



Eternity: A History

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CHAPTER

Reflection: Eternity and Astrology in the Work of Vettius Valens

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Vettius Valens (c. 120–185 CE) wrote an important treatise on the practice of astrology (*Anthology*) that was transmitted to the Arabs and became a useful text for astrologers in the medieval period. Though hardly a philosopher, Valens had a reasonable knowledge of the philosophical trends of his day and was versed in classical Greek authors, such as Plato, Euripides, and Aristotle. Thus there is some justification for examining Valens as representative of an astrologer's understanding of eternity. In this case study, I examine Valens's use of the Greek word αἰών. When Valens employs αἰών and its derivatives, they do not always mean “eternity” in the sense of something everlasting or always existing, but sometimes connote a long period of time, that is, an age. However, Valens does insist that astrology itself possesses qualities that can be considered eternal in Aristotle's sense of a heavenly eternity.

An important passage in which Valens uses the word αἰών (*Anthology* IX, 2.2) is as follows:

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For just as the all-seeing Sun, with untiring motion, whirls round with the cosmic revolution and rides through a time of great age, he by turns reinstates the dances of the stars with their varying courses and [then] detaches them. He causes seasonal turnings, proper times and phases, beginning from where he left off and leaving off from where he begins; and enchanting and arousing the souls of men, he is responsible for reputation, action, and every kind of advance. Likewise also the Moon, fortune of the cosmos, waxing and waning by the Sun's power, makes [her own] phases and changes of weather, and in ripening fruits for men she becomes co-responsible for life. In the same way, too, it will be necessary to investigate, for every birth, in what parts of the cosmos the Lots of Fortune and Daimon fell out . . .

ὄνπερ ἀρτρώπον ἐπὶ τοῦ κοσμικοῦ περιπολίσματος παντεπόπτης “Ἡλίου ἀκαμάτοις φοραῖς δινομένου καὶ μακροῦ αἰῶνος χρόνον διηπεύων τὰς τῶν ἀστέρων χορείας ἀλλεπαλλήλοις δρόμοις ἀποκαθίστησκαὶ ἀποχωρίζει, τροπάζετε καὶ καιροῦ καὶ φάσεις ποιούμενος, ἀρχόμενος ὅθεν ἔληξε καὶ λήγων ὅθεν ἄρχεται, τὰς δὲ ψυχὰς τῶν ἀνθρώπων θέλων καὶ διεγείρων, αἰτιοζύξας καὶ πράξεως καὶ πάσης προκοπῆς τυγχάνει, ὁμοίως δὲ καὶ ἡ Σελήνη, τύχη τοῦ κόσμου ὑπάρχουσα καὶ

ὑπὸ τῆς ἡλιακῆς δυνάμεως ἀξομειομένη, τὰς φάσεις ποιεῖται καὶ τὰς τῶν ἀέρων μεταβολάς, καὶ τοὺς καρποὺς πεπαίνουσα τοῖς ἀνθρώποις ζωῆς παραιτία γίνεται, τῷ αὐτῷ τρόπῳ καὶ ἐπὶ πάσης γενέσεως σκοπεῖν δεῖσει τὸν κληρὸν τῆς τύχης καὶ τοῦ δαίμονος ἐν ποίοις μέρεσι τοῦ κόσμου ἀπερρήσαν . . .¹

p. 58 This highly poetic passage, possibly derived from an earlier verse original,² introduces the topic of the Lots of Fortune and Daimon, two positions in the natal chart that are responsible for, among other things, determining the length of a life along with its actions and reputation. Without becoming mired in the intricacies of astrological technique, calculating these lots involves the Sun and Moon, two essential components of an astrological chart. In astrology, the Moon is associated with fortune (τύχη) and the body; the Sun with mind, soul, and spirit (δαίμων). Fortune and Daimon have a long and intertwined association in Hellenistic culture.³ (See table 1a.1.)

