



Homicida ab initio. Albert the Great on Time and Eternity of Evil



ANDREA COLLI

Università di Bologna, Italia

ORCID: 0000-0003-1582-737X

Recibido: 21 de febrero de 2025

Aceptado: 24 de junio de 2025

Abstract

The present paper aims to explore how Albert the Great conceptualizes the relationship between evil and time. The starting point is a controversial quotation from the Gospel of John 8:44: “He was a murderer from the beginning” (*Ille homicida erat ab initio*), which Albert examines by looking at the idea of *initium* according to three distinct meanings of the term “time”. This interpretation allows him to shed light on the close dependence between the exercise of free will and temporal extension. The second part of the study interrogates the concept of the end of time, in close relation to expressions such as “eternal life” and “eternal punishment”. A careful analysis of the various uses of the adjective “eternal” reveals the existence of two distinct functions of time: time as a medium for redemption and time as a conduit to endless death.

Keywords: Albert the Great, Eschatology, Eternity, Evil, Time, Begin

Homicida ab initio. Alberto Magno sobre el tiempo y la eternidad del mal

Resumen

El presente artículo tiene como objetivo explorar cómo Alberto Magno conceptualiza la relación entre el mal y el tiempo. El punto de partida es una controvertida cita del

Homicida ab initio. Albert the Great on Time and Eternity of Evil
Andrea Colli

Evangelio de Juan 8:44: “Fue un asesino desde el principio” (*Ille homicida erat ab initio*), que Alberto examina analizando la idea de *initium* según tres significados distintos del término “tiempo”. Esta interpretación le permite arrojar luz sobre la estrecha dependencia entre el ejercicio del libre albedrío y la extensión temporal. La segunda parte del estudio interroga el concepto del final de los tiempos, en estrecha relación con expresiones como “vida eterna” y “castigo eterno”. Un cuidadoso análisis de los diversos usos del adjetivo “eterno” revela la existencia de dos funciones distintas del tiempo: el tiempo como medio de redención y el tiempo como vía hacia una muerte sin fin.

Palabras clave: Alberto Magno, Escatología, Eternidad, Mal, Tiempo, Comienzo

1. Introduction

Albert the Great addresses the problem of evil mainly for a historical reason. When he began his theological studies in Paris, the Order of Preachers was still engaged in opposing Cathar doctrine (cf. Sennis, 2016; Rainini, 2017). The idea that the universe can only be described by assuming the existence of two primitive principles, good and evil, is a cornerstone of this New Manicheism. It was not only a matter of justifying evil facts or events, whose origin does not seem to be ascribable to a good principle, but rather of explaining the particular metaphysical status of creatures: as intrinsically mutable and transient, they do not seem to be the product of a supreme being, who is perfect and immutable. According to this worldview, there would thus be two opposites at the origin of the universe. Their interaction underlies reality with all its changeable aspects. Albert the Great is particularly interested in this side of the problem: throughout his life, he repeatedly criticized Manichaean dualism, often combining it with the theses of the Presocratics, who mistakenly made the universe a product of the conflict between opposites (e.g. *In II Sent.* d. 1, a. 2: 27A; *STh* I, tr. 6, q. 29, c. 2: 223). The necessity to resolve a doctrinal controversy thus parallels the intention to reject the dualist solution also in philosophical terms.

In the *Lectio Albertina* 2013, Rolf Schönberger comprehensively illustrated all aspects of Albert the Great’s metaphysical anti-dualism, emphasizing that the Dominican theologian addresses a well-known subject “with new conceptual elements and theoretical assumptions” (*mit zusätzlichen konzeptionellen Aspekten*

Homicida ab initio. Albert the Great on Time and Eternity of Evil
Andrea Colli

und theoretischen Voraussetzungen) (Schönberger, 2013: 80). The present study therefore attempts to shed light on another aspect of the issue. The dialectic of good-evil is undoubtedly fundamental to metaphysical problems, which are examined by interweaving doctrinal concerns and principles of Greek philosophy. However, a 13th-century theologian such as Albert the Great must also address the first instance of evil in the Salvation History: the fall of Lucifer.

Starting from Albert's interpretation of a controversial passage from the Gospel of John (§2), this study examines how the Dominican theologian applies the temporal boundaries of "beginning" and "end" to the concept of evil. The first section analyzes Albert's tripartite conception of *initium* in relation to his conception of time's creation (§2). The second section explores his notion of "end", which necessitates a thorough examination of the different significances of eternity (§3). This analysis compels Albert to reconcile theological doctrine with philosophical inquiry: the events marking evil's emergence and dissolution in cosmic history must align consistently with a specific physical and cosmological framework.

2. The First Evil Act and its Duration: Reading the Concept of *Initium*

During a heated discussion, Jesus accuses the Jews of being liars and murderers and declares: "You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him" (Ioh 8:44).¹ This invective, combined with a passage from the First Letter of John, in which he wrote "the devil has sinned from the beginning" (*a principio diabolus peccat*) (I Ioh 3:8), has been at the core of theological debates on the nature of evil since the Patristic age. Peter Lombard summarizes the matter in the second book of his *Sentences*:

Putaverunt enim quidam angelos qui ceciderunt, creatos esse malos; et non libero arbitrio in malitiam declinasse, sed in malitia a Deo factos esse, nec aliquam fuisse moram inter creationem et lapsum, sed ab initio apostatasse. (Petrus Lombardus, *Sent.* II, d. 3, c. 4: 343-344)

¹ Ioh 8:44: "Vos ex patre Diabolo estis et desideria patris vestri vultis facere. Ille homicida erat ab initio et in veritate non stabat, quia non est veritas in eo".

