

Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 5 | Issue 1

Article 5

1-1-1988

Eternity, Time and Tenselessness

Delmas Lewis

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

Recommended Citation

Lewis, Delmas (1988) "Eternity, Time and Tenselessness," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.

DOI: 10.5840/faithphil1988514

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol5/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

ETERNITY, TIME AND TENSELESSNESS

Delmas Lewis

In this paper I argue that the classic concept of eternity, as it is presented in Boethius, Anselm and Aquinas, must be understood to involve not only the claim that all temporal things are epistemically present to God, but also the claim that all temporal things are *existentially* present to God insofar as they coexist timelessly in the eternal present. I further argue that the concept of eternity requires a tenseless view of time. If this is correct then the existence of an eternal God logically depends on the truth of the tenseless account of time. I conclude by suggesting that the Christian theologian ought to reject a tenseless ontology.

The classic concept of eternity is essentially Neoplatonist, deriving from Plotinus, and ultimately from Plato and Parmenides.¹ Although it may be found in Augustine,² it was principally Boethius who transmitted it to the Christian middle ages, and provided subsequent Christian theologians with the canonical definition of eternity. In Book V, Prove VI of *The Consolation of Philosophy*, he writes:

Eternity therefore is the complete possession all at once of illimitable life (*interminabilis vitae tota simul et perfecta possessio*), which becomes clearer through a comparison with temporal things. For whatever lives in time progresses as something present from what is past to what is future, and there is nothing placed in time which can embrace (*possit amplecti*) the whole extent of its life equally (*totum vitae suae spatium pariter*). It does not yet grasp tomorrow, and it has already lost yesterday. Even in today's life you do not live more than in the moving and transitory moment. So what is subject to the condition of time is not yet such as is rightly to be judged eternal, even if, as Aristotle believed of the world, it never began to exist, and does not cease, but has its life stretched out with the infinity of time. For even if its life is infinite, it does not include (*comprehendit*) and encompass (*complectitur*) the whole extent of that life all at once (*totum simul*), since it does not possess the future and it already lacks the past. So that which embraces and possesses equally the whole completeness (*plenitudinem totam pariter*) of illimitable life, and for which there is not some of the future missing nor some of the past elapsed—that is rightly held to be eternal. And it must be in possession of itself and always present to itself, and must have present to itself the infinity of moving time.³



Boethius's definition appeals to the *kind* of life God possesses—it is illimitable or boundless—and to the *way* in which God possesses it—completely and all at once. These putative facts about divine existence are the essential ingredients from which the concept of eternity is constructed and by which it is justified. The central features of this concept may be discerned by taking a closer look at each part of the Boethian definition.

Consider, first, the claim that the life of God, and so God himself, is illimitable. This already distinguishes God's manner of existence from all of those temporal things that have a beginning and an end. For many, if not most, temporal things, there was a time before they came to exist and there will be a time after they cease to exist. Hence, their existence may be said to be limited in that it does not extend to times before their beginning or after their end. And anything whose existence has such temporal boundaries does not in a certain sense have unlimited existence. Therefore, eternity must be beginningless and endless, because it involves the possession of illimitable life.

It might be thought that by itself the attribution of illimitable life to God in Boethius's definition does not exclude the possibility that God is everlasting, i.e., that he exists throughout an infinite duration of time without beginning or end. I think this would be a mistake, for the following reasons. First, there is the fact that the events in the lives of most temporal things themselves begin and end, such that the life of that thing at any time may be said to be limited to only those events that are occurring in its life at that time. This will be true even if the life of the thing itself has no beginning or end. So there will be a real sense in which the life of any temporal thing whatever—even an everlasting one—may be said to be limited. Second, given Boethius's familiarity with the Aristotelian corpus, I think it unlikely that he did not have Aristotle's discussions of time in mind when he framed his definition of eternity. And there is explicit reference to boundaries in Aristotle's definition of time. In the *Physics* Aristotle writes:

