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David Burrell

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GOD'S ETERNITY

David B. Burrell

This essay seeks to demonstrate two related theses: that (I) God, to be God, must be eternal, and (II) there is no eternity other than God's eternity. They are related in the following ways. (1) The one whose existence needs no cause cannot have a beginning and so must stand outside all that does; moreover, what exists of itself cannot but be eternal, since there is no other way for such a one to be. (2) Yet this use of 'eternal', linked as it is with the manner in which the source of all must be said to be, should not be presumed to mean the same as 'atemporal' or 'timeless'. Nor is this caution merely stipulative, for the fact that some realities (like numbers or tautologies) may be indifferent to time ought not be confused with what cannot be temporal yet must (*ex hypothesi*) be intimately related to temporal things—as the source and origin of them all.

The demonstration of these theses, then, amounts to an extended conceptual clarification, through which a clear grasp of each will illuminate the other. That clarification will also contain a recommendation for pursuing questions of philosophical theology, for the very manner in which such questions are treated already displays a way of speaking about divinity, and hence reveals a position regarding use of the language to convey the nature of God and of God's relation to the world. So, by insisting that 'eternal' be restricted to assertions about divinity, I wish to call into question the propriety of speaking of *eternity* as a "mode of being," as though there were, among the store of being, eternal ones and temporal ones.

1. ETERNITY: A FORMAL FEATURE OF DIVINITY

By insisting that eternity must characterize the one whose essence is (simply) to exist, and only such One, I am asserting, of course, that the only way that One can *be* is eternally. And if adverbs bespeak *modes*, then one not only may but must say that God's "mode of being" is eternal. Yet such phraseology is misleading precisely to the extent that it lulls us into thinking that we know what it is to speak of *being*, and know as well how that subject divides into temporal and eternal. Here the adverbial reminder is a useful one: "modes" are usually invoked to call attention not to ordinary features, where adjectives will do; but to what Wittgenstein called "formal features," where a different way of relating



to the subject is called for from us—something adverbs express.¹

In those situations where we cannot positively identify *what* it is about the item in question which elicits the particular response from us, then our very inability to characterize that feature descriptively leads us to call it a *mode*, since we do know that a different response is called for. All I am cautioning here is that we not be misled into treating such *modes* as though they were features, and features of something of which we had hold, thus assimilating their grammar to that of adjectives, on a pattern of genus and specific difference.

For the fact is that the beings with which we are acquainted are all temporal, and those which we discover to be implied by our discourse are either temporal or atemporal, but none is, strictly speaking, eternal. To find such a one I must be led beyond whatever is to the source of all that is. That such a one must be eternal, or must eternally be, is the consistent testimony of those religious traditions which assert divinity to be creator. Jewish, Christian, and Muslim philosophers and religious thinkers have, until very recent times, concurred in this judgment. Anselm (1033-1109) assembles the elements of the argument in his *Proslogion*.² Speaking of divinity, he begins (in what some would call his “second proof”): “quod utique sic vere est ut nec cogitari possit non esse” [“certainly this being so truly exists that it cannot be even thought not to exist”] (III). Now what cannot be thought not to be “solus igitur verissime omnium, et ideo maxime omnium habes esse...” [“You alone, then, of all things most truly exist and therefore of all things possess existence to the highest degree”] (III). How? “Sed certe quidquid es, non per aliud es quam per te ipsum. Tu es igitur ipsa vita qua vivis...” [“But clearly, whatever You are, you are not that through another but through Your very self. You are therefore the very life by which You live...”] (XII). God must be, then, that life by which God lives; no distinction *quid est* and *quo est*. Yet Anselm speaks of other eternal entities—created spirits (XIII). How is God yet more eternal than they? Because God’s eternity contains all, the past, present, and future of time (XIX) as well as the not yet of immortal spirits: “tua et illorum aeternitas tota tibi praesens est” [“Your eternity and theirs is wholly present to You”] (XX). such beings will better henceforth be called “semipiternal” than eternal;³ what distinguishes God’s eternity is that it “contains even the aeons of time” (XXI), and the reason it does is that “Tu solus, ergo, Domine, es quod es, et tu es qui es.... Tu vero es quod es, quia quidquid aliquando aut aliquo modo es, hoc totus et semper es. Et tu es qui proprie et simpliciter es, quia nec habes fuisse aut futurus esse, sed tantum praesens esse, nec potes cogitari aliquando non esse” [You alone then, Lord, are what You are and You are who You are... You are what you are, for whatever You are at any time or in any way this You are wholly and forever. And You are the being who exists in a strict and absolute sense because You have neither past nor future existence but only present existence; nor can You be thought not to exist at any time”]

(XXII).

The two metaphors of *containing* and *present to* are used with explicit reference to the manner in which the soul must be said to be present to all parts of the body (XIII), and so is better said to contain the body than to be contained in it.⁴ God's existence is said to be simple because it is totally present to itself—the decisive note of eternity; yet that must be the case because “non per aliud es quam per te ipsum” [“You are not what You are through another”] (XII). So the argument is circular: simply to be entails being eternally, and vice-versa. Why? What is going on here? Not a surreptitious proof *that* God exists, but an attempt to characterize the One from whom comes all that is. Such a one, then, can only exist of itself: “non per aliud es quam per te ipsum,” because it cannot belong to that universe whose existence comes from another. Creation, then, is the cosmic structure presupposed, so the philosophic task becomes one of articulating the manner of being of the creator of all that is.