Homicida ab initio. Albert the Great on Time and Eternity of Evil

Andrea Colli

Some people have said that rebellious angels were created evil and did not choose to be evil by their own free will. They were created in evil by God. Thus, there was no lapse of time between creation and the fall, as they rejected God from the beginning. (Petrus Lombardus, *Sent.* II, d. 3, c. 4)²

Excluding any dualistic doctrine on the origin of the universe, two solutions are possible: either God created an evil being, or expressions such as “*ab initio*” and “*a principio*” do not refer to the act of creation. The first hypothesis is rendered invalid due to its incompatibility with the fundamental nature of God: a supremely good being cannot be the author of evil. The second is more plausible but requires an accurate description of the cosmogony.

Peter Lombard resolved the issue by referring to the solutions proposed by Augustine and Origen (*Sent.* II, d. 3, c. 4: 345-347). When Jesus alludes to the “beginning” of the murderous nature of the devil, he does not have in mind the instant of creation, but rather what occurs after a brief interval (*morula*). *Ab initio* is therefore to be understood as *statim post initium* (*Sent.* II, d. 3, c. 4: 347).

Albert the Great addresses the problem for the first time in *De quattuor coaequaevis* (1242-1245),³ explicitly raising the question “When did evil angel fall?” (*Quando cecidit malus angelus?*). After paraphrasing and commenting on Peter Lombard’s solution, he suggests three distinct approaches to comprehending the notion of “beginning”:

Dicendum, quod tempus et momentum casus indeterminatum est: sed hoc certum est, quod creatus est bonus, et postea iniqua voluntate factus est malus. Et ideo glossat Magister in Sententiis: “Ab initio in veritate non stetit, id est, statim post initium”. Posset tamen dici, quod est initium temporis, et initium status, et initium creationis Angeli: et verbum Domini intelligitur de initio status, et non de initio temporis vel creationis Angeli. Initium autem status ejus fuit ante confirmationem, et complementum ejus in confirmatione, sicut quaelibet res imperfecta est in sui initio, et perfecta in statu pleno. (Albertus Magnus, *De IV coaeq.* tr. 4, q. 66: 680B)

² English translation of all Latin quotations is mine.

³ For a chronology of the writings of Albert the Great see Albertus-Magnus-Institut, 2011: 28.

Homicida ab initio. Albert the Great on Time and Eternity of Evil

Andrea Colli

Time and moment of the fall are indeterminate. One thing is certain, however: [the evil angel] was created good and later, because of his unrighteous will, became evil. Therefore, Peter Lombard in his *Sentences* states: “He did not remain in the truth from the beginning, that is immediately after the beginning”. However, it can be understood as the “beginning of time”, the “beginning of a condition”, and the “beginning of the angel’s creation”. The Lord’s words refer to the “beginning of a condition” and not the “beginning of time or the angel’s creation”. The “beginning of a condition” means before confirmation [in grace] and completion in confirmation, as anything in the beginning is imperfect, while it is perfect in its complete state. (Albertus Magnus, *De IV coaeq.* tr. 4, q. 66)

Whilst in both *Super quattuor Sententiarum libros* (1243-1246) and *Enarrationes super Evangelium Ioannis* (1264-1268) Albert the Great does not provide a comprehensive discussion on the issue (*In I Sent.* d. 46, a. 12: 445A; *In II Sent.* d. 1, a. 2: 9A; *In Io. ev.* 8.44: 362A), the distinction among *initium temporis*, *initium status*, and *initium creationis angelorum* is restated in the *Summa theologiae sive de mirabilis scientia Dei* (after 1268):

Posset tamen dici, quod aliud est initium temporis, et aliud initium creationis Angeli, et aliud initium status Angeli. Et quod verbum Domini non intelligitur de initio temporis, vel de initio creationis, sed de initio status: status enim fuit ante creationem sicut quaelibet res imperfecta est in sui initio, perfecta autem in statu pleno. (Albertus Magnus, *STh* II, tr. 5, q. 24: 268B)

One could also say that one thing is the beginning of time, another the beginning of the angel’s creation and yet another the beginning of an angel’s condition. It could be said that the word of God does not mean the beginning of time or the beginning of creation, but the beginning of a condition: for a condition was before creation as any imperfect reality is in its beginning, whereas it is perfect in its fullness. (Albertus Magnus, *STh* II, tr. 5, q. 24)

As created from nothing, angels are essentially “imperfect” like all other creatures. This condition, however, does not reflect their inclination to evil, but rather their dependence on the first principle. The concept of “beginning of evil” is therefore not synonymous with *initium temporis*, but rather with *initium status*, signifying

Homicida ab initio. Albert the Great on Time and Eternity of Evil

Andrea Colli

the moment when Lucifer, the leader of the evil angels, voluntarily chose to separate himself from God.

In both the *De quattuor coaequaevis* and in the *Summa theologiae* Albert refers to three modes of “beginning” (*aliud est initium temporis, et aliud initium creationis Angeli, et aliud initium status Angeli*). However, in consideration of the aforementioned observations, this tripartition has not been previously contemplated in the extant literature on this issue, as evidenced by the summary provided by Peter Lombard. Even Albert’s contemporaries do not provide further specifications regarding the description of the initial stages of creation in the *Sentences*. The Dominican theologians Roland of Cremona (c. 1178-1259) and Hugh of St. Cher (c. 1200-1263), for example, appear to have demonstrated limited engagement with this subject.