Table 1a.1 Astrological Attributes of the Sun, Lot of Daimon, Moon, and Lot of Fortune

Sun	Lot of Daimon	Moon	Lot of Fortune
Breath	Soul	Body	Human bodies
Soul	Intentional mind	Mother	Actions in life
Movement	Character	Conception	Sufferings of soul
Mind	Power	Fortune	Companionship
Light of the mind	Worth	Breath	Reputation
Intentional mind	Reputation	An eye	Fortune
Spirit (<i>daimōn</i>)	Religious rites	<i>Pronoia</i> (providence, foreknowing)	
Action	Intended plans		
Vision, an eye	Advice		
Oracular response of gods	Mental activity		
Soul's sense-perception			

Sources: Vettius Valens, *Anthologiarum libri novem*, ed. David Pingree (Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1986), I, 1; II, 20; IV, 4 and 25; IX, 2; Antiochus of Athens (ap. Rhetorius), “Thesaurοι,” in *Catalogus Codicum Astrologorum Graecorum I*, ed. F. Boll and F. Cumont (Brussels: Henri Lamertin, 1898), 160; Antiochus of Athens (ap. Rhetorius), “On the Seven Planets in an Epitome from Antiochus,” in *Catalogus Codicum Astrologorum Graecorum VII*, ed. F. Boll (Brussels: Henri Lamertin, 1908), 127; Paulus Alexandrinus, *Elementa Apotelesmatica*, ed. Emilie Boer (Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1958), chap. 23; Paulus Alexandrinus and Olympiodorus, *Late Classical Astrology: Paulus Alexandrinus and Olympiodorus with the Scholia from Later Commentators*, trans. Dorian Gieseler Greenbaum (Reston, VA: ARHAT, 2001), 41–42, 103, 108; Olympiodorus, *Eis ton Paulon <Heliodorou>. Heliodori, ut dicitur, in Paulum Alexandrinum Commentarium*, ed. Emilie Boer (Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1962), chap. 22; Rhetorius, “Selected Chapters,” in *Catalogus Codicum Astrologorum Graecorum VIII, pars IV*, ed. F. Cumont (Brussels: Henri Lamertin, 1921), 122.20–23.

Circles and Starry Dances

The Sun circling through the “cosmic revolution” initiates planetary cycles that arise in relationship to it. Its daily cycle gives us day and night; its movement through the yearly cycle gives the seasons marked by solstices and equinoxes.

Valens invokes the metaphor of the dances of the stars in combination with the word αἰών. This is not his invention: Plato uses the metaphor of the starry dance in *Timaeus* (40c–d), but it originates in the fifth century BCE (e.g., Philolaos, Euripides).⁴ The stars in a choral dance, representing a regular and repeating motion, subsequently become a common trope.⁵ Plato uses it to describe the planets, which meet and separate, reverse course, and move forward (*Timaeus* 40c).

Valens too alludes to this dancing together and separation of the planets. The *Epinomis* (982d–e) and Philo Judaeus (*De opificio mundi* 78) also use the imagery of the stars' choral dance.⁶ The Middle Platonist Apuleius (*De Platone et eius dogmate* 1.10.9–14)⁷ connects the choric dance of the planets to time. Komorowska has demonstrated Valens's exposure to Middle Platonism.⁸ So Valens employs a well-known image, whether it was obtained directly from Plato or not. ↵

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The Sun leads and regulates the choral dance because it embodies and sets both primary and secondary motion. These correspond to the two Platonic motions of Same and Other, respectively. As leader of the planetary dance, the Sun physically represents the cycle of the seasons and repeating cycles that ↵ eventually result in “great ages,” one example of which is Plato's Great Year.⁹ In astrology, different cycles of the Sun, Moon, and planets create “maximum,” “middle,” and “minor” years assigned to each planet; minor years are based on recurrence cycles with the Sun. Valens gives the Sun preeminence here because of its leadership role, and because its position is essential for the Lots of Fortune and Daimon, which can determine both lifespan and reputation.

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In *Timaeus*, the existence of the sun, moon, and planets defines and protects the numbers of time (*Timaeus* 38c); their orbits, revolutions, and cycles allow a way for time to be measured. Similarly in Valens, the Sun and Moon cause the Lots of Fortune and Daimon to exist, determine, and provide life and reputation.