The temptation, of course, would be to overlook the distinction of creator from creation, and go on to speak of God as among the store of things that are. God would, to be sure, occupy the first place among all things, and be characterized by distinguishing properties like *aseity*. That is, unlike everything else that is, God would not be caused but exist of itself. In other words, God is among the set of existing things, yet exists in a manner different from any other. Whoever is prepared to speak that way, however, must also be prepared to show why there is only one such divinity, for *aseity* looks enough like a distributable property for the question to arise.

Anselm's strategy, however, is designed to keep such a question from arising, by incorporating the distinction of creator from creation in a formulation displaying how it can coherently only be said of the One from whom comes all that is, and that such a One must exist of itself. For nothing else can be said of that One, yet it need not (and does not) follow that we know what we have said! *Aseity*, in short, is not a property of things like one of Aristotle's predictables. It is rather a “formal feature” of divinity, like “created” is of all that comes forth from the creator. The only possible hold *we* have on something's “existing of itself” would be by way of contrast with the total context for our thought and action: the created universe. The philosophic task lies in displaying that distinction and thus the uniqueness of the One standing over against all that is.⁵

By his disarming way of putting *aseity*—that such a One “simply is”—Anselm underscores that he is not assigning a property to God as one might to any created object, by going on to insist that “simply to be” entails “neither past nor future but only present being.” Simply to be sets one apart from created being, which has its being from another. The language of ‘before’ and ‘after’ is co-terminous with creation, as Augustine reminded us, because what “simply is” has no stages to mark. Linking *eternity* with *aseity*, then offers a way of concatenating formal

features so as to characterize a divinity properly distinguished from all that it creates.

So Richard of St. Victor, writing in the mid-twelfth century, will insist “*nihil enim omnino potest esse a semetipso quod non sit ab aeterno*” (VI): to exist of itself entails existing eternally.⁶ “For that substance which can be only of itself pertains to that [mode of] being which is eternal and without any beginning” (XI). In completing his demonstration of the unity of the divine nature, Richard concludes: “*solus itaque et unus Deus est a semetipso et eo ipso ab aeterno*” [“the one God alone exists of itself and hence from eternity”] (XCII).

The argumentation is simple and direct; it hardly seems beholden to a “Greek predilection for permanence over change,” though the power of archetypes can never be gainsaid. It is rather a clear perception that what exists of itself *is* in a way in which it is entirely present to itself, and the name given to that mode of being is *eternal*. The metaphors of such a being’s eternity *containing* time, so that each moment of time is *present* to it, are in place. One step remains: to display that manner of existing in such a way as to make manifest how it uniquely characterizes the source of all, and does so in such a way as to display that it is the source of all. Eternity will then emerge not as a “mode of being” (except after the manner of speaking in which we have allowed that expression thus far), but as a formal feature of divinity as such: God, to be God, must be eternally; and there will be no eternity other than God’s eternity.

2. CHARACTERIZING THE DIFFERENCE

The step must show what it is for something to be of itself. The formula is there in Anselm, but without the means of systematically understanding it. That was to come from Ibn-Sina (980-1037), known in the West as Avicenna, whose life just preceded that of Anselm, but whose works were not available to the West until after Richard of St. Victor wrote his *de Trinitate*. Inheritor of an Aristotelian Platonism, transmitted through Alexandria, Ibn-Sina needed to make philosophical room for a creator. This he did by remarking how the fact that something exists is not part of our notion of what the thing is (*mahiyya*), but “comes to” whatever is. (His mode of expression made it sound as though existing is an *accident*, in the proper sense of a *feature* of a thing, for which Averroes would take him severely to task, but the move was more subtle than that.⁷) With God, however, there can be no question of God’s not existing, so God’s essence (*dhat*) must be identical with God’s existing.⁸ Maimonides will affirm this difference as uniquely expressive of divinity, adding a nuance reflecting the Islamic discussion of attributes in God: “God exists without possessing the attribute of existence, ...that is, God does not exist through existence, but [in God] existence and essence are identical.”⁹

Aquinas, in what is arguably his first written work, the opusculum *de Ente et Essentia*, sorts out the various senses these terms enjoyed in his predecessors, Christian and Arab, and aligns Avicenna's distinction with a step beyond Aristotle yet more faithful to the movement of his thought than the platonic version systematized by Ibn-Sina.¹⁰ For *esse* (to-be) becomes more than something adventitious to a thing's nature, but that which grants each natural being its ontological unity.¹¹ What specific form accomplished for Aristotle, in making a thing this *sort* of thing, *esse* will do for Aquinas, in making a thing *this* thing. Ontological unity will then know two levels: matter to form, and informed matter (essence) to *esse*, each related to its successor as potency to act.

God then becomes the One whose essence is to be—a formula which uniquely identifies without pretending to be a proper definition—and so God may be said to be “pure act.”¹² Such a One, Aquinas argues, must *be* eternally, since it participates in no way in any movement from potentiality to act which would bring it within the scope of time. Moreover, it must not only be said to be eternal, but it “is its eternity, in a way which belongs to no other thing to be its duration because nothing else is its *esse*.”¹³ We may be said to endure, but it takes a Faulkner so to concentrate our memories, for the *now* of present time is evanescent. Furthermore, what “is its eternity,” God alone can properly be said to be eternal, or as Aquinas puts it: “eternity truly and properly belongs to God alone” (1.10.3).