In the second book of his *Summa*, Roland dedicates a paragraph to the topic of good and evil angels (*De bonis angelis et malis, sed primo de bonis*) (*Summa* II.18: 42). He merely points out that at the same time that some angelic creatures are confirmed in grace, others are fallen (*simul confirmati sunt, et alii simul ceciderunt*) (*Summa* II.18: 43). However, no references are made to the interval between creation and fall.

By contrast, Hugh of St. Cher’s commentary on the *Sentences* addresses the fall of the rebellious angels, even quoting the invective from the Gospel of John. However, he does not emphasize the issue of “when” (*In II Sent.* 2: 48vb).⁴ Then, in the *Postilla super Iohannem*, he provides a definition of the “beginning of evil” as *quasi initium* (*In Post. Ioh.* 8: 342vb).

An examination of the writings of the most prominent Franciscan theologians of that period reveals a substantially unchanged perspective. Odo Rigaud (c. 1210-1275) provides a detailed exposition on the process of deliberation that leads a number of angels to separate themselves from God. The fundamental nature of the process under discussion suggests that “they could not be considered evil from the moment

⁴ Quotation is from the Vatican manuscript (Vaticano, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Cod. Vat. lat. 1098). However, four other manuscript witnesses were also consulted: Assisi (A=Assisi, Biblioteca Sacro Convento, 130), Bruges (Brugge, Stadsbibliotheek, 178), Leipzig (Leipzig, Universitätsbibliothek, 573), Parigi (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, lat. 10728). On this particular quotation no reading variants are handed down.

Homicida ab initio. Albert the Great on Time and Eternity of Evil
Andrea Colli

of their creation” (*Lectura super Sententias* II.3).⁵ Nevertheless, the Franciscan master contributes no further information to that which is reported in Peter Lombard’s *Sentences*. By following a similar reasoning, Alexander of Hales (c. 1185-1245) differentiates between two instants: initially, angelic creatures begin to exist (*incepterunt esse*), subsequently, some of them decide to turn in on themselves (*se verterunt*), thereby distancing from God (*STh* II, tr. 1, q. 2, c. 3: 209). Finally, Bonaventure of Bagnoregio (c. 1221-1274) simply reiterates Peter Lombard’s exegesis of *ab initio* as *statim post initium*: “He was murdered from the beginning, i.e. immediately after the beginning, because there was a short interval of time between the creation and the fall” (*In Io. ev.* 8.70).⁶

In any case, no one seems to address the issue, using the tripartition attested in Albert’s *De quattuor coaequaevis* and *Summa theologiae*. However, such a distinction, and especially the necessity of distinguishing between “beginning of creation” and “beginning of time”, is not superfluous. It is rather a consequence of Albert’s theory of durations, which is introduced in *De quattuor coaequaevis* a few pages before the angelological question at issue.

3. Time as Necessary Condition of Angelic Free Will

Albert the Great argues that prime matter, time, heaven, and angels were created immediately and simultaneously from nothing. These so-called four *coaequaevis*, derived from a well-established tradition, are posited as the primary and elemental realities of creation, from which all other entities are said to have descended (cf. Anzulewicz, 2013: 42-46). Time is not just a creature, as Christian tradition has generally maintained, but a primary creature, alongside matter, heaven, and angels. The origin of time is therefore substantially coincident with that of the angelic creatures. Albert’s explanation for this priority is articulated through the illustration of three distinct interpretations of the term “time”.⁷

⁵ Odo Rigaldus, *Lectura super Sententias* II.3: 83va: “non ergo in primo instanti in quo conditi sunt potuerunt esse mali”.

⁶ Bonaventura, *In Io. ev.* 8.70: 368: “homicida erat ab initio, id est statim post initium, quia parva fuit mora inter creationem et lapsum”. Cf. also, *In II Sent.* d. 12, a. 1, q. 2: 296.

⁷ Albertus Magnus, *De IV coaeq.* tr. 2, q. 5, a. 6: 378A: “Qualiter tempus sit unum de quattuor coaequaevis”.

Homicida ab initio. Albert the Great on Time and Eternity of Evil

Andrea Colli

Dicimus, quod tempus multipliciter accipitur: quandoque enim accipitur tempus generaliter pro mensura cuiuscumque mutationis vel fieri, sive simplicia sint illa, sive composita: et secundum hoc dicimus, quod Angeli moventur in tempore et intelligunt in tempore secundum discursum angelicae intelligentiae super res intelligibiles in cognitione vespertina, quia secundum matutinam cognitionem attingunt aeternitatem, ut supra habitum est. Hoc modo etiam dicimus, quod fieri creationis, quod nihil aliud est quam creaturam nunc esse et ante nihil fuisse, est in tempore. [...] Per hoc patet qualiter tempus secundum sui substantiam est unum de coaequaevs, cum tamen secundum rationem habeat ordinem prioritatis ad alia. Aliter accipitur tempus pro mensura mutationis quae est super materiam, sive sit subito, sive non subito: et secundum hoc dicit Augustinus quod informitas prima non est in tempore, quia in informitate prima non est aliqua mutatio: et tamen est in tempore quod primo modo dictum est tempus. [...] Aliter autem dicitur tempus mensura motus primi mobilis et per consequens aliorum motuum qui causantur ab illo: et sic multa sunt creata ante tempus. (Albertus Magnus, *De IV coaeq.* tr. 2, q. 5, a. 6: 379A-380A)

