**eternity/永恒(Yǒng Héng)**

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While everything existent exists in time, philosophers and religious people invented the idea of eternity, which not only signifies a kind of long time or even timelessness, but also an ideal state of being. In Western philosophy, he idea of eternity is already found in Parmenides’ description of being, which he defines as immoveable, without a beginning or an end. In contrast, everything that has a beginning and an end is becoming instead of being. In Plato’s philosophy, the idea of eternity is much richer. In his *Timaeus*, the invisible idea is described as eternal and immoveable, while everything created by God is movable. The noblest type of movement is circular movement, because it resembles motionlessness the best. When there is movement, there is time. But time is not composed of by any kind of movement, only regular and rhythmical movement makes up time, which is still a kind of similarity of the eternal. Hence there are two possible understandings of the relationship between eternity and time. Eternity is either the deprivation of time or the totality of time. This ambivalence is especially seen in the Neoplatonic philosophy of Plotinus. For Plotinus, everything created is temporal, while they all return to the eternal.

The dialectics between eternity and temporality is quite interesting in Greek intellectual tradition. αἰών, the Greek word for eternity, originally means lifetime, age, or an era, which of course has an obvious sense of temporality. But what is time? In *The Physics*, Aristotle defines time as the measure of movement. If there is no movement, it is regarded as timeless. It is from this idea of time, that the idea of timeless eternity is invented.

In addition, we cannot forget the very fact that in ancient Greek thought, history was not understood as a kind of linear progress. Different types of cyclical history were quite popular among Greek intellectuals. In this context it is much easier to understand that eternity and the circular progress of history could be seen as two sides of the very same thing, or at least not so different from each other. While both Parmenides and Plato see authentic being as immoveable and timeless, it is not understood as the creating God in the Christian sense. In *The Timaeus* by Plato, the personal gods, who are seen as the planets, are created gods who make circular movements, while the creating god is nothing but a great craftsman. While Aristotle understands the prime mover as unmoved, which would greatly influence medieval understanding of God, he denies that the world could be created from nothing, and hence the prime mover does not represent a beginning of history of all beings. Aristotle’s philosophy of time is very important to later discussions of eternity, both in Neoplatonism and in Christian philosophers such as Augustine.

It is with Augustine that the lineal idea of time was established philosophically, and hence a brand-new understanding of eternity also came into being, which became a key feature in the Christian idea of God. Augustine insists on the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, that is, God creates everything from absolute nothingness. Since only God is in the authentic sense, everything else is created from nothing, and always has a tendency toward nothingness, which is why it is always changing, while God Himself is changeless. This is the sharp contrast between eternal God and temporal creatures.

What does time mean to Augustine? Following the Aristotelian tradition, Augustine also sees time as movement from future via present to past. What is new in Augustine is the emphasis he lays on the present. For Aristotle, the present is nothing but the point that divides future and past, and all three are parts of time. But for Augustine, only the present is, but the future is not yet, and the past is no more.[[1]](#footnote-1) A step further, there is no future or past at all.

For Augustine, time is created by God as anything else. But as the measurement of change, whether time is something objective independent of the soul or but a kind of inner experience, is subject to debate. But most scholars agree that time for Augustine is a kind of inner experience, or the extension of the mind.[[2]](#footnote-2) The three dimensions of time is nothing but three aspects of the present in the soul. “The present considering the past is the memory, the present considering the present is immediate awareness, the present considering the future is the expectation.”[[3]](#footnote-3) While only the present is, we who are always changing experience it in different ways in the soul, and hence the ego is distorted and distracted toward different directions, which is why we are always miserable in such a temporal condition. In contrast, God is eternal in the sense that he is always present and nothing in him is transient. Augustine makes his ideas of time and eternity so radically different from his predecessors, that his eternity is never an elongation of time, nor an infinite one. The difference between eternity and time is that between the creator and creatures, between being and nonbeing, which is so great that nothing could bridge them in the authentic sense. The salvation of human beings, philosophically understood, is not to turn temporality into eternity, which is impossible, but to make the temporal being consider the eternity as constantly as possible. Regarding the past, they should not remember their mundane and trivial experience in the past, but trace to the very beginning of the world and study how God created everything. Regarding the future, they should not expect any personal or vulgar happiness in the future, but focus on the last day and the last judgment and always prepare for that, so that they could go to heaven at the very end. Regarding the present, which, though always is, could be profane too, they should not concentrate to any routine or humane enjoyment, but contemplate on the being of God that is always there. Although one is still living in a temporal way, he adheres to God and joins his eternity.

With the ideas of lineal history, *creatio ex nihilo,* inner time, Augustine radically concealed the dialectics between time and eternity and revolutionized the philosophy of time and eternity. But the dialectical relationship between time and eternity is so deeply rooted, that it still emerges from time to time, especially when we again face the problem of time and eternity in a modern world.