Other things, which for one reason or another, may be unaffected by time, or to which time is irrelevant, may be said to be atemporal (or timeless), but not, properly speaking, eternal. For what eternity adds to timelessness is the “perfect possession all at once of limitless life.”^{13a} Aquinas makes Boethius' celebrated formula his own, and in doing so explicates it: the “perfect possession” in question is the identity of the divine subject with its to-be, the absence of any composition whatsoever, and hence a perfect at-one-ness with itself. And such an unrestricted act of existing amounts to “limitless life.”

These cumulating remarks may serve to indicate why I prefer not to speak of eternity as a “mode of being,” though we will inevitably be drawn to do so. For the utter simpleness manifested by asserting the identity of essence with existence in divinity offers a particularly perspicuous way of displaying that unity of God which sets God off as the first and the source of all. God is not, then, *a* being (among others) any more than the first (of many); so *eternal* does not mark a division among beings like *rational* among animals, but rather names a unity and a simpleness which quite transcends any mode of being with which we are acquainted: personal, institutional, intentional, mathematical.... (That being said, we will of course speak of eternity, prescending from divinity, as a mode of being; and we may even find ourselves speaking of a *divine* mode of being, yet we will do so now expressly realizing how easily such language allows us to

pretend to be laying hold of what lies beyond our grasp.)

3. HOW TO CONCEIVE IT?

One relief these reminders offer is that we should not think ourselves dense if we cannot conceive an “atemporal duration.” One misleading by-product of Kretzmann’s and Stump’s thumbnail sketch of “the development of the concept of eternity” (444), in an article entitled “Eternity,”¹⁴ is that one might think oneself to have missed a step if one could not now see how “eternity, not time, is the mode of existence that admits of fully realized duration” (445). In a gently persuasive voice, they suggest that “the apparent incoherence in the concept is primarily a consequence of continuing to think of duration only as ‘persistence through time’” (446), whereas the sketch of “the tradition that runs through Parmenides, Plato, and Plotinus into Augustine, Boethius, and Aquinas [would] claim that it is only the discovery of eternity that enables us to make genuinely literal use of words for duration, words such as ‘permanence’, and ‘persistence’, which in their ordinary, temporal application turn out to have been unintended metaphors” (445). So would they introduce “atemporal duration” as a technical usage at “the heart of the concept of eternity” (444).

This narrative proves a likely story up to Aquinas, and even accounts for his unwary expression: “eternity is the measure of permanent being (*esse permanentis*).”¹⁵ But Aquinas would not have conceded that reflections on the evanescence of being in time would be able to establish a notion of eternity sufficiently coherent for us. They can function at best as *manuductiones*—reminders which can take us by the hand and lead us beyond what our concepts convey; for our language is invariably tensed, and we can only come to an appreciation of eternity through temporal considerations (1.10.1.). Reflections on the sense of *presence* evoked by the *now* of our continuing consciousness (which Augustine calls *memory*) can usefully point us towards a fullness of present life, quite different from atemporality, which the tradition intended when speaking of God’s eternity. But the fact is that same tradition counts fidelity the highest virtue because it bespeaks constancy over time—through so many and such unsuspected vicissitudes! Even their helpful elaboration of the relation between temporal and eternal entities or events (dubbed “ET simultaneity”), we shall see, derives its consistency from the two metaphors of *presence* and *containing* which we observed at work in Anselm.

A phrase like “atemporal duration,” in short, does not make the notion of eternity any more describable or expressible, for *our* language remains inevitably tensed. So we will simply lack any means for directly describing eternity, and if “eternity truly and properly belongs to God alone,” that should not surprise us, since we have no way of describing divinity either. Yet what Kretzmann’s

and Stump's treatment reminds us is that we should forbear calling *incoherent* what we find ourselves unable to conceive. And since it is precisely the difficulties attendant upon relating entities or events in time with those in eternity which have drawn the charge of incoherence, those we must now consider. But first two potential comparison terms, each called "eternal entities" in the tradition: (1) angels, spheres, and the like; (2) necessary truths.

What about angels and spiritual creatures generally? This question is the easier of the two, for one can note how, despite the fact that their life does not admit stages of development, they nonetheless can mark a before and after in thought and in affections. So if there be purely intentional (i.e., spiritual) creatures, they would admit of no contingency as we experience it (in *ipsa forma non est potentia ad non esse*), yet they still would not possess their life all-at-once, since they would be conscious of their dependence upon the "creator, in whose power is their very existence or non-existence" (1.9.2). That is, their awareness of receiving their existence from another would admit another (God) into their sense of themselves so that they could not be said to possess the total presence-to-self which marks eternal being. Acknowledging that dependence, of course, becomes their constitutive activity of praise, paradigmatic for all of creation. So the self not simply itself becomes itself by recognizing its origins with suitable gratitude. Such a composition, or lack of unity in their selfhood, would not place them in time as such, for they are immaterial beings, nor would it qualify them for eternity. Aquinas calls the mode *aevum*, or *aeviternity*.

