

Eternity

Infinity in the sense of not being determined by time is the eternity of God. Scripture nowhere speaks of a beginning of or an end to God's existence. Though he is often most vividly pictured as entering into time, he still transcends it. He is the first and the last (Isa. 41:4; Rev. 1:8), who existed before the world was (Gen. 1:1; John 1:1; 17:5, 24) and who continues despite all change (Ps. 102:27–28). He is God from eternity to eternity (Ps. 90:2; 93:2). The number of his years is unsearchable (Job 36:26). A thousand years in his sight are as brief as yesterday is to our mind (Ps. 90:4; 2 Pet. 3:8). He is the everlasting God (Isa. 40:28; Rom. 16:26), who inhabits eternity (Isa. 57:15), lives forever and ever (Deut. 32:40; Rev. 10:6; 15:7).

swears by his life (Num. 14:21, 28), is called "the living and enduring God" (1 Pet. 1:23), the immortal God (Rom. 1:23; 1 Tim. 6:16), who is and who was and who is to come (Exod. 3:14; Rev. 1:4, 8). Here too, to be sure, Scripture speaks of God in human fashion, and of eternity in the forms of time. At the same time it clearly indicates that God transcends time and cannot be measured or defined by the standards of time. The Deism of past and present, however, defines eternity as time infinitely extended in both directions. According to it, the difference between time and eternity is merely quantitative, not qualitative; gradual, not essential. The difference is not that eternity excludes the succession of moments but that it is without beginning and end. The past, present, and future exist not only for humans but also for and in God. So taught the Socinians^[46] and many people after them.^[47] Pantheism, on the other hand, similarly confused eternity and time. According to it, God and the world are related as "nature begetting" (*natura naturans*) and "nature begotten" (*natura naturata*).^[48] Eternity, says pantheism, is not essentially distinct from time but rather the "substance," the immanent cause of time, while time is the "mode," the "accident" of eternity, as waves are the incidental forms in which the ocean appears to us. God himself is pulled down into the stream of time and only comes to full relation in time.^[49] Strauss voiced this view clearly: "Eternity and time relate to each other as substance and its accidents,"^[50] while Schleiermacher cautiously defined God's eternity as "God's absolutely timeless causality, which conditions all that is temporal and even time itself."

Also, with respect to this perfection of God, Christian theology must avoid the errors of both Deism and pantheism. It is of course true that one distinction between eternity and time is that the latter has a beginning and an end (at least potentially) and the former does not. But this does not exhaust the difference between them. The marks of the concept of eternity are three: it excludes a beginning, an end, and the succession of moments. God is unbegotten (*ἀγεννητος*) and incorruptible (*ἀφθαρτος*) but also immutable.^[51] Between eternity and time there is a distinction not only in quantity and degree but also in quality and essence. Even though he thought he could conceive of motion in a world without any beginning, Aristotle already commented that though time is not synonymous with motion, it is most intimately connected with it, with "becoming," that is, with the transition from the potential to the actual. Augustine expressed this somewhat differently by saying that time exists only where the present becomes past and the future becomes present.

"What, then, is time? If no one asks me, I know; if I want to explain it to someone who asks me, I do not know. I can state with confidence, however, that this much I do know: if nothing passed away, there would be no past time; if there was nothing still on its way, there would be no future time; and if nothing existed, there would be no present time."^[52] Time is not a separate substance, a real something, but a mode of existence. If there were no creatures, there would be no time. "Time began with the creature" is a truer statement than that which says, "The creature began with time."^[53] On the other hand, time is also not merely a subjective form of observation either, as Kant thought.^[54] Admittedly, there is an element of truth here, too, and Augustine reasoned that for humans to measure and compute time, a thinking mind is required—a mind that retains the past by recollection, exists in the present, and expects the future, and to that extent measures the times within itself.^[55] But in saying this, Augustine did not imply that there would be no measurable and divisible movement of things if there were no thinking mind that counted and measured it. A distinction needs to be made, however, between extrinsic and intrinsic time. By extrinsic time we mean the standard by which we measure motion. In a sense this is accidental and arbitrary. We derive it from the motion of the heavenly bodies, which is constant and universally known (Gen. 1:14ff.). Time in this sense will one day cease (Rev. 10:6; 21:23ff.). But intrinsic time is something else. It is the mode of existence by virtue of which things have a past, present, and future as so many parts which, whatever the standard employed, can be measured and counted. Now whatever can be measured and counted is subject to measure and number and thus limited, for there always remains a measure and a number greater than that which was measured and numbered.

Accordingly, the essential nature of time is not that either with respect to the earlier or the later it is finite or endless, but that it encompasses a succession of moments, that there is in it a period that is past, a period that is present, and a period that comes later. But from this it follows that time—intrinsic time—is the mode of existence that is characteristic of all created and finite beings. One who says "time" says motion, change, measurability, computability, limitation, finiteness, creature. Time is the duration of creaturely existence. "Time is the measure of motion in a movable object." Hence, there can be no time in God. From eternity to eternity he is who he is. There is in him "no variation or shadow due to change" [James 1:17]. God is not a process of becoming but an eternal being. He is without beginning and end, but also knows no earlier and later. He can neither be subjected to measuring or counting in his duration. A thousand years are to him as a day. He is the eternal

I AM (John 8:58). God's eternity, accordingly, should be thought rather as an eternal present without past or future. "To God all things are present. Your today is eternity. Eternity itself is the substance of God, which has in it nothing that is changeable."^[56] Concerning God's eternity Boethius stated that "God comprehends and at the same time possesses a complete fullness of endless life."^[57] And Thomas described this eternity "as a complete and at the same time a full possession of endless life."^[58] And so speak all the theologians, not only the Roman Catholic but the Lutheran and the Reformed as well.^[59]

Nevertheless, God's eternity should not for that reason be conceived as an eternally static, immobile moment of time. On the contrary: it is identical with God's being and hence with his fullness of being. Not only is God eternal; he is his own eternity.^[60] A true analogy of it is not the contentless existence of a person for whom, as a result of idleness or boredom, grief or fear, the minutes seem like hours and the days do not go but creep. The analogy lies rather in the abundant and exuberant life of the cheerful laborer, for whom time barely exists and days fly by. From this perspective there is truth in the assertion that in hell there is no eternity but only time, and that the more a creature resembles God and is his image, the more he or she will rise above the imperfections of time and approach eternity.^[61] Hence, God's eternity does not stand, abstract and transcendent, above time, but is present and immanent in every moment of time. There is indeed an essential difference between eternity and time, but there is also an analogy and kinship between them so that the former can indwell and work in the latter. Time is a concomitant of created existence. It is not self-originated. Eternal time, a time without beginning, is not conceivable. God, the eternal One, is the only absolute cause of time. In and by itself time cannot exist or endure: it is a continuous becoming and must rest in immutable being. It is God who by his eternal power sustains time, both in its entirety and in each separate moment of it. God pervades time and every moment of time with his eternity. In every second throbs the heartbeat of eternity. Hence, God maintains a definite relation to time, entering into it with his eternity. Also, for him time is objective. In his eternal consciousness he knows time as a whole as well as the succession of all its moments. But this fact does not make him temporal, that is, subject to time, measure, or number. He remains eternal and inhabits eternity, but uses time with a view to manifesting his eternal thoughts and perfections. He makes time subservient to eternity and thus proves himself to be the King of the ages (1 Tim. 1:17).