

QUESTION 10

God's Eternity

Next we ask about eternity. On this topic there are six questions: (1) What is eternity? (2) Is God eternal? (3) Is it peculiar to God to be eternal? (4) Does eternity differ from time? (5) What is the difference between aeviternity (*aevum*) and time? (6) Is there a single aeviternity in the same way that there is a single time and a single eternity?

Article 1

Is eternity correctly defined as ‘the simultaneously whole and complete possession of interminable life’?

It seems that in *De Consolatione Philosophiae* 5 Boethius gives an incorrect definition of eternity when he says, “Eternity is the simultaneously whole and complete possession of interminable life (*aeternitas est interminabilis vitae tota simul et perfecta possessio*)”:

Objection 1: ‘Interminable’ is a negative term. But a negation is part of the definition only of things that are defective—which is not true of eternity. Therefore, ‘interminable’ should not be used in the definition of eternity.

Objection 2: ‘Eternity’ signifies a certain duration. But duration has to do with *esse* more than with life. Therefore, ‘life’ should not be used in the definition of eternity; instead, ‘*esse*’ should be.

Objection 3: Whatever is called a whole has parts. But this is not true of eternity, since eternity is simple. Therefore, it is wrong to call it a whole.

Objection 4: It is impossible for more than one day, or more than one time, to exist simultaneously. But [in the Scriptures] days and times are ascribed to eternity in the plural; for Micah 5:2 says, “His going forth is from the beginning, from the days of eternity,” and Romans 16:25 says, “. . . according to the revelation of the mystery which was kept secret from eternal times.” Therefore, eternity is not a simultaneous whole.

Objection 5: ‘Whole’ and ‘complete’ are the same. Thus, once eternity is said to be a whole, it is redundant to add that it is complete.

Objection 6: Possession is irrelevant to duration. But eternity is a certain duration. Therefore, eternity is not a possession.

I respond: Just as it is through composite things that we have to approach the cognition of simple things, so too it is through time, which is just the numbering of movement with respect to *before* and *after*, that we have to approach the cognition of eternity. For since in every movement there is a succession, with one part coming after another, it is by numbering the *before* and *after* in movement that we apprehend time, which is just the numbering of what is prior and posterior in movement. However, in that which lacks movement and always remains the same, there is no room for prior and posterior. Therefore, just as the concept of time consists in the numbering of prior and posterior in movement, so the concept of eternity consists in the apprehension of the uniformity of that which lies completely outside of movement.

Again, as *Physics* 4 says, the things that are said to be measured by time have a beginning and an end in time, and this is because in everything that is moved one can designate some beginning and some end. But just as that which is altogether immutable can have no succession, so neither can it have a beginning or an end.

Eternity, then, is characterized by two things: first, by the fact that what exists in eternity is interminable, i.e., lacking a beginning and an end (since ‘terminus’ refers to both); second, by the fact

that eternity itself lacks succession and is a simultaneous whole.

Reply to objection 1: Simple things are normally defined by means of a negation—e.g., a point is that which has no parts. This is not because the negation is part of their essence, but rather because our intellect, which primarily apprehends composite things, cannot arrive at the cognition of simple things except by way of ruling out composition.

Reply to objection 2: That which is truly eternal is not only a being but a living being, and ‘to live’, though not ‘to be’, itself includes operation in some way. But the protraction of duration seems to pertain more to operation than it does to being. This is why time is the numbering of movement.

Reply to objection 3: Eternity is called a whole not because it has parts, but rather in the sense that it lacks nothing.

Reply to objection 4: Just as God, given that He is incorporeal, is denominated metaphorically by the names of corporeal things in the Scriptures, so too eternity, which exists as a simultaneous whole, is denominated by the names of successive temporal entities.

Reply to objection 5: In the case of time there are two things to consider: (a) time itself, which is a successive entity, and (b) the temporal *now*, which is incomplete. Therefore, one says ‘simultaneous whole’ in order to rule out time, and one says ‘complete’ in order to exclude the temporal *now*.