So far as necessary truths are concerned, they seem best construed as *atemporal*.¹⁶ What we mean by their being *always* true is that past, present, and future are irrelevant to their truth-value; they do not intend reference to events. Whether they can be cut loose from presence to a mind is a point which many would strongly deny, so their being affirmed to be true would entail the *now* of some consciousness. Aquinas, following Augustine, accommodated this formal fact by locating them in their primordial instance in the divine intellect (1.10.3.3), so granting them a share of God's eternity. One could hardly object to such a placement so far as their dignity goes, though it has been queried whether that solution is compatible with God's simpleness.¹⁷ Yet God's knowing many things seems no less an invasion of God's unity than God's creating a manifold universe. And al-Farabi and Ibn-Sina's objections to the One creating many, epitomized in the axiom "from one only one can come," have been recognized to stem from an insufficiently *intentional* view of the divine nature.¹⁸ If creation is regarded not as a necessary emanation but as the intentional activity of a wise and powerful God, however, then a multiplicity of ideas seems quite compatible with a single intention. In both cases, then, God alone remains eternal.

4. RELATING TEMPORALITIES WITH THE ETERNAL

Now to the question which often elicits cries of incoherence: the relation of eternity to time, and vice versa. First of all, the abstract address is infelicitous. As we are concerned, in addressing the “problem of evil,” not with “evil” so much as with evil actions, so here we are concerned with the possibility of temporal and eternal beings relating to one another. So we will not be trying to map out a set of formal relations between features of being which we can formulate, since eternity is not, strictly speaking, a “mode of being,” nor can language (for most of us) escape temporal “consignification.” Moreover, if my elucidation of usage be persuasive, we are really concerned with a specific dimension of God’s relation to creation. In any case, all the pressing examples presume the “eternal entity” to be God.

Because we are focussing on the (from our perspective) *temporal* dimension, it may be helpful to employ some formal clarifications which prescind from divinity, but the fact remains that the relationship in question is one of fecundity: the proper effect of the creator (whose essence is to-be) is the to-be of things, for creation is nothing other than “the production (or alternatively, emanation [1.45.1]) of the whole of being (totius esse) by the universal cause of all things (omnium entium), which is God” (1.45.3). What is more, the fundamental guiding metaphor for the relationship is that of artisan, or creative artist, so the best analogy we have for God’s knowing creation will be artistic. These *caveats* should help to keep us alert to infelicities like “God sees that it is the case,” as though there were things God had to notice.^{18a} On the other hand, of course, a singular event or entity will not simply be comprehended by its creator “in principle,” but will be an object for God no less than the statue for the sculptor or a character for an author.¹⁹ It is simply that we cannot subtract the creative activity from the knowing when we are dealing expressly with a creator God.

The central question has to do with the two *now*’s: that of present time and that of presence to the Eternal. “Everything taking place in time is present to God in eternity” (S.T. 1.14.13) cannot mean that what has not *yet* taken place is *now* taking place in eternity.²⁰ The inherently indexical character of our *now* cannot be obliterated by our presence to the Eternal. Kretzmann and Stump aptly employ the results of special relativity theory here, to offer a leading example of the “relativity of simultaneity” regarding events in frames of reference moving with respect to one another.²¹ In such cases, whenever the differential motion approaches the speed of light, “one and the same time” will be amended, according to the Lorentz transformations, to consider the relative motion of the two frames of reference. *Simultaneity*, then, will be relative to the reference frame of a given observer.

This example helps us in two ways with regard to events considered temporally and eternally: (1) it warns us that questions like “are they *really* simultaneous?”

cannot be answered when the reference frames are so diverse, and (2) that the notion of *simultaneity* itself, at least in its normal meaning of “at one and the same time,” needs a good deal of elaboration. The example does not call that meaning into question, so much as introduce complications, since the parameter of the speed of light, together with the Lorentz transformations, allows one to speak coherently, if sophisticatedly, of same or different times—now relative to the observers.

4.1 A RECENT FORMULATION

When the reference frames are time and eternity, however, *simultaneity* can no longer be parsed as “one and the same *time*.” Kretzmann’s and Stump’s strategy here is to expand the notion to a generic one of co-occurrence (or occurrence at once) in which simultaneity as we know it becomes one species (T-simultaneity=existence or occurrence at one and the same time), and simultaneity among eternal entities another: E-simultaneity=existence or occurrence at one and the same eternal present (435). Then the search for the relation between the *now* of present time and the *present* of eternity becomes the task of formulating a third species: ET-simultaneity (436). Guiding this strategy is the conviction that eternity and temporality are “two [separate] modes of real existence” (434, 443), which we can parse as species within a genus.

Yet as we look more closely at the terms employed in their extremely helpful formulation of “ET-simultaneity,” we shall see that they embody the metaphors of *presence* and *containing* already noticed. The formulations will be most useful in keeping us from mixing the two senses of ‘present’, and so exposing more than one claim of incoherence, yet of themselves give no further precision regarding “the same eternal present.” And that criticism concerns the strategy, not the formulations, for I should not expect greater precision to be forthcoming. The real question is whether “occurrence at once” (or co-occurrence) is really a generic notion of which the others are species, or whether we have one notion of simultaneity, admitting of an immense sophistication to embrace relativity, which can be augmented with appropriate metaphors to formulate rules for our reflections in domains quite beyond our ken? (And therein lies a central question of method in philosophical theology.)

