

Eternity: The History of a Concept

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Main Goals of the Series:

The main goal of the Oxford Philosophical Concepts (OPC) series is to offer philosophically subtle and historically sound accounts of central concepts in the history of philosophy. Each volume will be a history of its concept in that it will offer a story about the most significant events in the life of the concept from its original inception through its transformations to its modern use. The point of this narrative is to deepen understanding of the concept and explore its role in the history of philosophy. Volumes will include the best international scholars, “extra-philosophical” material or Reflections, a lexicon mapping the relation between the concept and terms referring to it, and thorough indices.

1. General Description

Eternity is a unique kind of *existence* that is supposed to belong to the most real being or beings. It is an existence that is not shaken by the common wear and tear of time. Over the history of western philosophy we find two main distinct notions of eternity: (1) eternity as *timeless* existence, and (2) eternity as existence in *all times*. Both kinds of existence stand in sharp contrast to the coming in and out of existence of ordinary beings, like hippos, humans, and toothbrushes: were it eternal-timeless, a hippo could not eat, a human could not think or laugh, and a toothbrush would be of no use. The former notion of eternity goes back to Plato (and possibly to Parmenides); the latter is closely connected with Aristotelian philosophy. In recent philosophy, eternity has come out of favor, though proponents of

realism in contemporary philosophy of mathematics, and of timeless propositions (propositions that are said to exist independently of the uttered sentences that convey their thought-content) in philosophy of language, might perhaps be considered as eternalists (in contemporary analytic Protestant theology, the notion of eternity is widely discussed).

The importance of eternity is not limited to strictly philosophical discussions. It is a notion that also has an important role in traditional biblical interpretation. The Tetragrammaton, the Hebrew name of God considered to be most sacred, is derived from the Hebrew verb for being, and as a result has been traditionally interpreted as denoting eternal existence (in either one of the two senses of eternity). Hence Calvin translates the Tetragrammaton as '*l'Eternel*', and Mendelssohn as '*das ewige Wesen*' or '*der Ewige*'. Eternity also has some interesting use in contemporary South American fiction, especially in the works of J.L. Borges. In the current volume we would like to study the biblical interpretations as well as the literary uses of the concept. We would also be interested in artistic interpretations of eternity in painting, and even (paradoxically) in music.

2. Detailed synopsis and chapter headings

Chapter One: Introducing the Philosophical Questions (Yitzhak Y. Melamed)

In this short chapter we will introduce the concept of eternity, the two main competing senses of the term (everlastingness and atemporality), the related concepts of time and duration, and the main philosophical questions associated with the concept. Already at this early stage we would like to raise the following question: Why is eternal existence considered more real than temporal existence? - What is the relation between timeless-eternity and the present tense? What kinds of relations between timeless and temporal entities are legitimate?

(Causal relations? If so, what kind of causality is operative? Explanatory relations? If so, must the explanatory relation be asymmetric? - Is the notion of *timeless action* consistent? If God is supposed to be 'living', in what sense can he be eternal? - Can non-existing things be eternal? - Can material things be eternal? - Are there eternal truths, and if so, can temporal minds know them? - Do eternal entities have to be *active*? (Are numbers eternal?). The chapter will conclude with an overview of the book's structure.

Chapter Two: The Concept of Eternity in Antiquity (James Wilberding)

The early history of the concept of eternity turns out to be as slippery as the concept itself. It is generally agreed that by the end of late Antiquity the concept of eternity had emerged, but when exactly it developed and who developed it remains a matter of controversy. Added to these problems are those concerned with the content of the concept of eternity itself. In this chapter I shall investigate the evidence on the notion of eternity in antiquity, and I shall approach the evidence by looking to see what philosophical problems the introduction of (some notion of) eternity is meant to solve. The chapter will be divided into four sections. In a brief first section I will introduce and discuss the vocabulary the ancients used to discuss eternity. Here I shall pay particular attention to the Greek term *aiôn*, which by the end of late antiquity comes to refer to eternity, but which in Homer has the rather different sense of 'age' or 'lifetime'. These connections to life shall become important in subsequent sections. The second section shall be devoted to the Pre-Socratics. Here Parmenides will naturally be the main focus, as he is taken by some to be the first thinker to have articulated some notion of eternity, though other Pre-Socratic material will also be considered here or in the first section as appropriate (e.g., Empedocles' use of *aiôn*). The third section shall be devoted to Plato and Aristotle. Plato famously presents time as a

