

God and eternity¹

What is the relationship between God and time? Many religions hold that God is self-sufficient, dependent on nothing else for existence. If something brought God into existence, God would be dependent on that thing to exist. If there were something that could end God's existence, then God is equally dependent on that thing (not exercising its power) to continue to exist. If God depends on nothing else, then nothing can bring God into existence or end God's existence. And so (if God exists) God's existence has no beginning or end.

There are two ways in which this can be expressed. If God exists in time, then having no beginning or end, God exists throughout all time. God is a temporal being that is everlasting. If God exists outside time, then God is an atemporal being, timeless. In this case, God's existence is eternal. God has no beginning or end because the ideas of beginning and end only make sense in time - something can only start or stop existing in time. God is not in time, so God cannot start or stop existing.

This idea of God's 'eternal' existence says very little - just that God is atemporal - and even this is negative (God does not exist in time). Furthermore, while we can say this, it is very hard to understand what we could mean. What is it for a being, such as God, to exist 'outside time'? We discuss this question through an article by Eleanore Stump and Norman Kretzmann entitled 'Eternity'.

BOETHIUS ON ETERNAL BEING

Stump and Kretzmann begin their analysis of eternity with a famous definition by Boethius in his *Consolations of Philosophy*. An eternal being such as God, Boethius says, is one that has 'the complete possession all at once of illimitable life'. This life is possessed in its 'whole fullness', 'such that nothing future is absent from it and nothing past has flowed away'. Instead, it is 'always present to itself'.

In another work, *On the Trinity*, Boethius argues that this means that we need to understand the idea of 'now' differently for an eternal being. 'Now' for us, as beings that exist in time, marks the present moment in time and the passage of time. 'Now' is always becoming the past; it is only ever 'now' for an instant. But for an eternal being, 'now' remains and doesn't move - it marks out the whole eternal life of the being.

These are very difficult ideas, and it will take considerable discussion to understand them. But as a start, we can say that an eternal being

¹ This handout is based on material from Lacewing, M. (2017) *Philosophy for A Level: Metaphysics of God and Metaphysics of Mind* (London: Routledge), Ch. 2, pp. 31-7

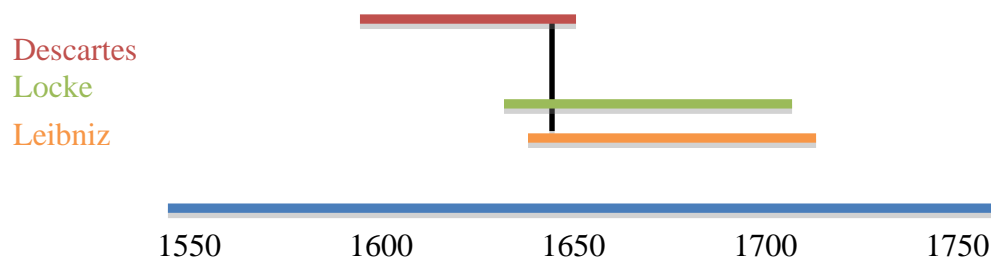
1. has 'life';
2. cannot have a beginning or an end, since it is 'illimitable' - not only limitless, but can't be limited;
3. is atemporal in possessing its whole life all at once, giving a distinct meaning to 'now'; and
4. involves a special kind of duration, as no part of its life is ever absent.

We need to understand each of these claims. (1) is fairly straightforward (at least in theory!). The 'life' of eternal being can't be physical or biological. What is physical or biological is temporal. It exists in time and undergoes change. So the life of eternal being must be a 'psychological life'.

(2) is similarly straightforward. This psychological life of an eternal being is not limited. If something has a beginning or an end, then it is limited - it does not exist before its beginning or after its end. So this is a life that has no beginning or end.