What Kretzmann and Stump propose to do, to respond to charges of incoherence, is to show how “what is temporal and what is eternal can co-exist,...but not within the same mode of existence” (436). Letting ‘x’ and ‘y’ range over entities and events, they formulate “(ET)” thus:

- For every x and for every y, x and y are ET simultaneous iff
 (i) either x is eternal and y is temporal, or vice versa; and

- (ii) for some observer, A, in the unique eternal reference frame, x and y are both present—i.e., either x is eternally present and y is observed as temporally present, or vice versa; and
- (iii) for some observer, B, in one of the infinitely many temporal reference frames, x and y are both present—i.e., either x is observed as eternally present and y is temporally present, or vice versa (439).

Since the notion of “simultaneity” introduced here crosses reference frames, it will not be transitive, showing that ET-simultaneity of two temporal events with one eternal event entails nothing regarding the (temporal) simultaneity of these events to one another. So given eternal event y, and temporal events x and z, from (1) x is ET-simultaneous with y, and (2) y is ET-simultaneous with z, nothing at all follows, since x and z are not “ET”-related.²²

Very helpful reminders when trying to make arguments involving the co-presence of eternal and temporal events. If my clarification of eternity be accurate, however, there will be one and only one entity/event as well as observer in the unique eternal reference frame. In that case the formulation reminds us that any and every temporal entity/event will be present to that agent, Omega, whose actions, while eternal, will be perceived (when so perceived!) by a temporal observer as taking place in time. As I have suggested, this is a fair rendition of the metaphors of *presence* and *containing* we noted in Anselm: all temporal events and entities are present to God, who can thereby be said to contain them all. Aquinas notes how the “existing all at once (*tota simul existens*) of eternity embraces all of time” (S.T. 1.14.13), or more simply “includes all times” (S.T. 1.10.2.4).

Yet neither these metaphors nor “ET” help us to discern *how* it is that a temporal event is *present* to the Eternal in such a way that *every* such event is, and so eternity can be said to *embrace* time. Kretzmann and Stump *say* as much, but then so has the tradition cited.²³ Aquinas even adds the baffling “in its presentness” (1.14.13), to remind us that “divine knowledge is always ordered to a thing *as* one present is ordered to something present” (de Ver. 2.12)—something which would follow nicely from this formulation were one to stipulate that all objects of divine knowledge be ET-simultaneous with the divine act of knowing. So one can say (now) that a future event (say, my death) *is present* to the Eternal; not that God *sees* it *before* it happens, but that it—not yet, though certain to me—is eternally present to God.

4.2. TOWARDS COHERENCE

That should suffice to elicit from us the retort that such language is totally baffling; if one wishes to speak of “two separate modes of existence,” it would

help to acknowledge that one of them utterly escapes our capacity for formulation—except metaphorically, and that sentences which try to put the two together can only baffle us. Here, of course, is where the suspicion of incoherence has emerged. It is one thing to show us how to keep our language straight when moving from one mode of affirmation (i.e., “eternally present”) to another (“now occurring”); it is something else to persuade us that it makes any sense (that meaning of ‘coherence’: cohering with our experience) to make such assertions. And the single sentence in which Kretzmann and Stump move (almost) beyond the canonical metaphors, is, I believe, incoherent:

What the concept of eternity implies...is that there is one objective reality that contains two modes of real existence in which two different sorts of duration are measured by two irreducibly different sorts of measure: time and eternity (443).

The notions which do not quite hang together here are the modifier ‘objective’, the residual metaphor ‘contains’, and the relational predicate ‘are measured by’. When they explicate the phrase, everything turns on the relational predicate: an event “is really future or not depending on which sort of entity, temporal or eternal, it is being related to” (443). So far, so good. Yet can it also be said that this act of relating (or measuring) so affects the “objective reality” in question that it can be said to “*contain* two modes of real existence.?” Or perhaps they are speaking of “all reality.” That is what remains baffling. And their explication (though not their formulation) is reminiscent of Aquinas’ celebrated image of “natural things [suspended] between God’s knowledge and ours, since we receive our knowledge from the very things which God causes through [God’s] knowledge” (S.T. 1.14.8.3). Such a picture sees the [objective] thing as constituted by an intentional activity relating it to the Eternal, yet existing in time where it presents itself as a temporal object of knowledge (and an object of temporal knowledge, since our language is invariably tensed).

One might conclude from that, as Josef Pieper does, that each existing thing may be the occasion for opening us onto the “mystery of being,” but he is as careful to call the relationship it bears to God’s creative knowing a mystery, as he is to remind us that the proper object of our knowing is each thing-as-related-to-us.²⁴ That is a considerably more cautious, if far more lyrical, way of putting the matter than contending that “one objective reality...contains two modes of real existence.” Yet a bafflement remains: how then are such entities—suspended between God’s knowing and ours—one? Yet there is evidence that that question is one of those which leads us yet more deeply into the mysteries of existence than to further antinomies.²⁵

This final critique, and my nagging worry about their use of “modes of existence” should not blunt my appreciation nor indebtedness to their essay. They

have exposed how the keenest of minds can lose their way in these thickets, leading others astray as well, with jejeune claims of incoherence. Moreover, they have indirectly opened a rich and rigorous philosophical tradition to many contemporaries with neither the taste nor the aptitude for exploring the history of these questions. And in doing so, they have shown how many traditional positions can, on closer examination by keeping one's reference frames distinct, not only be rescued from a bevy of recent *prima facie* changes of incoherence, but in fact afford paradigms for philosophical argument and mines for continuing inquiry. What they have not shown, however, is what might make such talk *coherent*. Yet that very lacuna affords an opportunity for some far-reaching reflections on method in philosophical theology.