‘moving image of eternity (*aión*)’ in the *Timaeus*, and this shall be examined along with other material in the *Corpus Platonicum*, including Plato’s characterizations of the Forms and his remarks on the One’s relation to time in the *Parmenides*. Since the ‘eternity’ of the intelligible world appears to be intended as an answer to problems caused by the flux affecting the sensible world, I shall attempt to shed some light on Plato’s notion of intelligible eternity by looking at Plato’s account of sensible flux. Determining Aristotle’s place in the history of eternity is difficult. On the one hand Aristotle’s opposition to Platonic Forms might seem to render eternity a concept without any extension in his metaphysics, but on the other hand Aristotle offers us a remarkable rich discussion of the nature of time, which sheds light on earlier accounts and informs many subsequent accounts of eternity. Here I shall use Aristotle’s discussion of time to help illuminate what Plato and others are saying, but also to investigate Aristotle’s own views on the ‘life’ of his unmoved mover, as described in, e.g., *Metaphysics* XII and *De Caelo* I.9. The final and, I predict, longest section will be devoted to later Platonic theories of eternity. Three figures – Plotinus, Augustine and Boethius – that have traditionally (and correctly) received the most attention for their contributions to the topic will also receive their due place here, though without marginalizing other important Middle and Late Platonic thinkers. It is in this period that we find the fullest discussions not only of the nature of eternity itself, but also of the consequences of there being an eternity, and both of these topics shall be examined. As for the former, I shall argue *inter alia* that emanationist metaphysics provides a metaphysical background that makes the notion of eternity as metaphysical *life* more comprehensible by allowing for timeless activities that have a bearing on the temporal goings-on in the sensible world. As regards the latter, a number of issues and debates will be explored with particular emphasis on the epistemological

consequences for humans and for god(s) and the metaphysical consequences for the creation and possible destruction of the sensible world.

Chapter Three: The Concept of Eternity in Medieval Philosophy (Peter Adamson)

The topic of this volume provides an unusually good opportunity for tracing a philosophical concept from the late ancient period through the Islamic philosophical tradition, and on into the scholastic Latin west. This chapter will look at three distinct, but frequently interacting, conceptions of eternity in the Islamic world, before moving on to look at the impact of the this tradition on Christian medieval philosophy. Our look at eternity in the Islamic world will include Jewish authors as well as Muslims: both Saadia Gaon and Maimonides are prominent contributors to the debate over the eternity of the world.

Out of the three conceptions of eternity to be considered in this chapter, two derive from the ancient Greek tradition and will already have been explored in the chapter by Wilberding (ch.2). These conceptions are (a) eternity as timelessness and (b) eternity as an infinite duration supervening on an infinite motion. The former comes into the Islamic world in late Platonic texts, especially versions of Plotinus and Proclus produced in al-Kindi's circle in the 9th century. Accordingly it is unsurprising to find al-Kindi saying that "God is above time, since He is the cause of time." Al-Kindi favors this idea of eternity over the more Aristotelian idea of infinite duration supervening on motion: he is unusual among Islamic philosophers in rejecting the eternity of the created world. On the other hand al-Kindi is also influenced by a third concept indigenous to the Islamic world (though certainly having resonances with the late Platonic conception): (c) eternity as a near-synonym of divinity. Al-Kindi, like other authors of his period more associated with *kalam* (Islamic theology), assumes that "eternal" means "on an ontological par with God." This equation will not be

broken decisively until the 10th-11th centuries, with the work of the Ash‘arites in theology and Avicenna in philosophy.

Another figure who draws on these conceptions, negatively and positively, is the 9th-10th century philosopher al-Razi. He is another unusual case among Islamic philosophers in that he had Plato’s *Timaeus*, rather than the late Platonists or Aristotle, as his primary influence. Under this influence, he set forward a strikingly original theory which departs from both the late Platonist and Aristotelian conceptions. For al-Razi, eternity is an infinite extension which does *not* supervene on motion. He calls this not only “eternity” but also “absolute time.” Here eternity is not atemporal, but rather the “empty” temporal extension within which God creates the world. (Thus al-Razi treats it as similar to void, which he calls “absolute place.”) Al-Razi is arguably the first philosopher to put forward a conception of time as both infinitely extended and independent from motion (though he draws here on Galen’s critique of Aristotle in the lost *On Demonstration*).