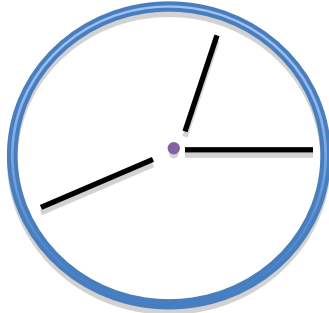
These first two conditions are compatible with God being everlasting - existing throughout time but with no beginning or end in time. (3) rejects this interpretation of God's relationship to time and is much harder to understand. The events that constitute the life of an eternal being do not, from its perspective, follow one another in time. Its whole life is experienced as 'now', i.e. as 'present'. That 'present' isn't flanked by past or future, it is not a moment in which future becomes past. It is a non-temporal present.

How can we understand this claim and the relation of an atemporal being, such as God, to temporal beings, such as ourselves? We will need to unpack the idea of 'now'. But first, it may help to have a picture in mind. We are used to thinking of time in timelines, with beings that exist at the same time - simultaneously - as overlapping one another on the line. We can figure out whether two beings exist at the same time by drawing straight lines at right angles to the timeline. A line at right angles to the timeline picks out a particular 'moment in time' - a moment that was, at that time, 'present'. Whatever occurs in the same moment is simultaneous - it occurs at the same time. So we can see that, for part of their lives, Descartes, Locke and Leibniz were all alive at the same time (1646-1650).



But we cannot show where an eternal being fits using this picture, because it isn't in time at all. The timeline is a picture of how future time becomes present and then past. Whether an event is future, present or past depends where on the timeline one is. But an eternal being doesn't have future or past, only present. It needs to be in a different dimension from the timeline.

Boethius suggests picturing the whole of time as the circumference of the circle and God as the centre point of the circle. From the centre of the circle, we can draw a line at right angles to any point on the circumference (the timeline). God is simultaneous with every point in time.



In this diagram, we can map every different moment in time onto just the one moment of God's entire existence.

These are only pictures, and they can be misleading (e.g. Boethius is not suggesting that time goes in a circle!). But they may help us understand the complexity of 'now' or 'simultaneity' when talking about an eternal being. We said there was a time when Descartes, Locke and Leibniz all lived simultaneously. An eternal being is simultaneous with every point in time. We cannot mean 'simultaneous' in the same sense in both sentences. We cannot say that an eternal being exists at the same time as events in time, since it doesn't exist in time. So what can we mean?

TYPES OF SIMULTANEITY

Stump and Kretzmann propose two new concepts of simultaneity to explain the relationship of God to time. The familiar concept of simultaneity is that two things are simultaneous if they exist or occurrence at one and the same time. But this is, obviously, a definition that presupposes that the two things are in time. Call our familiar concept 'T-simultaneity' (for temporal simultaneity). Part of the life of Descartes was T-simultaneous with part of the lives of Locke and Leibniz. (See the handout 'God and eternity: further thoughts' for Stump and Kretzmann discussion the relativity of simultaneity, given Einstein's theory of space-time.)

For an eternal being, its whole life is present. This is a new idea of simultaneity, call it 'E-simultaneity' (for eternal simultaneity). Two events or beings are E-simultaneous if they exist or occur in one and the same eternal present. Any two events in God's life will be simultaneous, since all events in God's life are present, in the eternal 'now'. This is an atemporal concept of simultaneity.

We can use these two concepts of simultaneity to create a third concept which will explain the relationship of an eternal being to time, to say that God is simultaneous with any (and every) event in time, 'ET-simultaneity' (for simultaneity between something eternal and something temporal). The concept is more complicated because we can't say that the two simultaneous things exist at

the same time (since one is atemporal) nor that they exist in the eternal present (since one is temporal).

Let's take the event in time as your reading this paragraph. From God's perspective, your reading this paragraph is present and so is the whole of God's eternal life. Your reading this paragraph is present in the temporal sense - it is 'now', in between past and future; and the whole of God's life is 'now' in the eternal present. From your perspective, your reading this paragraph is now in time, and God is eternally present.

