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In Four Volumes

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Mishpach having caught fire by a flash of lightning, in a few days reduced the whole town to ashes. *Mishpach* resolved to rebuild the place, whatever it should cost him; and having already destroyed all the timber of the country, he was forced to have recourse to *Shalum*, whose forests were now two hundred years old. He purchased these woods with so many herds of cattle and flocks of sheep, and with such a vast extent of fields and pastures, that *Shalum* was now grown more wealthy than *Mishpach*; and therefore appeared so charming in the eyes of *Zilpah's* daughter, that she no longer refused him in marriage. On the day in which he brought her up into the mountains, he raised a most prodigious pile of Cedar, and of every sweet smelling wood, which reached above 300 cubits in height: he also cast into the pile bundles of myrrh and sheaves of spikenard, enriching it with every spicy shrub, and making it fat with the gums of his plantations. This was the burnt-offering which *Shalum* offered in the day of his espousals: the smoke of it ascended up to Heaven, and filled the whole country with incense and perfume.

N^o 590. *Monday, September 6.*

----- *Affiduo labuntur tempora motu*

*Non secus ac flumen. Neque enim consistere flumen,
Nec levis hora potest: sed ut unda impellitur unda,
Urgeturque prior venienti, urgetque priorem,
Tempora sic fugiunt pariter, pariterque sequuntur;
Et nova sunt semper. Nam quod fuit ante, relictum est;
Fitque quod haud fuerat: momentaque cuncta novantur.*

Ov. Met.

WE consider infinite space as an expansion without a circumference: we consider eternity, or infinite duration, as a line that has neither a beginning nor an end. In our Speculations of infinite space, we consider that particular place in which we exist, as a kind of

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center to the whole expansion. In our Speculations of eternity, we consider the time which is present to us as the middle, which divides the whole line into two equal parts. For this reason, many witty Authors compare the present time to an Isthmus or narrow neck of land, that rises in the midst of an ocean, immeasurably diffused on either side of it.

Philosophy, and indeed common sense, naturally throws eternity under two divisions; which we may call in *English*, that eternity which is past, and that eternity which is to come. The learned terms of, *Æternitas a parte ante*, and *Æternitas a parte post*, may be more amusing to the Reader, but can have no other idea affixed to them than what is conveyed to us by those words, an eternity that is past, and an eternity that is to come. Each of these eternities is bounded at the one extrem; or, in other words, the former has an end, and the latter a beginning.

Let us first of all consider that eternity which is past, reserving that which is to come for the subject of another paper. The nature of this eternity is utterly inconceivable by the mind of man: our reason demonstrates to us that it *has been*, but at the same time can frame no idea of it, but what is big with absurdity and contradiction. We can have no other conception of any duration which is past, than that all of it was once present; and whatever was once present, is at some certain distance from us; and whatever is at any certain distance from us, be the distance never so remote, cannot be eternity. The very notion of any duration's being past, implies that it was once present; for the idea of being once present, is actually included in the idea of its being past. This therefore is a depth not to be sounded by human understanding. We are sure that there has been an eternity, and yet contradict our selves when we measure this eternity by any notion which we can frame of it.

If we go to the bottom of this matter, we shall find, that the difficulties we meet with in our conceptions of Eternity proceed from this single reason, That we can have no other idea of any kind of duration, than that by which we our selves, and all other created Beings, do exist; which is, a successive duration, made up of past, present, and to come. There is nothing which exists after this manner, all the parts of whose existence were not once actually present, and consequently may be reached by a certain number of years applied to it. We may ascend as high as we please, and employ our Being to that eternity which is to come, in adding millions of years to millions of years, and we can never come up to any fountain-head of duration, to any beginning in eternity: but

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at the same time we are sure, that whatever was once present does lie within the reach of numbers, though perhaps we can never be able to put enough of them together for that purpose. We may as well say, that any thing may be actually present in any part of infinite space, which does not lye at a certain distance from us, as that any part of infinite duration was once actually present, and does not also lye at some determined distance from us. The distance in both cases may be immeasurable and indefinite as to our faculties, but our reason tells us that it cannot be so in it self. Here therefore is that difficulty which human understanding is not capable of surmounting. We are sure that something must have existed from eternity, and are at the same time unable to conceive, that any thing which exists, according to our notion of existence, can have existed from eternity.

It is hard for a Reader, who has not rolled this thought in his own mind, to follow in such an abstracted speculation; but I have been the longer on it, because I think it is a demonstrative argument of the Being and Eternity of a God: and though there are many other demonstrations which lead us to this great truth, I do not think we ought to lay aside any proofs in this matter which the light of reason has suggested to us, especially when it is such a one as has been urged by men famous for their penetration and force of understanding, and which appears altogether conclusive to those who will be at the pains to examine it.