5. IMAGE AND PERFORMANCE

One way to begin would suggest we need some new images for the relation of time to eternity; often enough in these matters "image gives rise to thought."²⁶ One such is developed by Diogenes Allen, using the humble contrast of horizontal and vertical.²⁷ God's action, he tells us, is present to us as the line which marks the intersection of vertical and horizontal planes. Yet if the vertical plane is not visible, the line appears to be just that—a line in a horizontal plane. The assertion that it is formed by such an intersection, rather than merely *given* ("let there be..."), allows us to regard it as something richer than, say, an ordinary causal sequence. Yet that affirmation remains one of faith. (This image does not pretend to convey what *presence* and *containing* must, though one might project an infinity of vertical planes onto the horizontal from an infinite eternal point—and let oneself be carried away by the image!).

Allen's image, like Aquinas' of natural things somehow *between* two knowers (and two very different kinds of knowledge), rather calls our attention to what ordinarily escapes us, precisely because it (strictly speaking) lies beyond our knowledge.²⁸ The task then becomes how one intelligently relates to what lies, properly speaking, beyond one's knowledge—say, to eternity? The medieval's pervasive *belief in* a spiritual world—not to be confused with their faith though a useful vehicle for its expression²⁹—offered them an analogy not readily available to us: eternity contains time, as the soul the body, and more generally, as spirit does matter. Our analogies are more likely to be images, it seems, more surely drawn from the experience of life than from philosophical schemes, and—ironically enough, in what is touted as a "post-whatever" age—more directly from religious practice. (Whatever may be our relation to our inherited religious practice, a purportedly nihilistic age cannot denigrate religious practice in the way common enough to philosophers in the centuries immediately preceding our own.)

It has been suggested that Aquinas' capacity to combine a live faith in the reality of the Eternal with a rigorously empirical notion of the proper object of human knowing--and hence a vast unknowing about matters eternal, can be traced to a thoroughgoing sacramental vision born of daily practice. By 'sacramental' I mean that sense of the reality of ritual which brings God's saving presence into the home—the family with the strangers in their midst—which celebrates the Passover *seder* conscious of their connection with a people commanded to recall that liberation to each passing year. The event recalled was a happening in history, but of such a sort that its ritual celebration renders its effects present to each generation. There is, then, an eternal dimension to such shaping acts of God which allows us, when duly celebrating them, not to re-enact them but to render their inner reality *as events* present in our midst.

The reference to Jewish ritual is deliberate, for the structure of the *beraka* has informed Christian prayer—notably eucharistic prayer—from the beginning; and the polemics of the Reformation have until very recently rendered “sacramentality” a divisive word. Yet current attention to the broader outlines of liturgical action, rather than the edges of theological arguments, has led those engaged in revising books of worship to transcend effectively the polemics of four centuries by attending to the balanced principle: no liturgy without hearing the word of God; no proclamation of the Word without partaking of a meal. That is, a community pretending to make the Word of God present without allowing itself actively to be shaped by that same word can be said to be engaged in *hocus-pocus*; whereas one which reads and explains that Word of God without tangibly displaying its nourishing quality in a ritual meal turns that action into exposition (at best!) rather than allowing it to become the proclamation of a present reality.

Wherever the emphasis may lie, then, on word or on meal, the unity of both—exemplified in the *seder* meal—offers, I am suggesting, a background (and at particular times a foreground) in which the coherence of eternal action in time, and of time present to eternity, might be experienced. There are questions of right order attached to ritual actions, as conveyed by the term *seder*, and as such these will be linked with various communities and their authoritative modes of transmission; yet what is philosophically interesting about those modes (and to my mind supplies the context for considering questions of authority) is that they respect the way the *actions* are done, more than the commentary. It is as though ritual action embodies a message more decisive than the explanations elaborated about it—and this of course is precisely what anthropologists insist upon.³⁰ Actions not simply performed before an audience, but actions participated in by a congregation—that marks one note of difference in the theoretically complex yet practically less vexing task of distinguishing ritual from non-ritual activity.

Why should ritual action help us in composing temporal with eternal? Not so

much because of the claims made for it—the theological explanations, if you will—as the claims such activity makes upon us. We are asked to participate in it, as a Muslim at prayer engages in profound bows. It is that action, if I am not mistaken, which predisposes us to recognize eternal dimensions to temporal events, much as the fact that something exists cannot be conceived as a property of a thing but is better grasped on the analogy of an act—the act of affirming or assenting *to* what might be said. Just as “existence,” if you will, will not be found *in* our expressions, but in our *using* them to assert something to be the case, so we will never be able to express an “eternal mode of existence” in a language which cannot avoid tenses, nor the indexical “now”—except by an atemporal form contrived for timeless, not eternal things. So it may be that intentional activities like *asserting* something to be the case, and ritual activities like *commemorating* a saving event, may be sufficiently analogous to lead us to some grasp of time’s relation to eternity (speaking abstractly).

