

8: God's Eternity

Previously, we began discussing Thomas Aquinas's metaphysics, one of the tougher aspects of his work to fully grasp. We talked at length about the doctrine of God's simplicity, and the seeming paradox that arises because God is being itself, but also a being with a mind and a will. In this lecture we will tackle another difficult metaphysical concept, God's eternity, and the implications thereof.

I. Eternity vs. Time: As time-bound creatures, it is extremely difficult to think in a context outside of time. Nonetheless, in speaking of eternity, that is precisely what we are doing. Eternity is not merely the superabundance of time, but rather eternity is outside of time, and they are two distinct modes of duration.

Aquinas uses the classical definition of eternity he inherited from the Christian tradition before him, as espoused much earlier by Boethius in *The Consolation of Philosophy*: Eternity is the complete possession all at once of illimitable life. This sentence is short but rich, and so we will treat each of the four parts of the definition: The complete possession; All at once; Of illimitable; Life

Each of these requirements adds nuance to the meaning of eternity, and we will look at them in reverse order:

1. **Life:** It is important to note that something must be alive in order to be eternal. That which is not living cannot truly be eternal (e.g., ideas, truths, etc., can be timeless, but not eternal since they are not living).
2. **Illimitable:** The life in question can have no limits to either side, therefore no beginning and no end. As such, we should note that colloquial usage of the term "eternal life" when describing humans in heaven is incorrect; rather we should say "everlasting life," for while we will have no end, only God has no beginning and no end.
3. **All at once, and complete possession:** Here we are limited by being in time. Nothing within the strictures of time can possess its life all at once or in completeness, because the past is already gone and the future has yet to occur.

II. God as Eternal: God is eternal, and because eternity is outside of time, the confines of time as they apply to us on Earth do not apply to God. There are several implications from this: There is no succession of time or events in eternity - there is neither past nor future, there is neither earlier nor later. As such, everything in eternity is present, all things happen contemporaneously, even the beginning and end of specific events. A specific ramification of this is that it remains true that God knows all things past, present, and future, but this is not foreknowledge-

prediction. God knows the future, but as a contemporaneous present, along with what we experience in time as the present. God knows the future as present, not as events "yet to come."

God's eternity is not just timelessness, or it would be frozen. Rather it consists of a limitless duration of present not governed by past or future, and absent of succession. As a result, God's eternal present is metaphysically bigger than our temporal present, which is instantaneous and punctiliar in nature.

A truly important ramification of this is God's presence to us. God—in God's eternality - is present to us. This may seem difficult at first because God is outside of time, and we are limited to time. Somewhat counterintuitively, God is actually more present to us than we are to each other. This is because God is present to every instant of our lives at once, and all the time. We interact with each other in a limited way, only in the temporal present. God's eternal simultaneity with our temporal present means that God is present with us each moment from the temporal past, present, and future, all at once as an eternal present.

Reflection Questions:

1. What is the difference between eternity and endless time?
2. How can God be more present to us than we are to each other and to ourselves?