Time can be considered under many respects. In a common sense, time is to refer to the measure of any change or becoming, whether of simple or composite substances. Therefore, we can argue that angels move through time and know in time according to the way the angelic intelligence reasons over intelligible realities in the “evening knowledge”. Instead, they experience eternity in the morning knowledge, as mentioned above. The becoming of creation is to be explained thus: a creature that now exists and was not there before, exists in time. [...] Hence it is clear in what sense according to its substance time is one of the four *coaequaeva*: for it has an order of priority over other things. In another sense, time is to be understood as the measure of a change of a matter, whether it is an immediate change or not. For this reason, Augustine claims that the first informity of matter is not to be found in time: in the first informity there is no change. Nevertheless, this informity is found in time according to the first meaning. [...] In a third way, time is understood as the measure of the movement of the prime mover and consequently of all movements caused by it. In this last sense many things were created before time. (Albertus Magnus, *De IV coaeq.* tr. 2, q. 5, a. 6)

The prevailing and primary connotation of the term “time” pertains to the process of becoming. Secondly, it denotes the changes in primordial matter: the combination of the four elements (earth, water, air, and fire) with the four “properties” of matter (heat,

Homicida ab initio. Albert the Great on Time and Eternity of Evil

Andrea Colli

cold, dryness, and moisture) is considered to be the key to all nature. Thirdly, the word “time” can also be employed in an “astronomical” sense. The passage of centuries, years and seasons is counted by the movement of the inferior celestial bodies, which ultimately depend on the Prime Mover (cf. Anzulewicz, 2001: 83-129).

A similar division into three parts is also found in the first book of the commentary on the *Sentences* (Albertus Magnus, *In I Sent.* d. 8, a. 12: 236A-B) and in the *Summa theologiae* where, echoing what seems to be Alexander of Hales’ and Bonaventure’s opinions as well, Albert the Great does not propose a general classification of three types of time. Rather, he differentiates between the “common” (*communiter*), “proper” (*proprie*), and “most proper” (*magis proprie*) meaning of time (cf. Fox, 2006: 213-219):

Dicendum, quod tempus dupliciter consideratur, communiter scilicet et proprie. Communiter non est nisi simplex passio et mora motus vel mutationis, et sic tempus accipitur a Prisciano. Proprie autem accipitur dupliciter, proprie scilicet et magis proprie: proprie, quando accipitur ut passio et mensura eius cuius est passio, et sic accipitur a Dionysio; magis proprie et in ultima sui determinatione ad esse temporis, quando est passio primi motus et per eum mensura et numerus omnium motuum qui sunt ab ipso ut causati et regulati et numerati ab ipso, et sic accipitur ab Aristotele. (Albertus Magnus, *STh*, tr. 5, q. 23, c. 3: 136)

Time is to be considered in two ways: in a general or in a specific sense. In a general sense, time is only a simple passion (*passio*) and interval (*mora*) of movement or change. This is how Priscian understands the meaning of time. With regard to time in a specific sense, however, we can make a further distinction: there is time in a specific sense and in an even more specific sense. Time in a specific sense refers to *passio* and the measure of what it is subjected to *passio*. This is how Dionysius understands the meaning of time. Finally, in a more specific sense, time refers to the change of the prime mover and thus to all movements that are subject to it as they are caused, regulated and numbered by it. This is how Aristotle understands time. (Albertus Magnus, *STh*, tr. 5, q. 23, c. 3)

This tripartition essentially centers on postulating a non-metrical time that operates independently of the Prime Mover. However, whilst the term “measure” is linked to all three meanings of time in both *De quattuor coaequaevis* and *Super Sententiarum libros*, the common meaning (*communiter*) of time is described in the *Summa*

Homicida ab initio. Albert the Great on Time and Eternity of Evil
Andrea Colli

theologiae as “passion” (*passio*) and “interval” (*mora*). In doing so, Albert excludes any reference to Aristotle’s metrical conception of time, introducing a particular temporality that enables him to describe angelic operations (*affectio* and *intellectio*).

Indeed, in all three of the examined texts, Albert’s preoccupation with distinguishing between the various types of time appears to be predominantly associated with angelological issues. As created together with time, angels are subject to temporality. Conversely, as separated substances, their actions cannot be enumerated or measured according to the “time of physicians” (cf. *De IV coaeq.* tr. 2, q. 5, a. 2: 369B). It is therefore necessary to postulate the existence of an alternative kind of time.

Furthermore, the term *mora* is evidently significant in the context of our case study: the same term is used to denote the brief interval between the creation of the four primary realities and Lucifer’s fall. Indeed, the term “*mora*” (or “*morula*”, as stated by Peter Lombard) does not refer to a physical realm, but rather to an intellectual one (Porro, 1996: 407-422). In general terms (*communiter*), time does not encompass angelic creatures and their acts as an external category; rather, it represents their mode of being. As with all other angels, Lucifer was not created “in”, but “together with” a general time. This time constitutes the “extension” of his mental and volitional acts. It is evident that Lucifer’s decision to separate himself from God (*initium status*) is thus an expression of an already temporal existence.

Consequently, the assertions “the devil has sinned from the beginning” and “was a murder from the beginning” cannot be interpreted as referring to *ab initio temporis*, as time is the prerequisite for the exercise of free will, that is to say, the capacity to decide whether to separate from God or to accept confirmation in divine grace. Notwithstanding the imperceptibility of the phenomenon, a short interval of time (*morula*) must necessarily elapse for free will to be exercised. “Time” or “temporality” are not expressions of an evil or corrupt state, but rather constitute a fundamental aspect of angelic knowledge and activity.