6. A RADICAL FORMULATION

The clue lies in Aquinas’ pregnant statement that “eternity is the measure of *...esse* while time is the measure of motion” (1.10.4). If we were to be acquainted with something which simply was—that is, whose very nature was *to be*, such an acquaintance would demand that we transcend everything temporal, if only for a moment, to apprehend it properly. That, I take it, is the sense of ‘measured by’ here: the connaturality required for understanding. The temptation here is to picture being, in contrast to the world of becoming, as “the persistent, permanent, utterly immutable actuality that is required as the bedrock underlying the evanescence of becoming.”³¹ This is a temptation because the image of permanent bedrock clashes with actuality (which connotes activity), and so easily transmits the equivocal expression ‘immutable’ as ‘fixed’ or ‘static’. Yet these are temporal terms, as are ‘persistent’ and ‘permanent’. What is needed is a notion of actuality which carries the sense of *energeia* without *dunamis*. That is what Aquinas intends to convey by the language of *actus essendi* (act of existing), and by assimilating existing to an act to which form would in turn be in potency. A neat resolution of the difficulty Aristotle had in expressing how form brings actuality (*energeia*) where the manifest activity seems to come from the potency (*dunamis*) of matter.³² What, in our actual world, form brings with it is the actuality of existing. And the trick is to see that not as a mere given but by analogy with those activities of existing things which show us they are alive; particularly with that activity of affirming that something is the case, which belongs to intentional beings.

This is an unwelcome move for philosophers, because, as Aristotle loved to remind us, the essence is given in a formula, so that what lies beyond essence

must, strictly speaking, be inexpressible. But if we can't whistle what we can't say, we can, however, act it out. And that is what we do when we assert something to be the case, or affirm something to be real. We don't go around saying that, either, yet we do comport ourselves differently as a result. Not that we don't have expressions like "it's true," "it's a fact," "there really are aardvarks." It's just that we never quite know what we're saying when we utter them, since we know what it is to describe something by qualifying it with the appropriate predicates, yet we know in these cases that we're not doing that. What we also know, however, is that our comportment towards them changes, and that turns out to be a more important "fact" about them and about us than all the descriptions we can muster.

My suggestion, then, is that direct expressions, like "atemporal duration," will be less helpful in our gleaning some sense for eternity, than attending to those activities displayed in our using language to make the points we want to make. For it is these activities, notably those of asserting and affirming, which offer us a clue to the inexpressible fact/act of something's actually existing. (We add 'actually' perhaps because the world in and among which we exist can become commonplace, or because philosophers can get in the habit of attaching 'exists' to whatever we happen to be thinking about.) What distinguishes something's being the case from our entertaining that thought—this is what we are after. The clue, again, lies in Aquinas' associating eternity with *esse*, and the tradition's unanimity in reserving *eternal* for what "exists of itself," that One whose essence is to be.

Aquinas himself can become lyrical when speaking directly of *esse*.³³ Yet those moments only contribute to our suspense, since they hardly clarify. One might suspect, however, that when a thinker as utterly measured as Aquinas becomes lyrical, something is at stake. Perhaps yet another *measure*; a "mode of being," if you will, quite beyond our grasp. And that he would affirm to be the case—of the act of existing as well as of that eternity which characterizes the One whose essence is simply to be, and hence can be called "pure act."³⁴ What is really at stake is a way of characterizing the act of creation. The question on creation is a central locus, outside the early questions on divinity, where Aquinas utilizes the identity of essence with *esse* in God. For it allows him, as we have seen, to assert a link between creator and creature: the proper effect of the first cause of all is the to-be of things (1.45.5).

Besides neatly maintaining the transcendence of God, since this "proper effect" is not a describable feature of things; by using the formula "ipsum esse per se subsistens" for God (1.44.1) in the context of treating creation, Aquinas can set the stage for conceiving creation as an intentional act. Since a thing's *to-be* determines the range of its powers, usually as determined by a specific essential structure, God's being subsistent to-be is a way of saying that divinity possesses

whatever we recognize to be a perfection (of being), and does so “*eminentiori modo*” (1.13.3) since they are not held by God as qualities admitting of more or less, but as subsistent in divinity, qualifying each divine act.

The step from *esse* to intentionality in intentional beings is no step at all, since *esse viventibus est vivere* so *esse intelligentibus est intelligere* [as “the to-be of living things is to live,” so “the to-be of intelligent beings is to understand”].³⁵ So Aquinas is able to assert, knowing full well he cannot explain *how*, that God directly creates all things. The net effect of this affirmation, in his context, was to dispell the pseudo-explanation proferred by Ibn-Sina, after the initiative of Al-Farabi.³⁶ Their emanation scheme for mediating the creative power of divinity through ten spheres becomes otiose in a single stroke. Moreover, that same stroke insists upon creation as a divine act rather than a necessary emanation, and does so by a more rigorous application of the distinction between essence and *esse* originally derived from the writings of Avicenna. While he had introduced the distinction to safeguard creation, his subsequent scheme for explaining the emanation of many from One failed to maintain creation as a free divine act. What was a given of the Qur’an for Ibn-Sina became a hidden key to Aquinas’ entire cosmology.³⁷

7. STEPS REMAINING

And if creation represents the first chapter (alpha) in a narrative attempting to relate time with eternity, the promise of eternal life represents the finale (omega). For what this implies is a transformation of “those who believe in him” so that they might participate in the divine mode of life: eternity. Needless to say, such a promise has even less to do with “afterlife” than eternity with timelessness. Moreover, the terms of the promise refer to a progressive incorporation into that life while living a temporal existence. So this avenue is also available for gaining a gradual appreciation of eternity.