Reply to objection 6: That which is possessed is had firmly and steadily. Therefore, to designate the immutable and unfailing nature of eternity, one uses the term ‘possession’.

Article 2

Is God eternal?

It seems that God is not eternal:

Objection 1: Nothing that is made can be said of God. But eternity is something made; for Boethius says, “The flowing *now* makes time, the abiding *now* makes eternity,” and in 83 *Quaestiones* Augustine says that God is the author of eternity. Therefore, God is not eternal.

Objection 2: That which exists both before eternity and after eternity is not measured by eternity. But God exists before eternity, as the *Liber de Causis* says, and He exists after eternity, since Exodus 15:18 says, “The Lord shall reign for eternity and beyond.” Therefore, it is not fitting for God to be eternal.

Objection 3: Eternity is a certain measure. But it does not befit God to be measured. Therefore, it does not belong to Him to be eternal.

Objection 4: Since, as has been explained (a. 1), eternity is a simultaneous whole, there is no present, past, or future in it. But present-tense, past-tense, and future-tense verbs are predicated of God in the Scriptures. Therefore, God is not eternal.

But contrary to this: The Athanasian creed says, “The Father is eternal, the Son is eternal, the Holy Spirit is eternal.”

I respond: As is clear from what was said above (a. 1), the nature of eternity follows upon immutability, just as the nature of time follows upon movement. Hence, since God is maximally immutable, it belongs to Him especially to be eternal. And not only is He eternal, but He is His own eternity—even though no other thing is its own duration, since no other thing is its own *esse*. But God is His own *esse* in all respects; so just as He is His own essence, so too He is His own eternity.

Reply to objection 1: The abiding *now* is said to ‘make eternity’ according to our apprehension. For just as the apprehension of time is caused in us by the fact that we apprehend the flowing of the

temporal *now*, so too the apprehension of eternity is caused in us insofar as we apprehend an abiding *now*.

Moreover, when Augustine says that God is the author of eternity, he is talking about participated eternity. For God communicates His eternity to some beings, just as He communicates His immutability as well.

Reply to objection 2: The answer to this objection is clear from what has just been said. For God is said to exist ‘before eternity’ to the extent that His eternity is participated in by immaterial substances. Hence, the same passage says, “An intelligence is likened to eternity.”

As for the passage from Exodus, “The Lord shall reign for eternity and beyond,” note that ‘eternity’ is taken here for ‘the ages’ (*saeculum*), as another translation has it. So, then, it is said that He will reign ‘beyond eternity’ because He endures beyond every age, i.e., beyond any given duration. For, as *De Caelo* 1 says, an age is nothing other than the period of each thing.

An alternative reply is that He is said to reign ‘beyond eternity’ because even if something other [than God] always existed (e.g., the movement of the heavens according to some philosophers), God would still reign ‘beyond’ it in the sense that His reign is a simultaneous whole.

Reply to objection 3: Eternity is nothing other than God Himself. Hence, God is not said to be eternal in the sense that He is measured in some way. Rather, the notion of a measure is understood here only according to our apprehension.

Reply to objection 4: Verbs of different tenses are attributed to God insofar as His eternity includes all times and not because He Himself varies over the present, past, and future.

Article 3

Is it proper to God alone to be eternal?

It seems not to be the case that it is proper to God alone to be eternal.

Objection 1: Daniel 12:3 says, “They that instruct many to justice are as stars for everlasting eternities.” But there would not be more than one eternity if God alone were eternal. Therefore, it is not the case that God alone is eternal.

Objection 2: Matthew 25:41 says, “Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire.” Therefore, it is not the case that God alone is eternal.

Objection 3: Everything necessary is eternal. But many things are necessary, e.g., all the principles of demonstration, and all the demonstrated propositions. Therefore, it is not the case that God alone is eternal.

But contrary to this: In *Ad Marcellum* Jerome says, “God alone does not have a beginning.” But whatever has a beginning is not eternal. Therefore, God alone is eternal.