The classification of the different modes of time, and particularly the idea of a more general (*communiter*) meaning of the word, also accounts for Albert’s distinction between *initium creationis* and *initium temporis*. Despite the simultaneity of these two *initia*, the employment of two distinct expressions enables Albert to shed light on different aspects of the nascent stages of creation. The expression “beginning of

Homicida ab initio. Albert the Great on Time and Eternity of Evil

Andrea Colli

time” denotes the inception of the process of becoming for angels, signifying the duration of their cognitive and volitional activities. Conversely, “beginning of creation” indicates the act of creation itself, emphasizing the initial relationship between God and the four primary created realities. By examining the same instant from two different points of view, Albert denies that evil can be a creation of God (*initium creationis*) or the inherent condition of the creature, as it is both created from nothing and therefore temporal (*initium temporis*). Evil is not an inevitable consequence of creation, nor of the temporal being of creatures. Becoming is rather the fundamental condition underpinning all creatures from their origin and it is not considered inherently evil in nature.

Evil enters into salvation history as in a kind of second beginning (*initium status*), subsequent to the exercise of free will by one of the only rational creatures among the primary created realities. As previously demonstrated, the “after” in this context does not signify a physical interval of time, but rather the extension of the volitional acts that culminate in a choice, whether for evil or for good. Without this brief temporal interval, such an act would be deemed necessary rather than free. It can thus be concluded that time does not cause evil; on the contrary, it is a prerequisite for the exercise of free will. The capacity to engage in mental and volitional acts, which are characteristic of the most noble creatures, is made possible by the passage of time.

It has been established that time is not the root of evil; rather, it constitutes the fundamental condition for every creature to evolve and change, in our specific case study, to engage in mental and volitional acts. However, the question remains as to whether *initium status* of Lucifer and the other evil angels alters their experience of time. After *initium status*, do Lucifer and the other rebellious angels experience the same temporality as the angels confirmed in divine grace? The response to this question relates the problem of the beginning of evil to that of its end.

4. Eternal Life and Everlasting Death

The investigation of the origin of evil is predicated on an authoritative statement by Jesus, thus enabling the utilization of a broad and largely consistent exegetical tradition. Despite the existence of scriptural evidence, reflections on the existence of a temporal measurement of eternal beatitude or punishment are more questionable. As is the case

Homicida ab initio. Albert the Great on Time and Eternity of Evil

Andrea Colli

with other thirteenth-century theologians, Albert the Great subscribed to the doctrine of eternal life, believing that God would one day destroy the physical world and that human souls would be assigned to either eternal life or death. It is evident that rebel and faithful angels are thus involved in this eschatological vision, as destined for everlasting life. Nevertheless, it is not feasible for both to experience the same kind of eternity. The concepts of eternal punishment and eternal vision are evidently contrasting. For this reason, while the distinction among *initium creationis*, *initium temporis*, and *initium status* is explained by distinguishing three meanings of time, the problem of the end implies a study of the concept of eternity.

In *De quattuor coaequaevis* Albert undertakes the first systematic analysis of the different meanings of “eternity” (cf. Anzulewicz, 2001: 90-109). Indeed, it appears that the necessity to regulate the utilization of this term is not perceived as pressing among his contemporaries (cf. Fox, 2006: 282). Eternity is often intended as a long extension, and ambiguous expressions such as “eternal times” are very common (Colli, 2023: 229-245). Moreover, the fact that the same word refers both to a divine attribute and to the duration of certain creatures (e.g. angels or souls) seems to be a minor problem (cf. Porro, 2000: 63-102).

The point of departure of Albert’s analysis is Boethius’ definition of divine eternity as “to embrace and possess at once the whole fullness of unending life” (*Phil. Cons.* V.6.4; cf. Marenbon, 2013: 17).⁸ Although usually cited as the cornerstone of medieval discussions of eternity (cf. Stump-Kretzmann, 1981; Leftow, 1990; D’Onofrio, 1998; Adamson 2016; Colli, 2022), it is precisely Albert the Great who first examined (and presumably grasped) this definition in its profound meaning (cf. *De IV coaeq.* tr. 2, q. 3, a. 2: 340A-350A; Anzulewicz, 2001: 94-101).

Having established what God’s eternity consists in, the Dominican theologian points to three other—though less proper—significances of the word (*De IV coaeq.* tr. 2, q. 3, a. 4: 354B-355A). The first improper meaning concerns participation in eternity in the blessed life (*per participationem ipsius aeterni secundum vitam beatam*). The second refers to the possibility that some creatures can have a certain affinity with God’s eternity regarding some property (*secundum quod dicitur aliquid aeternum per*

⁸ Boethius, *Phil. Cons.* V.6.4: 101 : “Aeternitas igitur est interminabilis vitae tota simul et perfecta possessio”.