A Great Age (μακρὸς αἰών)

The use of αἰών and χρόνος in the same phrase is unattested elsewhere in this form.¹⁰ Perhaps Valens means just a “long span of time”—or the juxtaposition deliberately recalls the difference between time and eternity in the *Timaeus*. Perhaps Valens means the idea of a great age, even something like Plato's Great Year (*Timaeus* 39d–e), where at its basic astronomical level the eight celestial revolutions of the starry sphere and the planets, sun, and moon meet at the same place, but also join harmonically and philosophically.¹¹ With the circle of the Sun moving through the cosmos, coupled with the Sun's leadership of the circles of the planets, Valens describes a hierarchy of two systems moving cyclically together, with the planets' cycles dependent on the Sun's authority.

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Interestingly, Valens uses the phrase μακρὸς αἰών elsewhere in the *Anthology*, at IX, 8.35: “[Nature] ... serves the cosmos, rousing it from sleep and cycling it round in a Great Age” (ἡ φύσις... ὑπηρετοῦσα δὲ τοῖς κοσμοῖς καὶ ἐξ ὕπνου ἐγειρομένη καὶ εἰς μακρὸν αἰῶνα κυκλοστρεφόμενη).¹²

Interpreting μακρὸς αἰών here as a kind of great age is plausible, with its idea of a cycle forming such an age. This later quotation further supports a “great age” interpretation in the earlier passage. Here, too, the cosmos is “roused from sleep” just as the Sun in the earlier passage “arouses the souls of men.” Again a cosmic image is juxtaposed with a solar one.

Turns of Fortune

The passage quoted above (IX, 2.2) contains several wordplays on the Greek word τροπή, “turn, turning,” which cannot always be fluently rendered into English. Turning is an important function in astronomical cycles (e.g. the solstices), as it is in dancing, and it does not seem coincidental that τροπή (or idiomatic forms deriving from the same verb, τρέπω) appear three times. In fact, the first words of the passage (ὁνπεργὰρτρόπον), which mean “in the same manner,” translate literally as “by the very same turn.” Next, the Sun makes “turnings” (τροπᾶς), its apparent turns north and south at the solstices, causing the seasons. Finally, Valens uses τῷ αὐτῷ τρόπῳ, “in the same manner,” literally “by the same turn,” to insert the calculation of the lots into the turning process.

p. 62 The Moon, too, is part of the process of cyclical change. While the Sun regulates the planets in their choral dance and creates both the day and the year, the Moon, by contrast, gives us the month (its own personal dance with the Sun) and, as Valens emphasises, affects weather and the production of food to sustain life. As the astrological ruler of the physical body and the closest luminary to the earth, the Moon symbolically demonstrates, through its waxing and waning, the vagaries and changeability of life. It is associated with both good and bad fortune. Unlike the Sun, though, the Moon is only “co-responsible,” since it is also dependent on the Sun. However both astrological lots, the Lot of Fortune, “the Moon’s lot,” and the Lot of Daimon, “the Sun’s lot” (Paulus Alexandrinus, *Elementa Apotelesmatica*, chap. 23),¹³ are important for Valens, especially for determining length and quality of life.¹⁴

Chronos versus Aiôn in the Anthology

Astrology deals with *chronos* on a fundamental level: the mundane passage of time and allotments of it are given at birth to every human. (The planet Saturn, by way of a Greek pun, rules time—Kronos/Chronos.) The prediction of eclipse cycles was well established by Valens’s time. Astrological techniques assigned different planets to rule different times of life.¹⁵

p. 63 Yet for Valens, astrology is more than *chronos*; it is “a holy and immortal theory.”¹⁶ Those who study “dances of the gods and mysteries” (i.e., astrologers) enter into “an immortal place” and attain a “god-like glory” and “eternal honor and fame.”¹⁷ The knowledge of heavenly bodies is “divine and revered” and inspires Valens to keep his life pure and his soul “immortal.”¹⁸ These descriptions mirror Aristotle’s description of the heavenly αἰών as “immortal and divine” (*De caelo* 1.279a28).