We recognize time when we set boundaries to motion, bounding it by before and after. And we say that time has elapsed when we take notice of the before and after in motion. We set boundaries by taking the before and after as different and as having something distinct between them. For when we notice that the ends are different from what is in the middle, and the mind says that the nows are two, one before and one after, we say that there is time then and that this is time: let that be taken as given. When, therefore, we perceive the now as one, and not as one before and one after in motion, or when we perceive it as a single terminus, albeit a terminus of what comes before and after, then no time is thought to have occurred, because no motion. But when we

perceive a before and after, then we say that there is time. For this is what time is: the number of motion in respect of before and after.⁴

Aristotle extends the definition of time such that the before and after are understood in relation to any kind of change:

Someone might be puzzled as to the sort of change for which time is the number. Is it not change of any sort? For things come into being and perish and grow and change quality and move, all in time. So time is the number of each change in so far as it is a change; which is why it is the number of continuous change quite generally, and not of a particular of change.⁵

It is worth noting that Aquinas cites Aristotle's definition of time in defending and explaining Boethius's definition of eternity.⁶ Focusing on Aristotle's definition puts the attribution of illimitable life to God in a new light, for it suggests that there can be no before and after *in* as well as *around* a truly illimitable life, because this would subject that life to boundaries. But such a life cannot exist in time, for no temporal distinctions can apply to it—it cannot be before or after anything else, and nothing in it can be before or after anything else in it. It must therefore exist outside of time. Further, if there is no before or after in its life, there is also no change. Hence, a timeless life must also be immutable. In sum, the appeal to illimitability in Boethius's definition by itself may be understood to require that God exist outside of time. Even if this were not so, the rest of the definition allows no doubt with respect to the timelessness of God.

Let us consider, then, the claim that the illimitable life of God is *complete* and *all at once*. This should be understood in contrast to the successiveness intrinsic to time: the present moment never remains but inexorably recedes into the past as the future becomes present. (Note that this last sentence—following Boethius—presupposes the reality of temporal becoming.) As a result, no temporal thing can be said to possess all of its life at once, because the events comprised by that life occur in sequence—past events it no longer possesses and future events it does not yet possess. Indeed, this will be true of the life of any temporally extended thing whatever, including one that is everlasting. But there can be no succession in the life of an eternal thing, for succession involves the acquisition of something new—some new event or property—which contradicts the claim that this thing possesses its life completely and all at once. Of course, if there can be no succession in the life of God, then neither can there be change, for change requires succession.

The absence of succession in the life of God has as a consequence that the life of God lacks temporal duration. God is not temporally extended, because such duration can only come about by persistence through successive moments

of time. It would seem that this life must also lack temporal location, since to have temporal duration is just to occupy successive temporal positions. Anselm, endorsing Boethius, makes this implication explicit:

[The Supreme Being] is in every place and time because it is absent from none; it is in no place or time because it has no place or time. It does not receive into itself distinctions of space and time—as, for example, *here* and *there* or *somewhere*, or *now* or *then* or *sometime*. Nor does it exist in the fleeting temporal present which we experience, nor did it exist in the past, nor will it exist in the future. For these are distinguishing properties of finite and mutable things; but it is neither finite nor mutable.⁷

The upshot is that God must exist altogether outside of time, as Anselm declares in Chapter XIX of the *Proslogion*:

But if through Your eternity You have been and are and will be, and if to have been is not to be in the future, and to be present is not to have been or to be in the future—how does Your eternity exist as a whole always? Or is there nothing past in Your eternity so that it is no longer; nor anything future, as though it were not already? You were not, therefore, yesterday, nor will you be tomorrow, but yesterday and today and tomorrow you *are*. Indeed you exist neither yesterday nor today nor tomorrow but are absolutely outside all time. For yesterday and today and tomorrow are completely in time.⁸

To summarize: the ascription of timelessness to God lies at the heart of the classic concept of eternity. Thus God, if eternal, bears no temporal relations to any object or event whatever. It cannot be said that God exists *now*, for this would assign him a position in the temporal series, which he cannot have. Strictly speaking, then, it cannot be said that God *did* exist in the past or *will* exist in the future, because he does not exist *pastly* or *futurely*: he simply exists in the timeless mode of existence peculiar to an eternal thing.⁹

II

So much by way of introductory remarks on the concept of eternity. In this section I want to focus on the idea that God exists in an “eternal present” and that all temporal things are “present to” God in the eternal present. In his book *God and Timelessness*, Nelson Pike suggests that when Boethius says that temporal objects and events are *present to* God, Boethius is only making the epistemological point that God is aware of the temporal objects and events in question.¹⁰ Yet in the passage quoted above, Boethius says that what is eternal “must

be in possession of itself and always present to itself, and must have present to itself the infinity of moving time.” Is the point here merely epistemological? Perhaps, but not clearly so. The Latin adjective *praesens*, like the English “present” derived from it, is ambiguous between a locative sense of existing alongside or with something and the epistemological sense of registering to the awareness of someone. So which sense does Boethius intend?