It is well known that Isaac Newton built the foundation of modern cosmology, a core of which is the modern understanding of time. In the *Scholium* to Book I of his *Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematicae*, Newton makes a definition of time, “Absolute, true, and mathematical time, in and of itself and of its own nature, without reference to anything external, flows uniformly and by another name is called duration. Relative, apparent, and common time is any sensible and external measure (precise or imprecise) of duration by means of notion; such a measure-for example, an hour, a day, a month, a year-is commonly used instead of true time.”[[4]](#footnote-4) If Augustine is the strongest supporter of a subjective understanding of time, Newton is the strongest supporter of its objective understanding. According to Newton, time is not only absolutely objective, but also uniform and homogeneous. That is, time is always flowing at the same speed, whether we notice it or not, whether there is anything there at all to experience time. For Newton, there is no such thing as the Augustinian present. Every second is the same, otherwise there would not be mathematically calculable physics. The Newtonian theory of time is called eternalism by contemporary scholars, while the Augustinian theory is called presentism. With a different understanding of time, Newton also has a different theory of eternity. For him, time is eternally flowing in the same way and with the same speed. Hence eternity is not contrary to time as Augustine argues, but is inherent in the flow of time. In other words, eternity is the way that time exists and moves. God exists in the eternal flowing of time. Newton explicitly denies the Augustinian view to see God as a *nunc stans* without duration.[[5]](#footnote-5) Instead, the Newtonian God “is eternal and infinite…, that is, he endures from eternity to eternity and he is presently from infinity to infinity…He endures always and is present everywhere, and by existing always and everywhere he constitutes duration and space.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Newton revives the dialectical understanding of time and eternity. Eternity is not timelessness, but the entity of time.

When classical physics is replaced by the Relativity Physics in the twentieth century, however, Newton’s idea of absolute time is seriously challenged. According to the Special Relativity Theory, time is never absolute, and two events happen simultaneously or not dependent on the reference frame. The twentieth century saw a quite lively discussion on the philosophy of time, partly because of the rise of the Relativity Theory and Quantum Mechanics, partly because of other developments in philosophy, in which the idea of eternity is quite difficult to defend. Alan Padgett develops a new understanding of God’s timeless eternity, that is, God is timeless in a relative sense, not absolutely.[[7]](#footnote-7) Padgett finds it is meaningless to insist on the absolute timelessness of God in a modern world. In the time dominated by the Relativity Theory, since everything is in its own time-space reference frame, in what sense can we say that God is timeless? Is He confined to a reference frame or not? Craig decides to decline the Einsteinian theory, but turns to a neo-Lorentzian interpretation and incorporates it with the General Relativity Theory. He concludes that God is temporal, and His time is cosmic time, a privileged reference frame. Everything that happens in other reference frames is now to him. In this way, while Craig saves God’s eternity, he also preserves the dialectics between time and eternity.[[8]](#footnote-8) The denial of Einsteinian theory, however, is arbitrary and unsatisfied.

In Chinese philosophical tradition, however, eternity is not seen as timeless, but as a kind of eternal cycle. The seasonal cycle among spring, summer, autumn, and winter is understood as the rhythm of time. This is a kind of weak circulation theory. In a strong circulation theory of time, everything would return in the next cycle. In a weak circulation theory, however, only similar things return, but they are not exactly the same. For instance, the flowers on a tree of this spiring are quite similar with those of last spring, but they are not the same once. All living things in the earth experience such cycles, either once or many times. For some lower animals, a lifespan is no more than one year. A human being would experience many cycles. Hence eternity is understood as living through such cycles again and again. 永 originally means the flowing of water, while 恒 means a person standing in a boat. Hence the word 永恒 (eternity) means flowing forever like a river or always travelling in a boat. In *The Book of Change*, the diagram for eternity is , meaning thunder and wind. The nature for eternity is change, and a life could be long only by enduring more cycles. After Buddhism was introduced into China, Buddhist scholars often say, “everything is eternal, and one instance is not different from eternity.” Since nothing is still, everything is seen as eternal, not in the sense of timelessness, but as always changing in the world. Although the lifespan of some lives might be quite long, but no individual could be immortal. Eternity is not about any single life, but the totality of lives. Because the cycles would be eternal, and while one life dies, another one would rise again, the world is always full of lives and hence be eternal.

1. The Confessions, XI. 11(13). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The Confessions, XI. 26(33). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The Confessions, XI. 24(25). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Isaac Newton, *Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematicae*, translated by Bernard Coen and Anne Whitman, Berkeley: University of Berkeley Press, 1999, p408. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. William Craig, God, *Time, and Eternity*, Springer, 2001, p 157-158. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Principia, p941. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Alan Padgett, “God and Time: Toward a New Doctrine of Divine Timeless Eternity,” *Religious Studies,* Jun., 1989, Vol. 25, No. 2, pp209-215; see also Alan Padgett, *God, Eternity, and the Nature of Time*, New York : St. Martin's Press, 1992. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. William Craig, *God, Time, and Eternity*, Springer-Science+Business Media, B. V., 2001. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)