These discussions provide the background for what may be the most prominent single philosophical issue in Islamic philosophy (or at least in western perceptions of that tradition): the eternity of the world. We have already mentioned that al-Kindi rejected the world’s eternity, apparently in order to avoid putting the world on a par with God. Saadia Gaon does the same, using some of the same arguments, drawn from the late Platonist John Philoponus. More famous, though, is the clash over this issue in al-Ghazali and Averroes. The question receives a more aporetic answer in both Maimonides and (following him) Aquinas, both of whom try to show that neither side have compelling arguments so that the issue can only be decided by recourse to revealed truth. However some Latin Christian

authors, the so-called “Latin Averroists,” held that the eternity of the world can be proven if we accept certain limited premises from physics, which might however be overturned from a higher theological or metaphysical perspective. Thus, the debate over the eternity of the world becomes largely a methodological one – what sorts of argument could in principle settle the question? This issue is closely linked to the different conceptions of eternity canvassed above. The idea that the eternity of the world can be proven *physically* is linked to the Aristotelian conception of eternity as infinite duration supervening on time, whereas the idea that revelation or metaphysics has the last word on the subject goes hand-in-hand with the late Platonic and Islamic theological conceptions of eternity as timelessness and/or divinity.

Chapter Four: The Concept of Eternity in Early Modern Philosophy (Yitzhak Y. Melamed)

Modernity seemed to be the autumn of eternity. The secularization of European culture and the emergence of modern humanism provided little sustenance to the concept of eternity with its heavy theological baggage. Yet, our hero would not leave the stage without an outstanding performance of its power and temptation. Indeed, in the first three centuries of the modern period the concept of eternity will play a crucial role in the great philosophical systems of the period. In this chapter we will concentrate on the debate about the temporality of God. While most of the great metaphysicians of the period – Suarez, Spinoza, Malebranche, and Leibniz – ascribed to God eternal (non-temporal) existence, a growing number of philosophers conceived God as existing in time. For Newton, God’s eternity was simply the fact that “He was, he is, and is to come.” A similar view of God as being essentially in time was endorsed by Pierre Gassendi, Henry More, Samuel Clarke, Isaac Barrow, John Locke, and most probably Descartes as well. In order to clarify the nature of

the dispute we will look closely at the use of the terms of eternity [*aeternitas*], duration [*duratio*], and time [*tempus*] in the writings of these philosophers. We will also study the emergence of the concept of eternal truth, and the relation between God's immutability and his role in the conservation of motion. Spinoza's original understanding of eternity as self-necessitated existence will be the subject of a detailed analysis.

Chapter Five: The Concept of Eternity in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Continental Philosophy (Alistair Welchman)

Kant's philosophy decisively re-orientes the understanding of the eternal for European thought of the next two centuries. At one level, Kant's mature thought clearly involves a critique of the metaphysical speculation characteristic of the early modern era, including speculation about the eternal. At the same time, one of the core claims of Kant's positive doctrine of transcendental idealism is that space and time are subjective forms of appearance and the well-known—if controversial—corollary of this doctrine is that things in themselves are non-temporal and hence eternal. To the extent that the post-Kantian tradition of German idealism emphasizes such issues, it is sometimes regarded as regressing to a pre-critical metaphysical position. But there is, I argue, a marked change after Kant, even if metaphysical and theological issues do not altogether disappear. That change is the result of Kant's famous dictum that he has denied knowledge of things in themselves in order to make way for faith, specifically the faith that we, human persons, understood as things in ourselves, might still be free even though as appearances we are rigorously causally determined. As a result of this change, Kant inaugurates an association of the eternity of things in themselves with the subjective experience of human freedom that was to be taken up by a number of thinkers in nineteenth century, including Schelling, Schopenhauer,

Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. A brief first section of the essay will paint an appropriate picture of this Kantian background.

Metaphysical and theological issues are by no means absent from many of these nineteenth century discussions, especially from Schelling and Kierkegaard. But, due in large part to the intervening philosophical influence of Kant, we can begin to note a change in the way in which the concept of eternity is deployed. The concept becomes associated not simply with metaphysical descriptions of God but is also increasingly connected with questions of subjectivity, of the concrete manner in which we experience the world and especially our freedom within it. This of course is true in different ways and to different degrees in the thought of Schelling and Kierkegaard, but it does introduce the possibility of a secular, sometimes even psychological dimension, which will continue to be felt right up to, for instance, Nietzsche's conception of eternal return.

