
eternity

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Eternity, the concept of divine temporality, is the theological term used to describe the timeframe of God's existence as well as the timeframe of future eschatological existence of believers in Christ. Since eternity is the temporal mode in which God exists, it is an attribute or characteristic of God. Likewise, since eternity is the destined temporal mode in which those who are in Christ will dwell with God, it is also an attribute or characteristic of heaven. As a result, the concept of eternity is significant for understanding the nature of God and the nature of a believer's eschatological future; however, this significance is often thwarted by the great amount of confusion on the subject of eternity.

The Bible never discusses or defines eternity, and the various concepts used to describe eternity in the original languages are poetic not explanatory. In the Old Testament, God is described as eternal (Gen. 21:33; Deut. 33:27; Ps. 90:2; not to mention the oft-cited example of the name of God as *L'Eternel* in French translations). In the same way, the Bible presents the Messiah as eternal (Prov. 8:22–31; Mic. 5:2). The Psalmist uses the hyperbole of eternity to describe the duration of his praise for God (Ps. 30:12). Even though the Bible views creation as limited and not eternal (Gen. 1; Col. 1:15–17), it does not hesitate to contrast the appearance of eternity in the world with the very limited lives of its people (Gen. 49:26). A common theme in the New Testament is the life in eternity offered to those who follow Christ (John 3:16; 4:13–14; cf. Dan. 12:2). Jesus, being fully God, is master over eternity (John 8:58). Works by the Christian for the kingdom of God are recorded for eternity (2 Cor. 9:9). Finally, the book of Jude describes fallen angels as possessing “eternal” chains (Jude 6; cf. Dan. 12:2), giving rise to the idea of an eternal hell alongside an eternal heaven.

Eternity occupies a special place within theological speculation and misunderstanding. While there are many views on eternity, the greatest problem with eternity is the concept of time itself. Eternity, even if viewed as atemporal, is nonetheless a subset of temporality. Yet there is

no agreement on the nature of time – and there are an unlimited number of theories on time from which to choose. Therefore, since it is impossible to define time, it is likewise impossible to define eternity. At the same time, it is possible to describe some aspects of eternity as well as set some parameters; this is perhaps the best that can be hoped for by finite beings.

There are two major categories of theories on eternity. The first category includes theories of a temporal eternity. These theories hold that eternity, and therefore God, experience the passage of time in some degree or manner. Within this category are numerous types of variant theories of divine temporality. The *sempiternal theory* holds that eternity is an unlimited duration. The *everlasting theory* holds that eternity is unbounded time. The *eternal now theory* holds that eternity is composed of one moment that never ends. The *omnitemporal theory* holds that eternity probably started as atemporal but became temporal with the advent of creation, and will likely remain temporal into a temporal eternity. Thus, eternity exists at all times, even if there is no time as such. The *hypertemporal theory* holds that eternity is temporal but only in regards to an expanded, higher-dimensional understanding of temporality (as may be suggested by certain unorthodox interpretations of modern physics).

The second major category of theories on eternity is the theories of an atemporal eternity (also known as theories of divine timelessness). These theories hold that eternity, and therefore God, are in some manner without time or any sense of temporality. Within this subset are two major theories of divine atemporality. The first is the *static theory* of atemporal eternity; this theory argues that eternity, and therefore God, are atemporal in the sense that there is no change in any aspect – eternity is completely inert. An example of this theory is a waterfall that doesn't fall because it is already perfectly fallen (or “frozen” in a sense). The second is the *fluid theory* of atemporal eternity; this theory holds that while eternity, and therefore God, are atemporal there is still change (real and understood). This view of atemporality often builds its case from spatial metaphors – the idea that God is infinite, aspatial, but still can extend into space without actually becoming spatial. Atemporal theories of eternity are more difficult to define due to

their innate foreignness to human experience. Advocates of the atemporal theory of eternity emphasize the correlation of timelessness with the traditional attributes of God such as immutability and omniscience.

Another notable problem facing the Christian understanding of eternity is separating biblical eternity from conceptions of eternity found in philosophies and religions foreign to Christianity. The best example is the influence of the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle on Western Christianity's understanding of time and eternity; unfortunately, the Christian understanding of eternity is hidden deep within the Platonic worldview. The Platonic view of eternity is best described as the static theory of divine atemporality, although Plato never attempted to reconcile his view of eternity with a theistic God. As a result, many of the aforementioned theories for eternity try to distance themselves completely from Platonic thought by embracing a theory of divine temporality. Another non-Christian influence is modern science – although science has influenced the debate on both sides. Finally, the relationship between the idea of eternity and eschatology can be problematic. It is common for modern Christians to refer to eternity as a synonym or substitute for heaven, and thus to perceive eternity from a temporal, and not timeless, viewpoint (especially in the conception of “eternal life”). It is also common for conceptions of hell to impugn a proper understanding of eternity.

Theories of a temporal eternity are especially popular in modern theological discussion. This is due to many factors, the most prevalent being the current emphasis on the scope of divine action and the issue of human freedom. At the same time, theories of atemporal eternity represent the classic and historical understanding of God as timeless; Augustine, Anselm, Thomas Aquinas, and Jean Calvin are just a few to uphold the idea of eternity as timeless. Boethius, the most famous Christian philosopher of eternity, was most likely an advocate of the fluid theory of divine atemporality. The idea of eternity has greatly affected Christian civilization due to its conversation about the nature of God and heaven – and its implications for the brief, temporal nature of life on earth and God's call to people to make that pre-eternal time possess eternal value (Matt. 9:35–38).

SEE ALSO: Anselm of Canterbury; Aquinas, Thomas; Boethius; Chronos: Christianity and Time; Eschatology; Heaven; Hell; Immortality

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ethics

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Ethics is an important branch of philosophy; it's the study of a particular set of values, though neither aesthetic nor political. Ethical values distinctively pertain to what's right and wrong; morally permissible, forbidden, or obligatory; issues of good and evil; what constitutes moral conduct and the good life. Ethics is usually subdivided into three parts: applied ethics, normative ethics, and meta-ethics. Applied ethics takes