Boethius provides help several pages later in *The Consolation of Philosophy*:¹¹

Since then every act of judging encompasses those things subject to it according to its own nature, and God has an always eternal and present state, then his knowledge too, overstepping (*supergressa*) all movement of time, abides in the simplicity of his present, and encompassing (*complectens*) all the infinite spaces of the future and the past, beholds (*considerat*) them in his simple act of cognition just as they are then occurring (*quasi iam geruntur*).

And if the comparison of the divine and the human present is a proper one, just as you see certain things in this your temporal present, in the same manner he perceives (*cernit*) all things in his eternal one.

The suggestion is that God beholds all times, and what is occurring at those times, because his knowledge, like the eternal present in which he exists, *encompasses* all times. The point is epistemological, but its justification is metaphysical: all temporal things and events are present to God (meaning: they are objects of his awareness) in the eternal present because they are present to God (meaning: they are coexistent with God) in the all-encompassing eternal present. This interpretation is supported by Boethius’s comparison of the temporal and eternal present. If God beholds things in the eternal present in the same way that we see things in our temporal present, then things exist before and along with him in the eternal present just as things exist before and along with us in the temporal present.

That God’s eternal present should be understood in this fashion is corroborated by Anselm’s discussion of eternity in his treatise on the freedom of the will:

For within eternity a thing has no past or future but only a present; yet, without inconsistency, in the dimension of time this thing was and will be . . . However, although within eternity there is only a present, nonetheless it is not the temporal present, as is ours, but is an eternal present in which the whole of time is contained. For, indeed, just as present time encompasses every place and whatever is in any place, so in the eternal present the whole of time is encompassed at once, as well as whatever occurs at any time. Therefore, when the apostle says that

God foreknew, predestined, called, justified, and glorified his saints, none of these actions is earlier or later for God; rather everything must be understood to exist at once in an eternal present. For eternity has its own “simultaneity” wherein exist all things that occur at the same time and place and that occur at different times and places.¹²

This passage makes clear that the presence of temporal things and events to eternity cannot be reduced to a mere fact about God’s awareness. Indeed, the passage is decidedly metaphysical in tone, and contains no hint of epistemological concerns.

Anselm is trying to explain why the actions of God do not stand in the relations of earlier or later to temporal events. They do not, he says, because the eternal present *contains* the whole of time. He supports this somewhat surprising assertion with an analogy: the eternal present is related to the whole of time in the same way that the temporal present is related to the whole of space. Hence, just as, without inconsistency, all spatial objects and events, although in different places, exist at once in the present moment of time, so all temporal objects and events—past, present, and future—exist at once in the eternal present. So God’s actions cannot be earlier or later than any temporal event.

Yet this is not the only point that can be gleaned from Anselm’s analogy. It also illustrates how a timeless God can exist with temporal things and events in the eternal present even though time and eternity are considered distinct modes of existence. Let us assume that an object is *entirely temporal* if and only if it has temporal location and is spaceless, where an object is spaceless if and only if it bears no spatial relations to any object or event in space. A Cartesian mind is a good example of such an object. Clearly, an entirely temporal object may coexist with spatial objects in the temporal present, and yet remain spaceless. Likewise, according to Anselm, a wholly eternal God may coexist with temporal objects in the eternal present, and yet remain timeless.¹³ At the same time, so to speak, temporal objects and events may “coexist” with God in the eternal present without threat to their temporality. Just as the present moment encompasses all of space without being spatial, the eternal present encompasses all of time without being temporal.¹⁴