More generally, from our temporal perspective, because God is ET-simultaneous with every moment in time, then God is present at every moment in time. God is never past or future, and no part of God is past or present (so talk of how God 'used to be' or how God 'will be' makes no sense). From God's perspective, every event in time is observed as occurring in the present, ET-simultaneous with all of God's life. As Stump and Kretzmann put it, 'From a temporal standpoint, the present is ET-simultaneous with the whole infinite extent of an eternal entity's life. From the standpoint of eternity, every time is present, co-occurrent with the whole of infinite atemporal duration.' So God experiences every moment in time as present together, and the whole of God's existence is simultaneous with each moment in time.

The formal definition of ET-simultaneity is this:

Assume x is some temporal event and y is some eternal event. x and y are ET-simultaneous iff

1. for an eternal being, A , x and y are both present, x observed as temporally present and y as eternally present; and
2. for a temporal being, B , x and y are both present, x observed as temporally present and y as eternally present.

Because you are temporal, existing over a period of time, and God is eternal, we should not say that you and God exist at the same time. In other words, you and God do not exist T-simultaneously. Likewise, you do not exist eternally. So you and God do not exist E-simultaneously. But (if God exists and is eternal) you and God exist ET-simultaneously - at each moment when you exist, God also exists eternally.

A last point. Descartes existed (for a time) T-simultaneously with Locke, and Locke existed (at that same time) T-simultaneously with Leibniz. From knowing this, we can infer that Descartes existed (for a time) T-simultaneously with Leibniz. T-simultaneity is a 'transitive' relation. (A transitive relation is just one in which if it holds between x and y , and between y and z , then it holds between x and z . For example, if x is bigger than y , and y is bigger than z , then x is bigger than z .) If x happens at the same time as y , and y happens at the same time as z , then x and z also happen at the same time.

It is important to notice that ET-simultaneity is not transitive. If your reading this paragraph is ET-simultaneous with God, and another temporal event, say your 10th

birthday is also ET-simultaneous with God, this doesn't mean that your reading this paragraph is ET-simultaneous, or even T-simultaneous, with your 10th birthday. (If it is your 10th birthday, I'm very impressed, and happy birthday!)

ATEMPORAL DURATION

The final idea we need to look at is (4), God's existence as a special kind of duration. We said that our present is a moment in time, an instant at which future becomes past. The eternal present, God's present, is not like that, because there is no future or past. What it is like is hard, perhaps impossible, to imagine. It is a type of limitless, pastless, futureless duration. Perhaps the best way to try to understand this is to think about our concept of 'duration'.

Something that 'endures' lasts through time. It persists through time, it continues to exist. It isn't ephemeral or fleeting. These concepts have a resonance for us - endurance, persistence, substance, permanence. But what does the existence of any temporal thing, you for instance, really amount to? You exist through time, in the past, the present and the future. When your life is finished, you no longer exist. But right now, you exist. But how? The past does not exist and the future is yet to exist. You existed in the past, but you don't any more - that part of your life is gone. The past of your life does not exist. You will exist in the future, but you don't yet - that part is yet to exist. The future of your life does not exist. So it seems that your existence is only in the present. But what is that? Just a fleeting moment at which the future becomes the past! To exist in time is barely to exist at all, it seems!

We said that something that endures, that has duration, is not fleeting or ephemeral. Yet the existence of anything in time seems to consist in no more than existence in a fleeting moment. Most of its 'existence' is either past or future, so not in existence at all! If God existed in time, even if God is everlasting, this would be just as true of God as of you. God's past would not exist, nor would God's future. Only that part of God that is present would exist.

But now think of a form of existence in which no part of one's existence has disappeared into the past or has yet to come into existence in the future, an existence the whole of which is present. This is existence in which none of the existence of the thing has already gone and none of which is yet to come. That is what atemporal duration is, and according to Boethius, Stump and Kretzmann, it is the form of existence that God has. Everything that God ever 'was' or 'will be' always 'is'.