I respond: Eternity is truly and properly found in God alone. For as is clear from what has been said (a. 1), eternity follows upon immutability. But, as was shown above (q. 9, a. 2), God alone is altogether immutable.

However, to the extent that certain things receive immutability from God, they participate in His eternity.

For some things receive immutability from God insofar as they never cease to exist; accordingly, Ecclesiastes 1:4 says of the earth that it remains for eternity.

Again, in the Scriptures other things are called eternal because of the great length of their duration, even though they are corruptible; for instance, in Psalm 75:5 the mountains are called eternal, and

Deuteronomy 33:15 speaks of the “fruits of the eternal hills.”

Still other things participate in the nature of eternity insofar as they have untransmutability (*intransmutabilitas*) with respect to *esse* or, even further, with respect to operation, as in the case of the angels and the blessed in heaven, who take joy in the Word. For, as Augustine says in *De Trinitate* 15, the saints have no changeable thoughts with respect to their vision of the Word. That is why those who see God are said to have eternal life, in accord with John 17:3 (“This is eternal life, that they may know . . .”).

Reply to objection 1: Many eternities are spoken of because there are many who participate in eternity by contemplating God.

Reply to objection 2: The fire of hell is called eternal only because of its interminability. However, there are changes in their punishments, according to Job 24:19 (“They will pass from the waters of snow to excessive heat.”) Hence, in hell there is no genuine eternity, but instead time—in keeping with Psalm 80:16 (“Their time shall be for ever”).

Reply to objection 3: ‘Necessary’ signifies a certain mode of truth. But according to the Philosopher in *Metaphysics* 6, the true exists in the intellect. Therefore, the true and the necessary are eternal because they exist in an eternal intellect, which is God’s intellect alone. Hence, it does not follow that anything outside of God is eternal.

Article 4

Does eternity differ from time?

It seems that eternity is not different from time:

Objection 1: There cannot be two simultaneous measures of duration unless one is a part of the other; for no two days or two hours are simultaneous, whereas a day and an hour are simultaneous because the hour is part of the day. But eternity and time, both of which involve a measure of duration, are simultaneous. Therefore, since eternity is not a part of time, given that it exceeds time and includes it, it seems that time is a part of eternity and thus not distinct from eternity.

Objection 2: According to the Philosopher in *Physics* 4, the temporal *now* remains the same throughout the whole of time. But the nature of eternity seems to be constituted by the fact that it remains indivisibly the same throughout the whole course of time. Therefore, eternity is the temporal *now*. But the temporal *now* does not differ in substance from time. Therefore, eternity does not differ in substance from time.

Objection 3: Just as the measure of the first movement is, as *Physics* 4 says, the measure of all movements, so too it seems that the measure of the first *esse* is the measure of all *esse*. But eternity is the measure of the first *esse*, which is the divine *esse*. Therefore, eternity is the measure of all *esse*. But the *esse* of corruptible things is measured by time. Therefore, time is either eternity or some part of eternity.

But contrary to this: Eternity is a simultaneous whole, whereas in time there is a *before* and an *after*. Therefore, time and eternity are not the same.

I respond: It is clear that time and eternity are not the same.

However, some have given as an explanation for this difference the fact that eternity lacks a beginning and an end, whereas time has a beginning and an end. But this difference is *per accidens* and not *per se*. For even if time has always existed and always will exist—the position of those who posit a sempiternal movement of the heavens—there will still be a difference between eternity and time, just as Boethius explains in *De Consolatione Philosophiae*. The reason is that eternity is a simultaneous

whole—something that does not befit time—because eternity is a measure of permanent *esse*, whereas time is the measure of movement.

However, if the explanation just cited is applied to the things that are measured rather than to the measures, then it has some plausibility. For, as *Physics* 4 says, the only things measured by time are those which have a beginning and an end in time. Hence, if the movement of the heavens endured forever, then time would not measure that movement with respect to its whole duration, since the infinite is not measurable; instead, it would measure any given revolution, which has a beginning and an end in time.

