

Aeon

I. Greco-Roman Antiquity

From the earliest recorded literature the Greek term αἰών signifies a fixed period of time, most commonly a lifetime and hence a life or sometimes life force; to lose one's αἰών is to die. The term may also denote a time of life (αἰῶνα παρθένειον = "childhood," Aeschylus *Ag.* 229), and by extension an epoch or age (cf. Latin *aevum*), as in "the coming age," i.e., posterity (Demosthenes ■ which text exactly? ■ 18.199), and finally a long period of time, or forever (e.g., Aeschylus *Cho.* 26 δι' αἰῶνος; Isocrates ■ which text exactly? ■ 10.62 εἰς ἅπαντα τὸν αἰῶνα, "for all time"). The word acquires the technical sense of "eternity" among the Presocratic philosophers. Thus, Anaximander (A10 D–K) speaks of "corruption and genesis from infinite eternity [ἐξ ἀπειρου αἰῶνος]," and Anaximenes (A6 D–K) is said to have held that the κόσμος endures "for an infinite αἰών." Democritus (A49 D–K) makes a similar claim for the motion of atoms. But the adjective these philosophers employ to indicate "eternal" is αἰδιος, first found in the Homeric *Hymn to Hestia* (29.3) and the Hesiodic *Shield of Hercules* (311) in the sense of "permanent" or "endless." Plato, in turn, introduces the idea of eternity not as infinite temporal duration but as existing outside of time. He can employ αἰών to mean an "age" (*Gorg.* 448C), even an everlasting one (*Leg.* 701C, of endless torments in Hades), but in the *Timaeus* he says that the creator made "a kind of moving image of eternity [αἰών]," and "an eternal image, moving according to number, of eternity [αἰών] that remains in oneness" (*Tim.* 37D). Time is divided into parts, but temporal units and tenses are wrongly attributed to "eternal [αἰδιος] being," which rather imitates eternity (αἰών, *Tim.* 37E–38A). Thus Plato appropriated αἰών and the newly coined αἰώνιος (as opposed to the Presocratics' αἰδιος) to designate his notion of timeless eternity. Later Platonists imitate Plato's usage, employing both αἰδιος and αἰώνιος but tending to reserve the latter for timeless eternity. The middle Platonist Alcinous (*Didascalikos* 9.2) notes that the Platonists "define the Idea as an eternal [αἰώνιον] model of entities in nature" (the Ideas are "the eternal [αἰώνιοι] thoughts of God"). Plotinus states (*Enn.* 1.5.7) that happiness belongs not to time but to eternity (αἰών), which is "without extension": it is "neither more nor less, nor marked by any magnitude" (cf. also 3.7.2–5). Porphyry (*Comm. Tim.* 2 fr. 46) asserts that "the Demiurge operates eternally [αἰωνίως, i.e., outside of time] whereas the cosmos is eternal [αἰδιος] in accord with that eternity [αἰδιότης] that is extended in every time." This sense of αἰών and αἰώνιος is specific to Platonism. Aristotle never uses αἰώνιος and αἰών only occasionally, most often in the traditional sense of "life"; yet there are nearly 300 in-

stances of αἰδιος. Clearly Aristotle was not moved to adopt Plato's novel terminology, perhaps because he did not share his transcendental view of eternity. The same disproportion is reflected in the Aristotelian commentators; Aspasius (*In Aristotelis Ethica Nicomachea*) employs only αἰδιος, even in reference to the Platonic Ideas (13.1–3); and so too Alexander of Aphrodisias and Simplicius. Among the old Stoics, αἰώνιος occurs once: Chrysippus (fr. 597 SVF = Aetius 2.4.13) is reported as stating that "those who affirm that the ordered universe is αἰώνιος say that time is cyclical." Perhaps αἰώνιος is here associated with cyclically recurring cosmic eras or αἰῶνες, due to the periodic destruction and restoration of the world: the use of αἰῶνες for cosmological ages will subsequently influence Christian thinkers such as Origen (e.g., *Or.* 27.15). The Epicureans regularly employ αἰδιος to designate the eternity of imperishable constituents of the universe such as atoms and void (e.g., Epicurus *To Herodotus* 44). At *To Herodotus* 81, Epicurus uses αἰώνιος in reference to the future life that non-Epicureans expect, with its dread punishments, an afterlife in which Epicureans do not believe and which does not deserve to be called αἰδιος (cf. *Principal Doctrines* 28). For these schools, the term of art for "eternal" remains αἰδιος rather than αἰώνιος.

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■ Check system of abbreviations; SBL style? ■