Having thus considered that Eternity which is past, according to the best idea we can frame of it, I shall now draw up those several articles on this subject which are dictated to us by the light of reason, and which may be looked upon as the Creed of a Philosopher in this great point.

First, It is certain that no Being could have made it self; for if so, it must have acted before it was, which is a contradiction.

Secondly, That therefore some Being must have existed from all Eternity.

Thirdly, That whatever exists after the manner of created Beings, or according to any notions which we have of existence, could not have existed from Eternity.

Fourthly, That this eternal Being must therefore be the great Author of nature, *the Ancient of days*, who, being at infinite distance in his perfections from all finite and created Beings, exists in a quite different manner from them, and in a manner of which they can have no idea.

I know that several of the school-men, who would not be thought ignorant of any thing, have pretended to explain the manner of God's
P 2 existence,

existence, by telling us, That he comprehends infinite duration in every moment; that Eternity is with him a *punctum stans*, a fixed point; or, which is as good sense, an *Infinite Instant*: that nothing with reference to his existence is either past or to come: To which the ingenious Mr. Cowley alludes in his description of heaven,

*Nothing is there to come, and nothing past,
But an eternal NOW does always last.*

For my own part, I look upon these propositions as words that have no ideas annexed to them; and think men had better own their ignorance, than advance doctrines by which they mean nothing, and which indeed are self-contradictory. We cannot be too modest in our disquisitions, when we meditate on him who is environed with so much glory and perfection, who is the source of Being, the fountain of all that existence which we and his whole creation derive from him. Let us therefore with the utmost humility acknowledge, that as some Being must necessarily have existed from eternity, so this Being does exist after an incomprehensible manner, since it is impossible for a Being to have existed from eternity after our manner or notions of existence. Revelation confirms these natural dictates of reason in the accounts which it gives us of the divine existence, where it tells us, that he is the same yesterday, to day, and for ever; that he is the *Alpha* and *Omega*, the Beginning and the Ending; that a thousand years are with him as one day, and one day as a thousand years; by which, and the like expressions, we are taught, that his existence, with relation to time or duration, is infinitely different from the existence of any of his creatures, and consequently that it is impossible for us to frame any adequate conceptions of it.

In the first revelation that he makes of his own Being, he intitles himself, *I am that I am*; and when *Moses* desires to know what name he shall give him in his embassy to *Pharaoh*, he bids him say that, *I am* hath sent you. Our great Creator, by this revelation of himself, does in a manner exclude every thing else from a real existence, and distinguishes himself from his creatures, as the only Being which truly and really exists. The ancient Platonic notion, which was drawn from speculations of eternity, wonderfully agrees with this revelation which God has made of himself. There is nothing, say they, which in reality exists, whose existence, as we call it, is pieced up of past, present, and to come. Such a flitting and successive existence is rather a shadow of existence, and something which is like it, than existence it self. He only properly exists

ists whose existence is intirely present ; that is, in other words, who exists in the most perfect manner, and in such a manner as we have no idea of.

I shall conclude this Speculation with one useful inference. How can we sufficiently prostrate our selves and fall down before our Maker, when we consider that ineffable Goodness and Wisdom which contrived this existence for finite natures ? What must be the overflowings of that good-will, which prompted our Creator to adapt existence to Beings, in whom it is not necessary ? especially when we consider, that he himself was before in the compleat possession of existence and of happiness, and in the full enjoyment of eternity. What man can think of himself as called out and separated from nothing, of his being made a conscious, a reasonable and a happy creature, in short, of being taken in as a sharer of existence and a kind of partner in eternity, without being swallowed up in Wonder, in Praise, in Adoration ! It is indeed a thought too big for the mind of man, and rather to be entertained in the secrecy of devotion and in the silence of the soul, than to be expressed by words. The Supreme Being has not given us powers or faculties sufficient to extol and magnifie such unutterable goodness.

It is however some comfort to us, that we shall be always doing what we shall be never able to do, and that a work which cannot be finished, will however be the work of an eternity.

N^o 592. *Friday, September 10.*

-----*Studium sine divite vena.*

Hor.

I Look upon the Play-house as a world within it self. They have lately furnished the middle region of it with a new sett of meteors, in order to give the Sublime to many modern Tragedies. I was there last winter at the first rehearsal of the new thunder, which is much more deep and sonorous than any hitherto made use of. They have a *Salmons* behind the scenes, who plays it off with great success. Their lightnings are made to flash more briskly than heretofore ; their clouds are

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