Homicida ab initio. Albert the Great on Time and Eternity of Evil
Andrea Colli

convenientiam remotam alicuius proprietatis cum aeterno), for example, punishments are said to be eternal (*poenae [...] dicuntur aeternae*). Finally, the third improper use of “eternity” is as measure that encloses in itself “aevum” and “time” (*mensura excellens aevum et tempus*). Thus, this is Albert’s conclusion:

Unde habetur talis divisio, quod quaedam sunt aeterna, et in aeternitate, et ipsa aeternitas: quaedam autem sunt aeterna, et in aeternitate, et non ipsa aeternitas: quaedam autem sunt aeterna, quod nec sunt in aeternitate, nec ipsa aeternitas: quaedam vero nec aeterna, nec in aeternitate, nec ipsa aeternitas, sed clauduntur aeternitate. (Albertus Magnus, *De IV coaeq.* tr. 2, q. 3, a. 4: 355A)

Thus, we have this subdivision: some things are eternal, in eternity, and are eternity itself; some things are eternal, in eternity, but do not coincide with eternity itself; some things are then eternal, and neither are in eternity nor coincide with eternity itself. Finally, some things are neither eternal, nor in eternity, nor coincide with eternity itself, but are enclosed by eternity. (Albertus Magnus, *De IV coaeq.* tr. 2, q. 3, a. 4)

According to contemporary scholars, the interest of medieval thinkers in cataloguing different degrees of eternity is primarily to distinguish the eternal essence of God as the simultaneous existence of past, present, and future without extension from Aristotle’s conception of eternity as the double limitlessness of the world (cf. Fox, 2006: 282-308). By contrast, Albert’s main concern here seems to be eschatological, as evidenced by the example of eternal punishments. Given the frequency with which expressions such as *vita*, *beatitudo*, or *mors aeterna* occur in Scripture, it is necessary to establish the existence of an eternal destiny for both the blessed and damned angels and human souls, and to define their relationship to “eternity” as a divine attribute. Therefore, while a comparison between a theological and a physical view of eternity compels us to reconcile two different traditions of thought, in this case Albert focuses on a purely theological issue.

Blessed angels, blessed human souls—after their separation from the body—, and even bodies—after their resurrection—will be in close proximity to God’s eternity. Of all creatures these are the ones that can most appropriately be called “eternal” (*aeternae*) and “participants of eternity” (*in aeternitate*). This does not signify that they “dissolve” into God’s essence. Rather they establish such a close contemplative relationship

Homicida ab initio. Albert the Great on Time and Eternity of Evil
Andrea Colli

with Him that their lives reflect his eternity. This eternity is not to be understood as a limitless time; rather, it is defined by the complete realization of happiness.

The status of damned souls (and also fallen angels) is evidently different. Although the adjective “eternal” is conventionally employed to denote their duration at the end of time (e.g. eternal death or punishment), this pertains solely to their everlastingness. They remain utterly separated from God. Indeed, their damnation consists in their being completely separated from Him forever. Therefore, in this case the term “eternity” denotes an endless time.

In the first book of the *Super Sententiarum libros* Albert the Great addresses again the concept of eternity, particularly the notion of “eternal punishment”. He explicitly asks whether the damnations in hell are to be considered eternal (*utrum poenae inferni possunt dici aeternae*).⁹ Albert offers a rephrasing of the three distinct uses of the adjective “eternal”, as illustrated in *De quattuor coaequaevis*. He then asserts that the adjective “eternal” is applied to punishment not in reference to the divine essence, but because damnation is without a final term: “The punishments in hell are said to be eternal because they participate in a duration without term” (*In I Sent.* d. 8, a. 9).¹⁰

The issue is addressed in full in the commentary on the fourth book of the *Sentences* (d. 46), thus providing a comprehensive and definitive resolution to the problem through a series of questions explicitly devoted to eschatological problems: “Is there such a thing as eternal life? What is eternal life? Does eternal life belong to the blessed spirits by reason of essence or by reason of power? Do the damned live an eternal life? What is eternal death?” (*In IV Sent.* d. 46E, aa. 4-8: 632B-637B).¹¹ The study of the duration of evil after the initial act of rebellion is in fact closely linked to the destiny

⁹ The subject is not addressed openly by any of Albert’s contemporaries. In the first book of his commentary on the *Sentences* Alexander of Hales generally refers to the problem, dwelling on the distinction between time and *aevum* (*STh* I, 1, 1, 2, 4, 3, 4, 2: 107). However, he does not focus on the differentiated use of the adjective “*aeterna*”.

¹⁰ Albertus Magnus, *In I Sent.* d. 8, a. 9: 233B: “Poenae autem inferni dicuntur aeternae a participatione durationis sine termino”.

¹¹ Albertus Magnus, *In IV Sent.* d. 46E, aa. 4-8: 632B-637B: “An aliqua sit vita aeterna? Quid sit vita aeterna? An vita aeterna conveniat ratione essentiae vel ratione potentiae beatis spiritibus? An damnati vivant vita aeterna? Quid sit mors aeterna?”

Homicida ab initio. Albert the Great on Time and Eternity of Evil
Andrea Colli

of the damned. Their eschatological condition is erroneously understood as a form of eternal life due to the imprecise application of the concepts “life” and “eternity”:

Dicendum, quod damnati non vivunt vita aeterna, nec habent vitam aeternam: vivere enim est habere principium vitae: et hoc non habent damnati, sed potius per separationem ab illo principio: et ideo sunt mortui simpliciter, sed secundum quid vivi, scilicet secundum miseram naturae vitam. Si autem conceditur, quod vivunt, non debet concedi, quod vivant vita aeterna: dictum est enim, quod aeternum hic dicitur participative. [...] Et ita non vivunt, nisi in poenis: quia vicissitudinantur in illis. Sed bene conceditur, quod non videbunt interitum, et vivent adhuc in finem consumptionis secundum poenarum vicissitudinem. Si autem inveniatur improprie dictum, quod vivant vita aeterna propter carentiam finis in poenis, non debet concedi quod habeant vitam aeternam: quia hoc sonat possessionem: nemo autem habet mobilem participationem per modum possessionis [...] nisi qui habet eam ad nutum: et hoc non habent damnati, qui desiderant mortem, et mors fugit ab eis. (Albertus Magnus, *In IV Sent.* d. 46E, a. 7: 636A)