Valens even swears by the cycles of the planets, Sun, and Moon: “I adjure you, my most honored brother, and those being initiated into the mysteries with this composition, by the starry vault of heaven and circle of the twelve zodiac signs, by both the Sun and Moon, and the five wandering stars through which all life is driven, by both Providence itself and holy Necessity, to keep these things in secret.”¹⁹

Thus, Valens finds an approximation of eternity both in studying astrology and the doctrine itself. Though the body may be mortal, Valens ardently believes that the theory and practice of astrology is a path for the soul to the immortal, divine, and eternal.

Notes

- 1 In Vettius Valens, *Anthologiarum libri novem*, ed. David Pingree (Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1986), 318.17–28, my translation.
- 2 See Stephan Heilen, “Some Metrical Fragments from Nechepsos and Petosiris,” in *La poésie astrologique dans l’Antiquité*, ed. I. Boehm and W. Hübner (Paris: De Boccard, 2011), 23–93.
- 3 See Dorian Gieseler Greenbaum, “The Daimon in Hellenistic Astrology: Origins and Influence” (Ph.D. diss., Warburg

- Institute, University of London, 2009), and eadem, *The Daimon in Hellenistic Astrology: Origins and Influence* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2015).
- 4 See James Miller, *Measures of Wisdom: The Cosmic Dance in Classical and Christian Antiquity* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986), 23, 28–37, 46–49.
- 5 Miller, *Measures of Wisdom*.
- 6 Miller, *Measures of Wisdom*, 41, 59.
- 7 Miller, *Measures of Wisdom*, 258.
- 8 Joanna Komorowska, *Vettius Valens of Antioch: An Intellectual Monography* (Kraków: Księgarnia Akademicka, 2004).
- 9 See Godefroid de Callataÿ, *Annus Platonius: A Study of World Cycles in Greek, Latin and Arabic Sources* (Paris: Peeters, 1996).
- 10 Heilen, “Some Metrical Fragments from Nechepsos and Petosiris,” 60.
- 11 See de Callataÿ, *Annus Platonius*, 7–9.
- 12 Valens, *Anthology* IX, 8.35 (*Anthologiarum libri novem*, 330.13).
- 13 Paulus Alexandrinus, *Elementa Apotelesmatica*, ed. Emilie Boer (Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1958), 49; Paulus Alexandrinus and Olympiodorus, *Late Classical Astrology: Paulus Alexandrinus and Olympiodorus with the Scholia from Later Commentators*, trans. Dorian Gieseler Greenbaum (Reston, VA: 2001), 42.
- 14 Valens will demonstrate this in the remainder of Chapter 2 of Book IX. See the discussion of these lots so used in Greenbaum, *The Daimon in Hellenistic Astrology*, 331–335; see also the rich commentary of Stephan Heilen, “Hadriani Genitura”—*Die astrologischen Fragmente des Antigonos von Nikaia* (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter), 2 vols., here vol. 2, 1158–1182, whom I thank for emphasizing their importance in this chapter and spurring me to further investigation.
- 15 See Valens, *Anthology* IV, 1–10, 17–25 (*Anthologiarum libri novem*,).
- 16 Valens, *Anthology* IV, 11.9 (*Anthologiarum libri novem*, 163.20–21).
- 17 Valens, *Anthology* IV, 11.14 (*Anthologiarum libri novem*, 164.13–15); *Anthology* IX, 6.7 (*Anthologiarum libri novem*, 345.5).
- 18 Valens, *Anthology* VI, 1.15 (*Anthologiarum libri novem*, 232.6–8).
- 19 Valens, *Anthology* IV, 11.11–12 (*Anthologiarum libri novem*, 163.25–29); similarly at *Anthology* VII, 1.3 (*Anthologiarum libri novem*, 251.18–22) and VII, 6.231–234 (*Anthologiarum libri novem*, 281.4–18) (*Anthologiarum libri novem*, 231–234).