The analogy is not yet squeezed dry. Suppose with Anselm that, for any object X, at any time T which happens to be present, X exists in space at T only if X exists in the temporal present. The reverse entailment does not hold, as is shown by the notion of an entirely temporal object. Something may exist in time without existing in space. Likewise, pursuing the analogy, X exists in the temporal present at T only if X exists in the eternal present. But, again, the reverse entailment does not hold. God exists in the eternal present but not in the temporal present. Furthermore, *all* temporal things and events exist in the eternal present

but not all of them exist at the present moment of time, although, of course, all of them exist in some moment of time. Still, a defender of Anselm might argue, there is no need to introduce a new sense of “exist” to explain the different way in which spatial objects exist in time; they simply exist in the temporal present *in virtue of* the fact that they exist in space. Similarly, one might argue, there is no need to introduce a new sense of “exist” to explain the different way in which temporal objects exist in eternity; they simply exist in the eternal present *in virtue of* the fact that they exist in time.

However, the explanatory force of this “spatial containment” analogy is purchased at a certain metaphysical price. Time and space must be sufficiently similar in order to float the analogy. Anselm is obviously thinking of time and space as extended continua that can be divided into intervals or parts. But this similarity alone is not enough for the analogy to do its work. For spatially distant objects may be said to exist in exactly the same sense in which spatially present objects are said to exist. With respect to existence, things far away in space are on an equal footing with things nearby. It is for this reason that we ordinarily feel no reservations about saying that all spatial objects exist at once in the temporal present. If Anselm’s analogy is to play the explanatory role assigned to it, then temporal concepts must operate in the same way with respect to existence. That is, temporally distant objects—objects in the distant past or distant future, for example—must be on an equal ontological footing with objects in the temporal present. With respect to existence, past, present, and future things must “coexist” altogether and in the same way. Only then can all objects in time exist in the eternal present in the same way that all spatial objects exist in the temporal present—i.e., coexist at once.

An interesting consequence of the view that all temporal things and events coexist with God in the eternal present is that they all thereby have an eternal, and so timeless, mode of existence. Whatever exists temporally must also exist along with God in the eternal present. Anselm expressly recognizes this unavoidable implication.¹⁵ As remarked above, this does not imply that temporal things and events are not genuinely temporal, any more than the proposition that spatial objects have a temporal, and so spaceless, mode of existence implies that they are not genuinely spatial. Of course, only God has a *purely* eternal mode of existence, for only he exists wholly outside of time. However, just as a spatially extended object and its spatially distant parts may exist all at once in the temporal present, so a temporally extended object and the temporally distant parts of its history may exist all at once in the eternal present.

In Question II, Article 12 of *De Veritate*,¹⁶ Aquinas discusses the relation of God’s act of cognition to its objects. He says that something is known as future when there is a relation of past and future between the cognitive act of the knower and the occurrence of the thing. But this relation cannot exist between

the divine act of cognition and any event, because the relation of the divine act of cognition to any thing whatever, Aquinas contends, is like that of “present to present” (*sicut ordo praesentis ad presens*). Aquinas explains this relation with an analogy. We are to imagine someone who sees in succession many persons walking down a road during a given period of time. At different moments this observer would see some of those walking past as present such that in the entire period of his act of seeing, all the passers-by would be seen by him as present. Yet he would not see them altogether present since the time in which he sees them is not all at once. However, if his diachronic act of seeing could exist all at once, he would see all of the passers-by present at once, even though they would not walk past at once. What is impossible for a temporal observer is accomplished by God in eternity:

Therefore, since the act of seeing (*visio*) of divine knowledge is measured by eternity, which is all at once (*tota simul*), and yet contains (*includit*) the whole of time and is not absent from any part of time, it follows that he sees whatever occurs in time, not as future, but as present. Indeed, that which is seen by God is future to another thing, which it succeeds in time; but to the divine act of seeing itself, which is not in time but outside of time, it is not future, but present. Therefore, we see what is future as future, because it is future to our act of seeing, since our act of seeing is measured by time;; but to the divine act of seeing, which is outside of time, it is not future. In the same fashion, one who is among the ranks of the passers-by and who sees only those ahead of him, sees the passers-by in a different way than someone outside the ranks of the passers-by who looks at all of the passers-by at once.¹⁷

The important point in this passage is that Aquinas assumes that past and future things are “there” to be directly seen by an eternal being with the requisite visual capacity, even though *we* cannot see them.

