in the life of mankind" (1933, 33: 1.9.2).

One Renaissance writer who associated Diodorus with contemporary controversies over the eternity of the world was Niccolò Machiavelli. In Book 2, Chapter 5 of the *Discourses*, presenting the thesis "That variations in religion and language, together with the accidents of flood and plague, destroy the memory of things," the former Florentine secretary argues that our lack of knowledge concerning the very distant past, need not mean that the world was created according to the Biblical account.

To those philosophers, who would have it that the world is eternal, I believe that one could reply that if so much antiquity were true it would be reasonable that there be memory of more than five thousand years—if it were not seen how the memories of times are eliminated by diverse causes, of which part come from men, part from heaven. (2001, 339-340)

Reflecting on the near-total oblivion into which the Etruscans had fallen—a proud civilized people, who once controlled most of Italy, but whose history and language were lost, Machiavelli embarked on the most extended philosophical statement to be found anywhere in his works. It concerns time and human memory.

And because these [i.e., religions] vary two or three times in five or in six thousand years, the memory of the things done prior to that time is lost; and if, however, some sign of them remains, it is considered as something fabulous and is not lent faith to—as happened to the history of Diodorus Siculus, which, though it renders an account of forty or fifty thousand

³² Diodorus Siculus, 1.94.2 (1933, 321). Machiavelli's ironic comment on Moses at *Prince*, ch. 6 (2005, 55) deserves to be read in the light of this passage, as does the passage on Numa in *Discourses* 1.11 (Machiavelli 2001, 1: 78-79).

years, is nonetheless reputed, as I believe it to be, a mendacious thing. As to the causes that come from heaven, they ... [come] about either through plague or through famine or through an inundation of waters. The most important is the last, both because it is more universal and because those who are saved are all mountain men and coarse, who, since they do not have knowledge of antiquity, cannot leave it to posterity. And if among them someone is saved who has knowledge of it, to make a reputation and a name for himself he conceals it and perverts it in his own way so that only what he has wished to write down remains for his successors, and nothing else. That these inundations, plagues and famines come about I do not believe is to be doubted, because all the histories are full of them, because this effect of the oblivion of things is seen, and because it seems reasonable that it should be so.... Tuscany was then, as was said above, once powerful, full of religion and of virtue, and had its customs and ancestral language, all of which were eliminated by Roman power. So, as was said, the memory of its name is all that remains. (2001, 340-345; emphasis added)

For Machiavelli, the fact that from time to time human memory has been almost entirely erased becomes evidence that the eternity of the world is possible. Although he is quick to condemn as “mendacious” the ancient history that Diodorus presents, it is worth noting that Machiavelli exaggerates the age of the oldest events in Diodorus, which date at most to 20,000 or 25,000 years before Machiavelli’s time. What mattered to Machiavelli was not the specific computation so much as the fact that Diodorus’ account of ancient history was known as the one that extended the farthest back in time, long before the Christian creation, and that it might therefore be used as evidence of the world’s eternity.

Also of interest is Machiavelli’s mention of floods and of the possible survival of a learned man among mountaineers. Although he draws on a passage in Plato’s *Laws* (676b-678a), Machiavelli is also making a comment on the story of Noah. The implication is that the material in Genesis from the Creation to the Deluge is possibly a fiction devised by Noah himself. Indeed we are not far removed from the opinion expressed by that eternalist university professor, Biagio Pelacani, little more than a century earlier—namely the idea that the story of Noah was an “old wives’ tale.” Machiavelli was not a programmatic eternalist—although he has been read that way (Sasso 1987).² Elsewhere he can be seen as something of a creationist, at least of a Lucretian or Epicurean kind, when, for instance, at the beginning of the *Discourses* he writes how “at the beginning of the world” the few first men lived “dispersed in the manner of beasts” (1.2 [2001, 79]). But the fact that he takes quite seriously the idea of the world’s eternity, and that he uses it in *Discourses* 2.5 as a weapon against a providential worldview, offers a valuable indication of the role played by eternalism in contemporary intellectual discourse.³⁴

The ideas, persons and circumstances that contributed to a changed attitude toward the past during the Italian Renaissance—including its anachronic (and sometimes anarchic) tendencies--will always remain of interest. What has been suggested here is that

³³ Rahe (2008) studies the points at which Machiavelli may have been influenced by Averroism.

the freeing of historical narrative from medieval providentialism was assisted by the presence of ideas both ancient and current concerning the eternity of the world. This is not to say that the humanists were themselves eternalists. But the idea that the world is eternal was of assistance in the first of what would become a long series of attempts by European intellectuals to loosen the “grip of sacred history” (Smail 2008, 12-39) that is in some ways still with us. It used to be argued that a political crisis precipitated the Renaissance revolution in historical thought. Maybe it was a question of vantage points, of finding a broader perspective on the past.

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