It is customary to close a philosophical discussion at this point, calling the next step “mysticism.” Yet if the subject in question demands such a preparation of the whole person to understand it, why should the requisite disciplines be considered any more irrelevant to grasping this subject than say, logic to general philosophical inquiry? In any case, the preconditions for divine illumination so carefully and warily set out by a John of the Cross, may be the most rigorous available for the empirically minded among us attempting to make some sense of eternity as “atemporal duration,” or even better, as the “complete possession all at once of limitless life.”³⁸

NOTES

1. On "formal features," see Edy Zemach's "Wittgenstein's Philosophy of the Mystical," *Review of Metaphysics* 18 (1964) 38-57 (reprinted in I.M. Copi and R.W. Beard, eds., *Essays on Wittgenstein's Tractatus*[New York, 1966]). For Abu Hashim's use of "modes," see Richard Frank, *Beings and their Attributes* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1978), pp. 20sq.
2. M.J. Charlesworth, ed. *St. Anselm's Prologion* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1965).
3. Norman Kretzmann and Eleonore Stump, "Eternity," *J. Philosophy* 78 (1981) 432.
4. Augustine, *Confessions*, Bk 7, Ch 1, 15, 17.
5. The clearest development of this task is to be found in Robert Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982).
6. Richard of St. Victor: *De Trinitate* (Paris: Cerf, 1959).
7. Alexander Altmann, "Essence and Existence in Maimonides," in *Studies in Religious Philosophy* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969), cites Fazlur Rahman's "Essence and Existence in Avicenna," in M.M. Sharif, ed., *History of Muslim Philosophy* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1963) 480-503.
8. Louis Gardet, *La Pensée Religieuse d'Avicenne* (Paris: Vrin, 1951) 57-8; Avicenne, *La Métaphysique du Shifa*, trad. G.C. Anawati (Paris: Vrin, 1978) I.8.
9. Moses Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*, trans. Schlomo Pines (Chicago, 1963), 1.57; Etienne Gilson, "Maimonide et la Philosophie de l'Exode," *Med. Stud.* 13 (1951) 223-25; reprinted in Jacob Dienstag, ed., *Studies in Maimonides and St. Thomas Aquinas* (New York: KTAV, 1975) 279-81.
10. Cf. G. Vajda, "Les notes d'Avicenne sur la 'Théologie d'Aristote'," *Revue Thomiste* 59 (1951) 346-406.
11. M-D Roland-Gosselin, O.P., *Le "de ente et essentia" de S. Thomas d'Aquin* (Kain, Belge: Le Saulchoir, 1926) 125.
12. *Summa Theologiae* (=ST) 1.3.4; cf. my *Aquinas: God and Action* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), ch.2. (References in text will be to *Summa* unless otherwise indicated.)
13. ST 1.10.2: "nec solum est aeternus, sed est sua aeternitas, cum tamen nulla alia res sit sua duratio, quia non est suum esse."
- 13a. ST 1.10.1, from Boethius, *Consolation of Philosophy*, V, 6.
14. *J. Philosophy* 78 (1981) 429-58.
15. ST 1.10.4.
16. "Eternity" (note 3) 432.
17. Alvin Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1980), p.5.
18. Louis Gardet, *Pensee*, 157-8.
- 18a. Peter Geach, *Providence and Evil* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977) 54-55.
19. These analogies are employed with considerable finesse by James Ross, to help "free us from the anemic metaphysics of possible worlds" (138), in "Creation II" (in Alfred J. Freddoso, ed., *The Existence and Nature of God* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983) 115-42), esp. 127-30.
20. "Eternity" (note 3) 144 n. 20.
21. *Ibid.* 437; they cite Wesley Salmon, *Space, Time, and Motion* (Encino CA: Dickenson, 1975).

22. Kretzmann and Stump develop this and use it to render hollow objections offered by Anthony Kenny—that God’s knowing two distinct temporal events “in eternity” would entail their simultaneity (440, 447).
23. “Thus the entire life of any eternal entity is co-existent with any temporal entity at any time at which that temporal entity exists” (441).
24. Josef Pieper, *Silence of St. Thomas* (New York, Pantheon, 1957) 53-67.
25. L-B Geiger, O.P., “De l’unité de l’être,” *RSPT* 33 (1949) 3-14; reprinted in *Philosophie et Spiritualité* (Paris: Cerf, 1963) 71-86.
26. One is reminded of the work of Paul Ricoeur (from whom this phrase comes), Bernard Lonergan, and John S. Dunne.
27. *Traces of God* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 1981).
28. Diogenes Allen, *Three Outsiders* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 1983).
29. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Faith and Belief* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979).
30. Notably Victor Turner and Mary Douglas. See also Rodney Needham, *Belief, Language, and Experience* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1972).
31. “Eternity,” 445; cf. my *Aquinas*, 39.
32. Joseph de Finance, *Etre et Agir* (Roma: Gregorianum, 1960), reviewed by L-B Geiger, O.P., in *Bulletin Thomiste* 7 (1943-6) 175-95; reprinted in *Philosophie* (cf. note 24) 159-81.
33. Cf. my *Aquinas*, ch. 3; also Anthony Kenny, *God of the Philosophers* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979) 93.
34. ST 1.3.4.
35. This insistence of Aquinas (*In de An* 1.14 [209]) seems to be implicit in Plato’s final discussion in the *Phaedo* of a “principle of life” being essentially alive: for he presumes it to be of the sort which would animate a Socrates!
36. ST 1.45.5; *de Potentia* 3.4.
37. Josef Pieper, *Silence*, 47-53.
38. ST 1.10.1 (cf. note 13a).