Book I, Chapter 66 of the *Summa contra Gentiles* is devoted to the question whether God knows things which do not exist. There Aquinas develops Boethius’s suggestion¹⁸ that the relation between time and eternity is analogous to that between the circumference and the center of a circle:

For a designated point on the circumference, although it is an indivisible, does not coexist together with another point as regards position since it is the order of position that produces the continuity of the circumference. But the center, which is outside the circumference, is directly opposite any designated point on the circumference. In this way whatever is in any part of time coexists with what is eternal as being present to

it even though past or future with respect to another part of time. But nothing can coexist with what is eternal in its presentness except as a whole, for it does not have the duration of succession. And so in its eternity the divine understanding perceives as present whatever takes place during the whole course of time. It is not the case, however, that what takes place in a certain part of time has been existent always. It remains, therefore, that God has knowledge of those things that, as regards the course of time, are not yet.¹⁹

This spatial analogy reveals that Aquinas, like Anselm, conceives of time primarily as a linear continuum, such that different instants of time are strictly analogous to points on a line. Thus, existence at a particular moment of time is analogous to location at a point on the circle's circumference. The analogy further illustrates that it is on account of their coexistence with God in the eternal present that God beholds all temporal objects and events.

As with Anselm's analogy of spatial containment, the explanatory force of Aquinas's analogy is purchased at a certain metaphysical price.²⁰ It is only because all of the points on the circumference exist altogether and in the same way that each may be related in the same way to the center. Of course, with respect to *location*, the points on the circumference differ. But with respect to *existence*, all of the points on the circumference are on an equal ontological footing. If time is related to eternity just as the circumference is related to the center of a circle, then all temporal things—past, present, and future—are on a par ontologically, because they all exist timelessly in the eternal present. It does not follow that all temporal objects and events are on an equal ontological footing with respect to any one moment of time—for example, that they coexist *now*—for this would contravene the fact that they occupy *different* positions in the temporal series. Nor does it follow that all temporal objects and events exist *always*, for even though they and every moment of time exist in the eternal present, they do not all exist at every moment of time. What does follow is that all temporal objects and events coexist timelessly in the eternal present. Aquinas is in complete agreement with Boethius and Anselm with regard to this implication of the concept of eternity.²¹

If the above interpretation of the concept of eternity is accurate, then Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann's explanation of the way in which something eternal is present to something temporal is mistaken.²² They analyze this presentness in terms of a simultaneity relationship, which they call *ET-simultaneity* (for "eternal-temporal simultaneity"). They begin by rejecting the suggestion that ET-simultaneity is a two-term relation between an eternal entity and temporal objects and events. They offer the following argument:

But on the view we are explaining and defending, it is theoretically

impossible to specify a single mode of existence for two *relata* of which one is eternal and the other temporal. To do so would be to reduce what is temporal to what is eternal (thus making time illusory) or what is eternal to what is temporal (thus making eternity illusory) or both what is temporal and what is eternal to some *third* mode of existence; and all three of these alternatives are ruled out.²³

If the line of reasoning in this passage is correct, then it follows that temporal things and events cannot be existentially present to (i.e., exist in the same mode of existence with) an eternal God.²⁴

I have argued at length that the concept of eternity as found in Boethius, Anselm, and Aquinas involves this very relation of existential presentness. If we concentrate on the spatial containment analogy used by Anselm to clarify and justify the notion of the eternal present, it will become clear that Stump and Kretzmann's objection is unwarranted. Recall that the eternal present is supposed to be related to all objects and events in time just as the temporal present is related to all objects and events in space. Now consider the following claim: "It is theoretically impossible to specify a single mode of existence for two *relata* of which one is temporal and the other spatial." This is plainly false, even though time and space may be understood as two equally real modes of existence, neither of which is reducible to the other, nor can they both be reduced to some third mode of existence. Existing spatially is not necessarily the same as existing temporally. We *can* specify a single mode of existence for a nonspatial, temporal thing and a spatial thing—namely, time. That is, a purely temporal thing and a spatial thing both exist in time, although they do not both exist in space. If this is admitted, it certainly does not follow that we have reduced space to time or time to space, or that either space or time is illusory. Likewise, as we have seen, temporal things and events are said to coexist with God in the eternal present without threat to their temporality. But this is just to say that all temporal things have an eternal mode of existence—they exist along with God in the eternal present.