It must be said that the damned do not live an eternal life, nor do they have an eternal life. “To live” means “to have a source of life”, and the damned do not have it. They are rather separated from that principle. They are dead, but alive according to something: a miserable natural life. Therefore, if they are permitted to live, this does not mean that they live an eternal life. In fact, it has been said that in the case of life we speak of “eternal” as participation. [...] The life of the damned is not like that, because they live in pain. However, we can argue that the damned will have no end and will continue to live exhausted by the succession of punishments. If it is improperly written that “they lead an eternal life”, since there is no end to punishment, this statement does not mean that “they have an eternal life”, as this expression sounds like possession. On the other hand, participation [...] only refers to those who voluntarily intend to participate in something. However, this is not the case for the damned who wish for the end and do not get it. (Albertus Magnus, *In IV Sent.* d. 46E, a. 7)

As with Lucifer’s primordial sin, the act of choosing evil entails a separation from God, as the source of life (*principium vitae*). Nonetheless, while the fall of Lucifer is an irreversible phenomenon, the condition of sinners prior to death is not: life constantly provides the opportunity to re-establish the lost relationship with God. Consequently, time, as a divine creation, cannot act as an impediment to redemption; rather, it serves

Homicida ab initio. Albert the Great on Time and Eternity of Evil
Andrea Colli

to attain and participate in divine eternity at the end of the universe. By contrast, rebellious angels experience a particular type of temporality from the beginning of their fallen state (*ab initio status*). This temporality is characterized by the endless prolongation of their alienation from God, thereby resulting in their damnation. Indeed, this is the precise condition that the damned souls will experience:

... dicendum quod mors non proprie dicitur aeterna: quia aeternum ponitur pro perpetuo quando mors aeterna vocatur: et hoc est simile aeterno in carentia finis, et non in alio. Et bene concedo, quod haec separatio durat sine fine. [...] dicendum, quod causa separationis adjacet continue, quae est malitia confirmata et damnata, et haec causat posse pati poenas: et ideo passibilium poenarum passio potius est sequela talis mortis, quam mors: quia sicut anima egrediente corpus marcescit et exspirat, et egressus animae est mors, exspiratio autem et putrefactio sunt sequelae mortis, eo quod ab anima non continetur corpus: ita separatio a principio aeternae vitae est mors aeterna, et sequela hujus mortis est passio ignis, eo quod spiritus condemnatus a principio vitae aeternae non continetur. (Albertus Magnus, *In IV Sent.* d. 46E, a. 8: 636B-637B)

... It must be said that death is not properly defined to be “eternal”: when speaking of “eternal death”, “eternal” stands for “perpetual”. “Perpetual” is similar to “eternal” only in respect of the endless. It is therefore an endless separation. [...] It must be said that the cause of separation constantly affects the damned: it consists in the continued and damned evil. This is the reason of the punishment. Therefore, suffering does not simply consist of death, but of continuous death. When the soul is separated from the body, the body rots and dissolves. Thus, whilst death consists in the separation of the soul from the body, dissolution and putrefaction are the continuation of death, due to the fact that body is no longer animated. Similarly, separation from the source of eternal life is eternal death, and the continuation of this death is to burn in hell forever, as the damned soul no longer has the source of eternal life. (Albertus Magnus, *In IV Sent.* d. 46E, a. 8)

“Eternal death” refers to “endless separation from God”. The adjective “eternal” is therefore improperly used. In this case, the term “eternity” should be more appropriately replaced with “everlastingness” or “endless time” as these expressions better indicate endless spiritual dissolution and putrefaction.

Homicida ab initio. Albert the Great on Time and Eternity of Evil
Andrea Colli

5. Conclusion: Beginning and End (?) of Evil

Evil and time are closely related. Despite being extremely brief (*morula*), time enables angels and humans to exercise their noblest operation: free will. This means that attaining union with God is not an instantaneous and mechanical process; rather, it necessitates a progression of understanding and love over an extended duration. Free choice can only occur within time. As with all other creatures, it can thus be reasonably concluded that the biblical statement “He saw that it was good” (Gn 1:31) also applies to time.

On the other hand, the concept of free will implies the possibility of sin, which can result in temporary or definitive separation from God, the very source of life. When rational creatures deliberately persist in evil without seeking to re-establish their relationship with the Creator, their temporality is no longer a good, but rather becomes an everlasting punishment: their temporality will never be fulfilled in God’s eternity; instead, it will be transformed into infinite duration. In a sense, it can be deduced that time is influenced by the behavior of the creature whose duration it is: either a path to eternal life or an endless sentence of damnation.

In conclusion, while we can reasonably establish a beginning for evil, we cannot determine its end. The fall of the rebellious angels and damned human souls is too great for their punishment to end. It is therefore necessary to assume the existence of damned time as a duration of continuous death. It is not possible to define precisely the characteristics of this special duration. Albert the Great employs an image derived from biology: damned souls (and presumably fallen angels) suffer a sort of perpetual decomposition. Using an analogy frequently employed within the Christian tradition (cf. Is 14:11), he refers to the worm of conscience (*vermis conscientiae*), as infinite remorse (cf. *In IV Sent.* d. 1, a. 20: 36B; *Problemata determinata*, q. 52: 64).