Even where Schelling and Kierkegaard do engage in a more conventional metaphysics of eternity, they draw upon literary methods to sustain some ironic distance from the content of their discussions: Schelling by means of a mythological register and Kierkegaard by masking himself under his pseudonyms. Eternity, for Schelling, describes both what is 'prior to' temporality as well as the perspective that transcends temporality. It describes the nature of the act that constitutes temporality itself, the act of divine creation, but this act is one that is recapitulated in the free decision in which a human being constitutes him or herself as an authentic individual. Schelling's conception of eternity as a moment of radical and unmotivated choice of character is a piece of anti-Hegelianism (it does not stand in a dialectical relation to temporality) that links him to Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard is concerned with eternity as a lived experience of freedom—encapsulated in his theory of the moment—as the condition for the possibility both of an

authentic grounding in temporality and of religious redemption. Of particular importance for all these thinkers—starting with the Kant of the *Religion* text—is the idea that human freedom (and responsibility) is linked to an act that takes place in eternity, ‘outside’ of time. This paradoxical thought will form the link between the thinkers discussed in this longer second section of the essay.

In the—again shorter—third section I will investigate the contemporary fate of the concept of eternity in European thought. Until very recently, this fate has been, I think ignominious. The increasing development of an at least potentially or problematically secular understanding of eternity in the nineteenth century centered on the experience of human freedom is stymied by the twentieth century. There is still some talk of the eternal in a number of significant twentieth century thinkers such as Martin Heidegger, Henri Bergson and Gilles Deleuze. But I will argue that it is mainly diagnostic in intent. These thinkers are primarily interested in the concept of *time*. They want to develop a deeper thought of temporality (often in relation to lived human experience) than empirical (‘clock’) temporality, and they see the metaphysical and theological notions of eternity as conceptually confused ways of doing this. Correlatively, there is some discussion of the concept in avowedly religious thinkers like Emmanuel Lévinas and, more recently, Giorgio Agamben. As a result, one might argue that the twentieth century fate of the concept of eternity suggests that the continued interest of nineteenth century thinkers in the eternal was a result of an incomplete movement of secularization. But this result is contradicted by what appears to be a genuine revival in recent years of a fully-fledged and unapologetic conception of eternity in the work of radical Maoist and philosopher of mathematics, Alain Badiou. The latter’s interest in mathematics suggests a rapprochement with Anglophone interests in eternity as descriptive

of the status of numbers and propositions. But Badiou's *political* interests also point to a revival of nineteenth century notions of the relation of human freedom with the eternal.

Chapter Six: The Concept of Eternity in Twentieth Century and Contemporary Analytic Philosophy (Kristopher McDaniel)

At the beginning of the 20th Century, many attempts were made to demonstrate by means of speculative metaphysics that time is a mere appearance. The most famous of these purported demonstrations is McTaggart's argument for the unreality of time. Although McTaggart's argument for the unreality of time is not widely viewed as successful, it did set the agenda for analytic philosophers pursuing the philosophy of time in the second half of the 20th century.

Complimenting the arguments of speculative metaphysics are the arguments of speculative philosophy of physics. The theory of special relativity seemed to some to show that temporality per se was not metaphysically fundamental, but should instead be seen as an aspect of spatiotemporality. Kurt Gödel attempted to argue from the unreality of time by appeal to considerations stemming from the theory of general relativity. And more recently, some physicists and philosophers of physics have entertained the hypothesis that spatiotemporality is itself a derivative feature that emerges from a more fundamental non-spatiotemporal framework.

My plan accordingly is as follows. In the first half of this paper, I will critically discuss some of the arguments of speculative metaphysics for the unreality of time, and follow this discussion by tracing some of the highlights of twentieth-century philosophy of time. In the second half of this paper, I will discuss the hypothesis of speculative philosophy

of physics that spacetime derives from a more fundamental basis. This hypothesis has received comparatively little attention from metaphysicians, despite the tempting prospects for speculation it invites. Accordingly, in the second half of the paper, I will discuss how the truth of this hypothesis would impact various other disputes in metaphysics, such as disputes about what it is to be an abstract rather than a concrete object, the nature of material composition, and the relationship between necessity and eternity.