III

We are now in a position to see how the concept of eternity is allied with a particular philosophical view of time. The most important question about time has to do with the reality of tense. Philosophers throughout history have divided into two camps over this issue. On the one side are those who hold what may be called a tenseless theory of time. On this view, the distinction between past, present, and future, as Genevieve Lloyd puts it, "is an epistemological accretion which infects our perception of the world"²⁵ but is in no way essential to a

complete understanding of reality. Since it denies the reality of tense, I will call this the anti-realistic theory of tense, and its adherents simply anti-realists. McTaggart believed that anti-realism about tense amounts to anti-realism about time, but most philosophers who deny the reality of tense do not thereby intend to deny the reality of time. According to anti-realists, “the present is an epistemological/subjective notion reflecting our limited knowledge at any time of a temporally extended reality, just as where we are limits our knowledge of distant objects.”²⁶ A. J. Ayer endorses the anti-realistic view when he writes that

. . . events are not in themselves either past, present or future. In themselves they stand in relations of temporal precedence which do not vary with time . . . What varies is only the point of reference which is taken to constitute the present, . . . the point of reference, by which we orient ourselves in time, the point of reference which is implied by our use of tenses, is continuously shifted.²⁷

According to anti-realists regarding tense, *all* temporal things—past, present, and future—are on an equal ontological footing with respect to existence.

In the other camp are philosophers who believe that tense is essential to a complete understanding of reality, and that the distinction between past, present, and future signifies a real, irreducible feature of things. Since this view holds that tense is real, I will call it the realistic theory of tense, and its adherents simply realists about tense. On this view, past and future things are considered not to exist at all in the sense in which present things are now existing, such that things past and future cannot be on an equal ontological footing with things present.

In the eternal present in which God beholds all of temporal reality, there is no contrast between past, present, and future with respect to existence. This alone suffices to show that the concept of eternity presupposes a tenseless view of time. If the claim that all temporal things are metaphysically present to God in eternity is combined with certain plausible assumptions about God (assumptions which Boethius, Anselm and Aquinas, at any rate, clearly accept), then an even stronger argument can be marshalled for the conclusion that God’s eternity precludes the reality of tense.

Let us assume with these theologians that God’s view of things must be the correct view. Since God is unaware of an objective nonrelational difference between the existence of things present and the existence of things past and future, there is no such difference as there appears to be from our perspective in time. Otherwise, God does not apprehend temporal things and events as they truly are, i.e., God has a false or inaccurate picture of temporal reality. Yet God is omniscient, and his knowledge is perfect and complete. Hence, if God is eternal, then the present does not differ with respect to existence from the past

and the future, and the tenseless view of time is correct.²⁸

I doubt whether this implication of the doctrine of divine eternity was ever recognized by Boethius, Anselm or Aquinas. In fact, these theologians seem to appeal to the reality of tense in order to justify the *a priori* need for divine timelessness. Boethius writes of “the moving and transitory present”; Anselm of “the fleeting temporal moment”; the Aquinas of contingent events which “come into actual existence successively.”²⁹ However, if it is necessary to presuppose the reality of tense in order to understand the *a priori* need for divine timelessness, then there arises a curious logical and practical dilemma for any philosopher or theologian who wishes to defend the doctrine along a priorist lines. In order to concede the force of at least some of the *a priori* considerations which motivate the doctrine of divine eternity, a philosopher must reject the tenseless account of time. However, a philosopher cannot accept the doctrine without thereby committing himself to the truth of the tenseless account.

IV

The upshot of this discussion is that the existence of an eternal God logically depends on the truth of the tenseless account of time. This point is not a new one, although it has been curiously overlooked in recent discussions. Duns Scotus long ago recognized that the Boethian concept of eternity presupposes an understanding of time and existence which makes sense only if anti-realism about tense is correct, and objected to Aquinas’s account of God’s relation to temporal things on the grounds that things past and future are not ontologically on a par with things present.³⁰

A full discussion of the plausibility of a tenseless ontology lies outside the ambit of this paper. However, there is good reason to doubt that a tenseless ontology is a live option for the Christian theologian. For Christianity is at its heart a moral religion, and makes no sense unless certain presuppositions about human nature and human action are true. If Christian theism is true, then human persons must minimally be the sorts of things that are susceptible to divine judgment and forgiveness; they must be moral agents. I have argued elsewhere that the only things to which responsibility could be assigned on a tenseless account of persons do not appear to be the sort of things to which responsibility is assignable.³¹ Hence, there is good reason to think that human persons on the tenseless view cannot be moral agents, since moral agents are necessarily the sort of beings to which responsibility is assignable.

