**eternity/永恒(Yǒng Héng)**

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| European Perspective | Tilo Weber | 31 Mai 2022 |

Eternity and attempts to cope with the concept in terms of philosophical analysis marks the intersection of several discourses that have defined European history of thought by revolving around the following questions:

What is the nature of time?

What is the nature of God?

What is the nature of the human being?

They represent different perspectives on a notion that challenges human mind intellectually as well as emotionally. The intellectual challenge is to try to comprehend eternity in the context of a theory of time. Emotionally, eternity is associated with existential hopes and worries that seem to be deeply entrenched in human nature and that are related to urgent questions of life and death.

Since the first two of the questions put forward above will be discussed more extensively in the second part of this article, the following two sections limit themselves to profiling and highlighting, rather than clarifying, several related issues that also seem to create unresolved puzzles for thinkers today. The third question will, then, be elaborated on to some greater extent.

## **1 Eternity and the nature of time**

While intellectual challenges concerning the nature of time are manifold, not all of them have to be tackled when the focus is on eternity. The most urgent issues, however, that have to be clarified seem to be rooted in the contrast between Plato’s idealist and Aristotle’s mundane concepts of time. A first question arises from the opposition between a concept of eternity as boundless duration vs. atemporality: Is, that means, eternity equal to temporal sempiternity, an endless duration of time as Aristotle suggests,[[1]](#footnote-2) or is to be conceived of as Platonic atemporal, unchanging simultaneity[[2]](#footnote-3)? And if it is temporal, has it always existed or did it, at some point (in time?), come into being and how?

The difference that inspires the second question is the one between immanence and transcendence: Is eternity a dimension within the physical world or is it an inhabitant of the transcendent realm of the ideal as Plato and Augustine[[3]](#footnote-4) (LIT; see below) assume?

Rather than offering answers, it is merely suggested here that these questions represent puzzles, intellectual challenges that, up to date, are to some extent open and still fuel debates in European philosophy, theology, and cosmology. Against the background of this view, it is plausible to turn to a discourse, in which the issue of eternity is raised in a different, if related, intellectual context: the quest for grasping the nature of the divine, of (the Christian) god.

## **2 Eternity and the nature of God**

Augustine, the early Church Father of the 4th and 5th century AD, in his *Confessions* contributed greatly to the theory of time as well as to an elucidation of the relationship between time and eternity. Since more will be said on Augustine later, only the most central Augustinian ideas related to the present topic shall be highlighted here:

* Augustine’s concern for time and eternity is not theoretical and about these concepts *per se*. Rather, it is but one aspect of his pursuit of God by trying to understand HIS nature as well HIS relationship to human beings.
* Augustine’s ontology is dualistic like Plato’s. And this ontological dualism fits perfectly his inquiry in the dualism between the divine and the human. In this view, eternity is a dimension of the divine, time is an image of eternity in the realm of the human.
* Augustine, other than both, Plato and Aristotle, introduces the view of “inner”, “psychological”, “subjective” time.[[4]](#footnote-5) The issue of eternity, thus, becomes an issue relevant for the human being.
* Last and still important: Augustine’s mode of philosophizing is *not* conceptual analysis, *sine ira et studio*, in cold blood. His opus magnum is titled *Confessions*. This title reflects the author’s personal crisis, his doubts, and existential worries.

And this leads to reflections on eternity from yet a third perspective.

## **3 Eternity and the nature of the human being**

The intellectual impasse stated above may be one of the factors that have motivated men and women from various backgrounds to seek for alternative ways to cope with eternity. Another may lie in human nature. The idea of eternity is inevitably tied to experiences that affect human lives in deeply existential manners. As human beings we are mortal, and since sooner or later we will be confronted with the reality of death, the question of an eternal afterlife is urgent both from the point of view of the individual and from the perspective of collective cultural or religious communities. Where reasoning is not successful in meeting existential needs, different approaches are sought.