Chapter Seven: Lexicon

In this chapter we will provide a brief overview of the etymology and history of eternity (and closely associated) terms. In the first section will be a discussion of the Greek terms: *aion*, *aionios*, *aidios/aidiotés*, *aei*, *nun*. The second section will discuss the Latin terms: *Aeternitas*, *Aevum*, *duratio*, and *tempus*. The third section will explain the Arabic terms: *Dahar* and *Azali*. The fourth section will discuss the Hebrew terms: *Netzach*, *Olam*, and *Zeman*. The final section will discuss eternity terms in modern European languages (*ewig*, *eternal*, etc.)

3. Definition of the market

The book seeks to engage a relatively broad audience. Its primary audience should include those with an interest in the following fields: Metaphysics, history of philosophy, philosophy of religion, and intellectual history. It is a research monograph aimed at the broad public, academics and students, and should engage readers in the US, Canada, and the UK. The book could be used as part of the core readings in undergraduate courses such as: History of Western Philosophy, Introduction to Metaphysics, and Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion.

4. Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Eternity – Introducing the Philosophical Questions

- §1. Eternity, Time, and Duration: A Few Preliminary Questions
- §2. Overview of book chapters.

Chapter 2: The Concept of Eternity in Ancient Philosophy

- §1. Homer and the ancient vocabulary for eternity
- §2. The Pre-Socratics
- §3. Plato and Aristotle
- §4. Late Platonism

Chapter 3: The Concept of Eternity in Medieval Philosophy

- §1. Eternity in Islamic and Jewish Philosophy
- §2. Eternity in medieval Christian Philosophy.

Chapter 4: The Concept of Eternity in Early Modern Philosophy

- §1. God, Time and Eternity in Early Modern Philosophy.
- §2. Eternal Truths.
- §3. Spinoza on Eternity as Self-necessitated Existence

Chapter 5: The Concept of Eternity in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Continental Philosophy

- §1. Eternity and Noumena.
- §2. Schelling and Kierkegaard.
- §3. Eternity in Twentieth Century Continental Philosophy: From Bergson to Badiou.

Chapter 6: The Concept of Eternity in Twentieth Century Contemporary Analytic Philosophy

- §1. McTaggart on the unreality of Time
- §2. Speculative Philosophy of Physics: The Theory of Relativity and the unreality of Time.

Chapter 7: Eternity Lexicon

§1. Greek terms

§2. Latin terms

§3. Arabic terms

§4. Hebrew terms.

§5. Eternity terms in modern European languages.

Bibliography

Suggested Reflections

Our intention is to have side-notes that discuss *particular* cases exemplifying *general* trends in literary, artistic and religion representation of eternity, i.e., instead of having lengthy surveys we would prefer to have a brief, direct, and straightforward example of the treatment of eternity in particular genre/discipline/art. Hence, for example, I asked Lina Steiner – a scholar of Russian and German Romanticism (University of Chicago) – to come with an example of the treatment of eternity in her field, and she suggested the rather concrete topic of the eternal punishment of Prometheus in Romantic Literature. The list below suggests a few ideas of areas we would like to cover, yet, in most areas, we still need to choose the precise concrete example in each of the areas.

- The Eternal punishment of Prometheus in Romantic Literature (19th & 20th Cent.: Lina Steiner (University of Chicago).
- Eternity as the meaning of the Tetragrammaton in biblical commentaries (medieval: author?)
- Eternity in non-Western cultures (introduction)
- Eternity in the Christological Debates (Cristophe Erismann?)
- Eternal damnation (medieval)
- The Trinity and Eternity in Renaissance Art (early modern: Christia Mercer (Columbia))
- Eternity in the Kabbalah (medieval: Moshe Idel (Hebrew U.) ?)
- Eternity in painting (medieval).
- Eternity in music (19th & 20th Cent.: Walter Frisch (Columbia)? Minimalism; Mahler and Nietzsche's eternal return; Arvo Part).
- Eternity in literature (modern): T.S. Eliott: Four Quartets?

The *Reflections* will be incorporated into the chapters.

ADDITIONS

- Schelling, *History of Modern Philosophy*, 71: Eternity is simultaneous with any time.
- Schelling, *Presentation*, §13: Everything viewed as being in itself is absolutely eternal.
- Kojève, “Note on Eternity, Time and the Concept” in *Lectures on the Phenomenology*, 100-150.
- Heidegger, *Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, §21 (p. 303): Distinction between the atemporal existence of numbers, and aeternitas.