However, there is another possible explanation having to do with the things measured, if the end and the beginning are thought of as potential. For even given that time lasts forever, it is possible to designate a beginning and an end in time by focusing on some part of time. For instance, we speak of the beginning and the end of a day or of a year—something that is not possible in the case of eternity.

Still, these differences follow upon the primary and *per se* difference, viz., that eternity, but not time, is a simultaneous whole.

Reply to objection 1: This argument proceeds on the assumption that time and eternity are measures that belong to a single genus. The falsity of this assumption is clear from the things of which time and eternity are the measures.

Reply to objection 2: The temporal *now* is the same in subject (*idem subiecto*) throughout the whole of time, but differs in concept (*differens ratione*). The reason is that the temporal *now* stands to the thing that is moving in just the way that time stands to the movement. The thing moving is the same in subject throughout the whole course of the time, but it differs in concept insofar as it is *here* and *there*, and this alternation [of places] is just the movement. Similarly, the flow of this *now*, insofar as it alternates in concept, is just time. But eternity remains the same both in subject and in concept. Hence, eternity is not the same as the temporal *now*.

Reply to objection 3: Just as eternity is the proper measure of *esse* itself, so time is the proper measure of movement. Hence, to the extent that some *esse* falls short of permanence of being and is subject to transmutation, it falls short of eternity and is subject to time. Therefore, since the *esse* of corruptible things is transmutable, it is measured not by eternity, but by time. For time measures not only those things that actually undergo transmutation, but also those things that are able to undergo transmutation. Hence, it measures not only movement, but also rest, which belongs to that which is apt to be moved and yet is not [actually] being moved.

Article 5

Is aeviternity different from time?

It seems that aeviternity (*aevum*) does not differ from time:

Objection 1: In *Super Genesim ad Litteram* 8, Augustine says, “God moves the spiritual creature through time.” But the measure of spiritual substances is called aeviternity. Therefore, time does not differ from aeviternity.

Objection 2: It is the nature of time to have a *before* and an *after*, whereas it is the nature of eternity to be a simultaneous whole, as has been explained (a. 1). But aeviternity is not eternity, since according to Ecclesiasticus 1:1, eternal wisdom precedes aeviternity. Therefore, aeviternity is not a simultaneous whole, but instead has a *before* and an *after*, and so is the same as time.

Objection 3: If there were no *before* or *after* in aeviternity, then it would follow that in aeviternity *exists*, *existed*, and *will exist* do not differ from one another. Therefore, since it is impossible for

aeviternal entities not to have existed, it would follow that it is impossible for them not to exist in the future. But this is false, since God could reduce them to nothingness.

Objection 4: Given that the duration of aeviternal entities is infinite with respect to the future (*ex parte post*), if aeviternity is a simultaneous whole, then it follows that some created thing is actually infinite—which is impossible. Therefore, aeviternity does not differ from time.

But contrary to this: Boethius says, “He commands time to go forth from aeviternity.”

I respond: Aeviternity differs from time and eternity as something midway between them.

Now some characterize the difference among them by claiming that (a) *eternity* lacks a beginning and an end, (b) *aeviternity* has a beginning but no end, and (c) *time* has both a beginning and an end. But, as was explained above (a. 4), this difference is *per accidens*. For even if, as some claim, aeviternal things were such that they always have existed and always will exist—or even if aeviternal things ceased to exist at some future time, which would be possible for God to bring about (*Deo possibile esset*)—aeviternity would still be distinct from eternity and from time.