If this conclusion is correct, then there is no reconciling the doctrine of divine eternity with the central anthropological claims of Christian theology. The claim that God is eternal may well be a coherent piece of *philosophical* theology. It remains to be shown that it is a coherent piece of *Christian* theology.

NOTES

1. The history of the concept is treated at length in Richard Sorabji, *Time, Creation and the Continuum* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1983).

2. See Augustine, *Confessions*, Book XI.

3. Boethius, *The Theological Tractates and the Consolation of Philosophy*, ed. H. F. Stewart, E. K. Rand, and S. J. Tester (London: Heinemann; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 1973) 422-424. All references hereafter to the *Consolation* are to this edition.

4. *Physics* 4.11, 219a21-b1, quoted in Sorabji 84.

5. *Physics*, 414, 223a29-b1, quoted in Sorabji 84-85.

6. For example, see *Summa theologiae*, Ia.10, 1.

7. Anselm, *Monologion*, Chapter 22, Jasper Hopkins and Herbert Richardson, ed. and trans., *Anselm of Canterbury*, 4 vols. (New York: Edwin Mellen, 1974-76) 2: 38. References hereafter to Anselm's *Monologion* are to this edition.

8. Anselm, *St. Anselm's Prosligion*, trans. M. J. Charlesworth (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1965) 141.

9. See the first chapter of Nelson Pike, *God and Timelessness* (New York: Schocken Books, 1970) 6-16; William Kneale, "Time and Eternity in Theology," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 61 (1960/61): 87-108; G. E. L. Owen, "Plato and Parmenides on the Timeless Present," *Monist* 50 (1966): 317-340.

10. Nelson Pike, *God and Timelessness* 11.

11. Boethius, *Consolation* 426.

12. Anselm, *The Harmony of the Foreknowledge, the Predestination, and the Grace of God with Free Choice*, Chapter 5, in Hopkins and Richardson 2: 189. References hereafter to *The Harmony of the Foreknowledge* are to this edition.

13. See *Monologion*, Chapter 22: "The Supreme Being must be present as a whole in every different place and present as a whole at every different time at once. Its being present at one place or time does not prevent it from being simultaneously and similarly present at another place and time. Nor does the fact that it was or is or will be mean that something of its eternity (a) vanishes from the temporal present along with the past, which no longer exists, or (b) fades with the present, which scarcely exists, or (c) is going to come in the future, which does not yet exist." (37).

14. Anselm writes in *The Harmony of Foreknowledge*: "For, indeed, the point I am making is not that something which always exists in eternity never exists in time, but is only that there is sometime or other at which it does not exist. For example, I am not saying that my action tomorrow at no time exists; I am merely denying that it exists today, even though it always exists in eternity. And when we deny that something which is past or future in the temporal order is past or future in eternity, we do not maintain that that which is past or future does not in any way exist in eternity; instead, we are simply saying that what exists there unceasingly in its eternal-present mode does not exist there in the past or future mode. In the cases no contradiction is seen to raise an obstruction." (190).

15. See *The Harmony of Foreknowledge*: "A thing is known to exist in time so differently from the way it exists in eternity that at some point the following statements are true: (1) in time something is not present which is present in eternity; (2) in time something is past which is not past in eternity;

(3) in time something is future which is not future in eternity . . . Indeed, being mutable in time and being immutable in eternity are no more opposed than are not existing at sometime and always existing in eternity—or than are existing in the past according to the temporal order and not existing in past or future in eternity. For, indeed, the point I am making is not that something which always exists in eternity never exists in time, but is only that there is sometime or other at which it does not exist. For example, I am not saying that my action of tomorrow at no time exists; I am merely denying that it exists today, even though it always exists in eternity. And when we deny that something which is past or future in the temporal order is past or future in eternity, we do not maintain that that which is past or future does not in any way exist in eternity; instead, we are simply saying that what exists there unceasingly in its eternal-present mode does not exist there in the past or future mode.” (190-191).

