

Anselm on Eternity as the Fifth Dimension

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Among the various arguments for the contemporary rejection of the view that God is eternal is the claim that a timeless God could not be omniscient in that He could not know what time it actually is right now, and the complaint that invoking divine eternity fails to solve the dilemma of freedom and foreknowledge. I argue that Anselm's doctrine of divine eternity avoids these criticisms by adopting what I call the "four-dimensionalist" theory of time; all times, what we call past, present, and future exist equally and are all immediately present to divine eternity.

Recent work in philosophy of religion has given the lie to Boethius' claim that all who live by reason judge God to be eternal. Among the various arguments for the contemporary rejection of the view that God is eternal I would like to mention two which will prove especially interesting in looking at Anselm's view of eternity. One criticism of the claim that God is eternal holds that a timeless God could not be omniscient. Were God outside of time in such a way that He sees all of time as if it were equally present, then He is missing one really crucial piece of information and that is what time it actually is right now.¹ God may have numbered the hairs on your head, but He doesn't know whether you are presently dead or alive. A serious problem indeed! A second common complaint is that those who subscribe to the doctrine of divine eternity invoke it to solve the dilemma of freedom and foreknowledge, but the eternalist solution doesn't live up to the hype. That is, if God's knowing in the fixed and immutable *past* that I will choose x tomorrow means that I cannot do other than choose x tomorrow and so I do not choose x tomorrow with libertarian freedom, then saying that God's knowledge is not past, but eternal, does not solve the problem. Eternity is just as fixed and immutable as the past. I cannot choose other than as God eternally knows I will choose, and if this conflicts with libertarian freedom, then I am not free in a robust enough sense to be the subject of praise and blame.²

I want to argue that Anselm's doctrine of divine eternity avoids these complaints—it does not conflict with the thesis of divine omniscience and it *does* succeed in solving the dilemma of freedom and foreknowledge. And this is because Anselm, in a very clear and conscious way, adopts what I will call the "four-dimensionalist" theory of time, sometimes also called the "tenseless" theory. He is, to my knowledge, the first philosopher in history to do so.

In order to explain four-dimensionalism it is perhaps best to start with its chief rival among theories of time, what we can call "presentism." Presentism holds that the only time that exists is the present instant. The future is absolutely non-existent, as is the past. This is perhaps the more "common sense" view of time, although, as Augustine remarks in the famous

¹ The contemporary *locus classicus* for this point is A.N. Prior, "The Formalities of Omniscience," *Philosophy* 37 (1962) pp.114–129.

² See, for example, Linda Zagzebski *The Dilemma of Freedom and Foreknowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991) Chapter 2.

meditation on time in Book 11 of the *Confessions*, it isn't really very commonsensical, given that it reduces the present moment to an extensionless point at which the non-existent future becomes the non-existent past.

Four-dimensionalism holds that all of time is equally existent. On Anselm's analysis, all of time is equally present to God's eternity since it is God's eternal activity which causes it all to be. What we call the future and the past exist as much as does what we call the present. The terms "past," "present," and "future" are relative to a given temporal perceiver at a given moment in time in a way analogous to the way "here" and "there" are relative to a given spatial perceiver at a given point in space. Granted, as many contemporary philosophers of religion have noted, this is a difficult position to grasp imaginatively. It is bizarre to think that the "me" of a moment ago and the "me" of a moment hence are just as real as the "me" at present. And yet it is a fairly familiar theory in popular culture as it is the view that underlies time travel stories. When the time traveler, in his present, sets the dial to what is to him past or future, his destination must "be there" to become his present when he arrives.

In any event Anselm's methodology does not permit the limitations of the human imagination to decide what is the case. Anselm's starting point is the non-negotiable claim that God is "that than which a greater cannot be conceived." If, as Anselm claims, being eternal is a perfection, then God is eternal. And if, as Anselm further holds, four-dimensionalism follows from God's eternity, then we live in a four-dimensional space-time block in which all time is equally real. In trying to think about God and His relation to the universe we are pushing the limits of human reasoning and must expect to bump up against theories that are hard to grasp. Were it the case that conceptualizing God as eternal did indeed conflict with His knowing what time it is now, or with our libertarian freedom (Anselm is arguably the first philosopher in history to propose a careful and systematic libertarian analysis of freedom³), then Anselm might agree that we need to rethink divine eternity. But our having imaginative difficulty with the theory does not rise to the level of evidence against it.