From a religious point of view, experience can be seen as a way of—not understanding, since this is impossible from the standpoint of faith—but pursuing, getting closer to God or the divine by way of imitation, trying to transcend ones limited human existence and thus reach an ecstatic mental state that makes eternity tangible. In the midst of a community of believers, religious rites, prayers, sermons, liturgies and the like may serve this end. For a long time, critics have claimed that Western religious traditions and practices have lost (or possibly never really had) the capacity to sufficiently meet people’s transcendental needs. As a reaction, they have turned to approaches beyond the European sphere, sometimes apostrophized as “Eastern”, e.g., Zen Buddhism or what has become known as *Transcendental Meditation.*[[5]](#footnote-6)

A second, non-analytic approach is found in attempts to make eternity or aspects of it accessible to sensual perception. Artists of all genres have tried to do so for a long time. One may point to the sacred paintings of the so-called (European) Middle Ages, to poetic speculations of early romanticists like Friedrich Hölderlin or Novalis,[[6]](#footnote-7) to the architecture of Gothic cathedrals and much more to illustrate this idea. However, among the various artistic genres or modalities, music might be said to be particularly apt to deal with time and eternity. This is, because music can be looked at as configured, modulated time. European musical traditions feature many cases of compositions and musical performances that not only deal with eternity, but also make eternity audible.

A felicitous example is the so called “eternal pedal point”, a long, sustained note in the bass of numerous sacred compositions. Among many other pieces in his oeuvre, a pedal point occurs in Johann Sebastian Bach’s motet *Lobe den Herrn* (‘Praise the Lord’), where the word *Ewigkeit* (‘eternity’) is accompanied with long, deep note.[[7]](#footnote-8) A more recent composition is György Ligeti’s version of the *Lux aeterna* (1966), the prayer for eternal light, in which mystical content is met by musical form. A radical approach is adopted by John Cage’s ORGAN2/ASLSP (*As slow as possible*, 1987).[[8]](#footnote-9) Its realization in the St. Buchardi church in Halberstadt (Germany), beyond exploring the role of silence in music, induces a transcendent experience of eternity in those who are present. Some interpreters have observed that Cage was decisively influenced by Zen Buddhism and the early Chinese *Book of Changes* (*I Ching)* as inspirational sources for his music. Here, eternity is evoked by the performance’s sheer length in time. Started on September 5, 2001, it will take 639 (!) years to its completion. The initial pause is “performed” as a period of total musical silence lasting 17 months. In later phases, except in the rare moments of tonal change (on average, there will less than one per year in the first 70 years), the “audience”, human, time-bound listeners, will be left to monotonous experiences without perceptible beginning or end. Furthermore, it is the organ, i.e., the classical instrument of sacred music, as well as the place (a medieval church), that both support a spiritual air and the idea of transcendence.

## **4 Concluding thoughts from a European point of view**

From a European (or “Western”) perspective, the nature of eternity appears twofold: seen as a concept, it has been “treated” as an object of theoretical reasoning and scientific analysis; in this manner, philosophers and cosmologists have tried to *say what eternity is*. As a facet of existential human experience, eternity has been approached by way of ritual practices that aim at inducing states of transcendence in their practitioners, but also by artists, poets, musicians and others who have aimed at *showing eternity*. The focus in the preceding sections was on European perspectives. However, examples from various fields, including art, music and also philosophy, show that Europeans have in some cases long since expanded their horizons beyond the boundaries of their own intellectual continent.

1. Aristotle. Book IV, Chapters 10–14. In: Aristotle. Physics, Books III and IV. Translated with Notes by Edward Hussey. Clarendon Press, Oxford 1983. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Plato. Timaeus, 37c6–d7. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. St. Augustine. Confessions. Book XI. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. St. Augustine. Confessions. Book XI, Chapter 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Melton, Gordon J. Transcendental Meditation. In: Britannica Online Encyclopedia. Accessible at: https://www.britannica.com/topic/Transcendental-Meditation (last access: May 31, 2022). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Novalis. Blüthenstaub. Fragment 16. In: Novalis. Schriften. Die Werke Friedrich von Hardenbergs. Band 2, Stuttgart 1960–1977, pp. 413–464. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. On the relationship between pedal point and eternity in Bach’s oeuvre, cf. Martin Geck. Johann Sebastian Bach: Life and Work. Boston. 2006, p. 427. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. John-Cage-Orgel-Kunst-Projekt Halberstadt. Organ²/ASLSP As Slow as Possible und das Wunder der Zeit. Halberstadt: John-Cage-Orgel-Stiftung. 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)