16. Thomas Aquinas, *De Veritate*, quaest. II, art. 12, in Thomas Aquinas, *Opera Omnia*, ed. Tipis Petri Fiacadori, 26 vols., (1852-1873; New York: Musurgia Publishers, 1948-50) 9: 46. References hereafter to the *Opera Omnia* of Aquinas are to this edition.

17. Thomas Aquinas, *De Veritate*, quaest. II, art. 12, in *Opera Omnia* 9: 46.

18. Boethius, *Consolation*, Book V, Prose 6, 364.78-366.82.

19. *Summa contra gentiles*, Book I, Chapter 66, The translation is by Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann in “Eternity,” *Journal of Philosophy* 78.8 (1981): 429-458; 441.

20. This is brought out nicely by Duns Scotus’s summary of the analogy: “If flowing time is supposed to be the circumference of the circle, and the *now* of eternity the center, then, however much time may flow, nevertheless the whole flowing and every part of it is present to the center. Likewise, on this view, since all things in whatever part of time must *exist*, whether they are in this *now* of time, or are past, present or future, all of them are present to the *now* of eternity. Thus, in eternity God sees them as actually present (*praesentialiter*) on account of such coexistence, just as I can see as actually present whatever I see in the instant during which I see it.” (*Ordinatio*, I Sent., dist. 39, quaest. 5, scholium, in Johannes Duns Scotus, *Opera Omnia*, ed. Luca Wadding, 16 vols. (Lyon, 1639; Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1969) V.2: 1294-1295.) All references to the *Opera Omnia* of Duns Scotus are to this edition.

21. This interpretation is not at all novel or idiosyncratic. See Joseph de Finance, “La Presence des Choses a L’Eternite d’apres les Scolastiques,” *Archives de Philosophie* 19.2 (1956): 24-62; Hermann Schwamm, *Das göttliche Vorherwissen bei Duns Scotus und seinen ersten Anhängern* (Innsbruck: Felizian Rauch, 1934) 14, 91-99; and Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, in *The One God: A Commentary on the First Part of St. Thomas’s Theological Summa* (St. Louis and London: Herder, 1943) 278-284, 452-456. Garrigou-Lagrange writes: “According to Thomists and many other theologians . . . future things are eternally present in God not only objectively and intentionally, but physically and really.” (p. 456). See also R. Garrigou-Lagrange, *God, His Existence and His Nature*, trans. Dom Bede Rose, 2 vols. (St. Louis and London: Herder, 1936) II:50-52, and the commentary on Chapter 66 of Book I of the *Summa contra gentiles* in the Leonine Edition of Aquinas’s works.

22. Stump and Kretzmann, “Eternity.”

23. Stump and Kretzmann 436.

24. Say Stump and Kretzmann: “What is temporal and what is eternal can coexist, on the view we are adopting and defending, but not within the same mode of existence.” (436).

25. Genevieve Lloyd, “Time and Existence,” *Philosophy* 53 (1978): 215.

26. J. Butterfield, “Seeing the Present,” *Mind* 93 (1984): 161.

27. A. J. Ayer, *The Problem of Knowledge* (Penguin Books, 1956) 170.
28. Cf. Stump and Kretzmann's assertion, in defending the Boethian/Thomistic concept of eternity, that "the past is solely a feature of the experience of temporal entities." ("Eternity," 454). Only anti-realists about tense would make such a claim.
29. See notes 3, 7, and 17 above.
30. Scotus says in reply to Aquinas's suggested analogy of the center and circumference of a circle: "Since time is not a standing circumference, but a flowing one, of whose circumference there exists nothing but the actual instant, neither will any of it be present to eternity, which is like the center, except that instant, which is like the present. If, however, it were supposed *per impossibile* that all of time is all-at-once standing still (*simul stans*), then all of it may be at once present to eternity just as to the center." (*Ordinatio*, I Sent., dist. 39, quaest. 5, art. 33, in *Opera Omnia* V.2: 1316.
31. "Persons, Morality and Tenselessness," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*. Vol. XLVII, No. 2, December 1986.