Albert successfully identifies the proper meanings of eternity and time, liberating the latter from any negative connotation intrinsic to it. Time is regarded as a creature that angels and humans must care for: they have the responsibility to ensure that it does not become a form of everlasting condemnation.

Homicida ab initio. Albert the Great on Time and Eternity of Evil
Andrea Colli

Bibliography

Sources

Manuscripts

- Odo Rigaldus. *Lectura super quattuor libros Sententiarum*. Vatican City, Vat. Lat. Ms. 5982
- Hugo de Sancto Caro. *Super libros Sententiarum*.
Assisi, Biblioteca Sacro Convento, 130
Brugge, Stadsbibliotheek, 178
Leipzig, Universitätsbibliothek, 573
Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, lat. 10728
Vatican City, Vat. Lat. Ms. 1098

Editions

- Alexander Halensis (1924). *Summa theologica*, 1. Ad Claras Aquas.
- Alexander Halensis (1928). *Summa theologica*, 2. Ad Claras Aquas.
- Albertus Magnus (1893). *Enarrationes super Evangelium Ioannis (Opera Omnia 24)*. Ed. Borgnet, A. Vivès.
- Albertus Magnus (1893). *Super quattuor libros Sententiarum (Opera Omnia 25-30)*. Ed. Borgnet, A. Vivès.
- Albertus Magnus (1895). *De quattuor coaequaevis (Opera Omnia 34)*. Ed. Borgnet, A. Vivès.
- Albertus Magnus (1895). *Summa theologiae sive de mirabili scientia Dei (Opera Omnia 31-33)*. Ed. Borgnet A. Vivès.
- Albertus Magnus (1978). *Summa theologiae sive de mirabili scientia Dei (Alberti Magni Opera Omnia 34.1)*. Ed. Siedler, D. Aschendorff.

Homicida ab initio. Albert the Great on Time and Eternity of Evil

Andrea Colli

- Boethius (1957). *Philosophiae Consolatio*. Ed. Bieler, L. Brepols. (CCSL 94).
- Bonaventura (1893). *Commentarius in Evangelium sancti Iohannis* (*Opera omnia* 6). Ad Claras Aquas.
- Bonaventura (1895). *Commentarium in librum II Sententiarum* (*Opera omnia* 2). Ad Claras Aquas.
- Hugo de Sancto Caro (1703). *In Postillam super Iohannem*. Ed. Pezzana N.
- Petrus Lombardus (1971). *Sententiae in IV libris distinctae*. Ed. Brady, I. Ad Claras Aquas. (Spicilegium Bonaventurianum 4).
- Rolandus Cremonensis (2016). *Summa*. Ed. Cortesi, A. and Midali, H. Corponove Editrice. (Quaderni della biblioteca comunale Luigi Cortesi di San Paolo d'Argon. Cortesiana 10).

Complementary Bibliography

- Adamson, P. (2016). "Eternity in Medieval Philosophy". In: Melamed, Y. Y. (ed.). *Eternity. A History*. Oxford University Press, 75-116.
- Anzulewicz, H. (2001). "Aeternitas - aevum - tempus. The Concept of Time in the System of Albert the Great". In: Porro, P. (ed.). *The Medieval Concept of Time. Studies on the Scholastic Debate and its Reception in Early Modern Philosophy*. Brill, 83-129.
- Anzulewicz, H. (2013). "The Systematic Theology of Albert the Great". In: Resnick, I. M. (ed.). *A Companion to Albert the Great. Theology, Philosophy and the Sciences*. Brill, 15-68.
- Albertus-Magnus-Institut (2011). *Albertus Magnus und sein System der Wissenschaften. Schlüsseltexzte in Übersetzung Lateinisch-Deutsch*. Aschendorff.
- Colli, A. (2022). "Eternity and Prophetic Cognition. A Note on Paschasius Radbertus' Understanding of *Philosophiae Consolatio* V, 6", *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 56, 97-107.
- Colli, A. (2023). "Aevum, aeterna tempora, and tempus generale between History and Metaphysics. A Note on the Patristic Reading of Time and Duration", *Freiburger Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Theologie* 70.1, 229-245.
- D'Onofrio, G. (1998). "Boezio e l'essenza del tempo". In: Ruggiu, L. (ed.). *Il tempo in questione. Paradigmi della temporalità nel pensiero occidentale*. Guerini, 119-129.

Homicida ab initio. Albert the Great on Time and Eternity of EvilAndrea Colli

- Fox, R. (2006). *Time and Eternity in Mid-Thirteenth-Century Thought*. Oxford University Press.
- Leftow, B. (1990). “Boethius on Eternity”, *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 7, 123-142.
- Porro, P. (1996). *Forme e modelli di durata nel pensiero medievale. L’ævum, il tempo discreto, la categoria “quando”*. Leuven University Press. (Ancient and Medieval Philosophy 1.16).
- Porro, P. (2000). “Il vocabolario filosofico medievale del tempo e della durata”. In: Capasso, R. and Piccari, P. (eds.). *Il tempo nel Medioevo. Rappresentazioni storiche e concezioni filosofiche*. Società Italiana di Demodossalografia, 63-102.
- Schönberger, R. (2013). *Der Gegensatz von Gut und Böse und die eine Wirklichkeit – Albertus Magnus zum Problem des Dualismus*. Aschendorff. (Lectio Albertina 14).
- Stump, E. and Kretzmann, N. (1981). *Eternity*, *The Journal of Philosophy* 78, 430-458.