By contrast, others claim that the difference among the three is that (a) *eternity* does not have a *before* or an *after*, (b) *time* has a *before* and an *after* along with newness and oldness, and (c) *aeviternity* has a *before* and an *after* without any newness or oldness. But this position entails a contradiction. This is manifestly obvious if newness and oldness are taken to apply to the measure itself. For given that a duration’s *before* and *after* cannot exist simultaneously, if aeviternity has a *before* and an *after*, then when an earlier part of aeviternity recedes, a later part must newly arrive, and so there will be newness in aeviternity itself, just as there is in time. But even if newness and oldness are taken to apply to the things that are measured, it is still the case that an absurdity follows. For a temporal entity grows old with time because it has transmutable *esse*, and, as is clear from *Physics* 4, the *before* and *after* in the measure derive from the transmutability of the thing being measured. So if an aeviternal entity is itself incapable of either newness or oldness, this will be because it has untransmutable *esse*. Therefore, its measure will not have a *before* or an *after*.

So, then, one should respond as follows:

Since eternity is a measure of permanent *esse*, to the extent that something falls short of permanence of *esse*, it falls short of eternity.

Some things fall short of permanence of *esse* in such a way that their *esse* is either the subject of transmutation or consists in transmutation, and things of this sort are measured by time—e.g., every movement as well as the *esse* of all corruptible things.

On the other hand, some things fall short of permanence of *esse* to a lesser degree, since their *esse* neither consists in transmutation nor is the subject of transmutation, though they have transmutation adjoined to them either in actuality or in potentiality. This is clear in the case of the celestial bodies, which have untransmutable substantial *esse*, but have this untransmutable substantial *esse* along with a transmutability with respect to place. Likewise, in the case of the angels it is clear that they have untransmutable [substantial] *esse* along with a transmutability with respect to choice, as it pertains to their nature, as well as a transmutability with respect to acts of understanding and affection and (in their own way) with respect to place. And so entities of this sort are measured by aeviternity, which falls midway between eternity and time.

By contrast, the *esse* that is measured by eternity is neither mutable nor adjoined to any mutability.

So then, (a) time has a *before* and an *after*, (b) aeviternity does not have a *before* or an *after* in its own right (*in se*), but can have a *before* and *after* conjoined to it, and (c) eternity does not have a *before* or an *after* and is incompatible with them.

Reply to objection 1: With respect to their acts of affection and understanding, which involve succession, spiritual creatures are measured by time. Hence, in the same place Augustine says that to be moved through time is to be moved through acts of affection. On the other hand, with respect to their

natural *esse* they are measured by aeviternity, whereas with respect to the vision of glory, they participate in eternity.

Reply to objection 2: Aeviternity is a simultaneous whole, but it is not eternity because it is compatible with a *before* and an *after*.

Reply to objection 3: There is no difference between past and future in the very *esse* of an angel, considered in itself; instead, this difference arises solely because of the adjoined mutations.

Moreover, when we say that an angel exists or existed or will exist, the difference stems from the apprehension of our intellect, which apprehends the *esse* of an angel by relating it to different parts of time. And when the objection says that an angel exists or existed, it makes an assumption, the opposite of which is not [now] subject to God's power, whereas when it says that the angel will exist, it is not yet positing any assumption. For because the *esse* and non-*esse* of an angel fall under God's power, absolutely considered, God can make it the case that the angel's *esse* will not be; and yet God cannot make it the case either that (a) the angel, while he exists, does not exist or that (b) the angel, after he has existed, has not existed.

Reply to objection 4: The duration of aeviternity is infinite because it is not limited by time. However, there is nothing problematic about some created thing being infinite in the sense that it is not limited by some other created thing.

Article 6

Is there a single aeviternity?

It seems that there is not just a single aeviternity (*non sit tantum unum aevum*):

Objection 1: The apocryphal Esdra (3 Esdra 4:40) says, "The majesty and power of all the aeviternities stands before You, Lord."

Objection 2: There are different measures for different genera. But some aeviternal things are in the genus of corporeal things, viz., the celestial bodies, whereas others are spiritual substances, viz., the angels. Therefore, there is not just a single aeviternity.

Objection 3: Since 'aeviternity' is the name of a duration, things that have a single aeviternity have a single duration. But there is not just one duration for all aeviternal things, since some of them begin to exist after others, as is especially clear in the case of human souls. Therefore, there is not just a single aeviternity.

Objection 4: Things that do not depend on one another do not seem to have a single measure of duration. For it seems that the reason why there is a single time for all temporal things is that the first movement, which is prior to time, is in some sense a cause of all movements. By contrast, aeviternal things do not depend on one another, since it is not the case that one angel is a cause of another. Therefore, there is not just a single aeviternity.

But contrary to this: Aeviternity is more simple than time, and it is closer to eternity than time is. But there is just a single time. Therefore, *a fortiori* there is just a single aeviternity.

I respond: On this question there are two opinions. Some claim that there is just a single aeviternity, whereas others claim that there are many. To determine which of these opinions is closer to the truth, we have to inquire into the reason for the oneness of time, since we arrive at the cognition of spiritual things through corporeal things.

Now some claim that there is a single time for all temporal things because there is a single numbering for all the things that are numbered; for according to the Philosopher, time is a numbering. But this does not suffice, since time is not a numbering that is abstracted from what is being numbered.

Rather, it exists in the thing being numbered; otherwise, the numbering would not be continuous. For tenells of cloth have continuity not because of the numbering, but because of the thing numbered. However, the numbering that exists in the thing numbered is not the same for all things, but is instead diverse in diverse things.

Others explain the oneness of time by appealing to the oneness of eternity, which is the principle of every duration; on this view, all durations are one if their principle is considered, whereas they are many if we consider the diversity of things that receive their duration from the influence of the first principle. Still others explain the oneness of time by appealing to primary matter, which is the first subject of movement, the measure of which is time. However, neither of these explanations seems sufficient, since things that are one because of a principle or a subject—especially a remote principle or remote subject—are not one absolutely speaking, but one only in a certain respect (*secundum quid*).

So, then, the reason for the oneness of time is the oneness of the first movement. Since this movement is the simplest, all the other movements are measured by it, as *Metaphysics* 10 says. Thus, time is related to this particular movement not only as a measure to what is measured, but also as an accident to its subject; and so time receives its oneness from this movement. Moreover, this movement is related to other movements only as a measure to what is measured. Hence, time is not multiplied according the multiplicity of those movements, since the many separate things can be measured by a single measure.

Given this, we should note that there are two opinions about spiritual things. Some have claimed that all spiritual substances proceeded from God with a certain equality, as Origen maintained, or at least that many of them did, as others have maintained. By contrast, others have claimed that spiritual substances proceeded from God according to a certain gradation and ordering. This is what Dionysius seems to think, since in *De Caelesti Hierarchia*, chap. 10, he says that among spiritual substances some are first, some are in the middle, and some are last—even within a single order of angels.

Thus, in keeping with the first opinion, one has to claim that there are many aeviternities, insofar as there are many first equals among aeviternal things.

On the other hand, in keeping with the second opinion, one has to claim that there is just a single aeviternity. For since, as *Metaphysics* 10 says, each thing is measured by what is most simple in its genus, it must be the case that the *esse* of all aeviternal things is measured by the *esse* of the first aeviternal thing. For the more simple a thing is, the more priority it has. And since, as will be shown below (q. 50, a. 4), this second opinion is closer to the truth, we will concede for now that there is just a single aeviternity.

Reply to objection 1: ‘Aeviternity’ is sometimes taken for ‘age’ (*saeculum*), which is a given entity’s period of duration. And so the term ‘many aeviternities’ means ‘many ages’.

Reply to objection 2: Even though celestial bodies and spiritual substances differ in their natural genus, they nonetheless agree in having untransmutable *esse*. And that is why they are measured by aeviternity.

Reply to objection 3: It is likewise not the case that all temporal things begin simultaneously; and yet there is a single time for all of them because of the first thing that is measured by time. So, too, all aeviternal things have a single aeviternity because of the first aeviternal thing, even if they do not all begin to exist simultaneously.

Reply to objection 4: In order for it to be the case that certain things are measured by a single thing, that single thing does not have to be a cause of all the others. Rather, what is required is that it be more simple than the others.