In this paper I will just mention Augustine and Boethius on time, and then sketch out Anselm's views from his text. Making the historical case that Anselm is indeed the first to connect divine eternity and the four-dimensionalist theory in a clear and conscious way also serves the purpose of elaborating the position. Once the theory is clear, it is a quick and easy task to answer the two contemporary criticisms.

Augustine and Boethius both discuss the relationship of time to eternity and both say things that sound four-dimensionalist, but neither elaborates his views clearly enough to rule out other interpretations. Augustine in *On Diverse Questions to Simplician* (2.2.2) writes, "For what is future to God who surpasses all time? If the knowledge of God contains the things themselves (*res ipsas habet*), they are not future to Him, but present. For this reason it can be called not

³ I argue this in *Anselm on Freedom for Theists*, currently in progress.

foreknowledge, but rather knowledge.”⁴ This sounds four-dimensionalist, but admits of an alternative interpretation: Presentism is true, so all that exists is what exists at the present moment. God, however, sees all things past, present, and future, unchangeably, *as if* they were present. In the *City of God*, written later, he discusses God’s work of creation in a way inconsistent with four-dimensionalism. He writes,

So long as things did not exist it was his decree that prevented their existence at first, and when they came into being it was his will which brought them into existence later. In this way perhaps he shows, in a wonderful manner, to those who can see such things, that he did not stand in need of his creation, but produced his creature out of pure disinterested goodness, since he had continued in no less felicity without them from all eternity without beginning (12.18).⁵

This cannot be four-dimensionalism, because on that view all of time is equally real and equally present to God. Since God chooses to create, the created world is always present to God’s eternity. There is no point before creation at which God exists alone and then a later point at which He exists with creation.⁶

The same ambiguity is present in Boethius’ *Consolations*. There are texts in Book 5, Prose 6 which suggest four-dimensionalism: God’s eternity, “hold[s] as present the infinity of moving time.”⁷ The image of God looking “forward on all things as though from the highest peak of the world” suggests that the things, past, present, and future, are really there to be seen. Earlier, in Book 4, Prose 6, though he is not really addressing the question of time and eternity, Boethius repeats an analogy found in Plotinus (*Enneads* VI, 5,11) and later in Aquinas (*Summa Contra Gentiles* I, 66,7). “Therefore as reasoning is to understanding, as that which becomes is to that which is, as time is to eternity, as the circle is to its centre, so is the moving course of fate to the unmoving simplicity of providence.” This analogy, too, suggests four-dimensionalism, in that all the points on the circumference of the circle (time) are equally present to the center of the circle (eternity), and are equally real. But Boethius frequently inserts a qualification. “God...considers [all past and future] *as though* [my italics] (*quasi*) they were now going on.”⁸ And he distinguishes between the future as foreknown by God and as actually taking place. God sees things “...as present to him just such as in time they will at some future point come to be.”

So Augustine and Boethius may understand divine eternity to be absolute immutability, but on a presentist, not a four-dimensionalist theory of time. All that is real is the present moment, but God is, always was, and always will be thinking and doing exactly what He does at present. This presentist understanding of divine eternity entails that the future is absolutely non-existent, but for Augustine and Boethius this does not pose an insurmountable problem regarding

⁴ CCSL XLIV p.76, ll.27–31.

⁵ I am following the Bettenson translation in the Pelican Classics edition (Penguin Books, 1972).

⁶ This might seem to be the point of the argument in *Confessions* 11.13, but I do not see that Augustine offers a clearly four-dimensionalist analysis there.

⁷ I am following the Tester translation in the Loeb Classical Library Edition (1973).

⁸ Book 5, Prose 6. Latin text in Loeb edition p.426 ll.62–66.

reconciling human freedom with divine foreknowledge. There is good reason to believe that both are compatibilists.⁹ Future human choices in the final analysis depend upon God's causal activity, and so God can know in the present what those choices will be by knowing His own intentions. This seems to be exactly Boethius' conclusion in the *Consolation*. God knows what will happen "...not from the issuing of future events but from his own simplicity...." His knowledge "embracing all things in a present act of knowing, establishes a measure for everything, but owes nothing to later events." But the problem that God does not know what time it is *now* remains. Neither addresses it, and my suggestion is that it had not occurred to them, perhaps because neither offers a clear and definitive statement of the relationship of time to eternity. That had to wait for Anselm.

The clearest statement of Anselm's four-dimensionalism comes in his last completed philosophical work, *On the Harmony of the Foreknowledge and the Predestination and the Grace of God with Free Will*, but the subject comes up in his earlier works. He devotes several chapters of the *Monologion* to God's relationship to time. In Chapter 14 he argues the traditional, classical theist point that God must be immediately present to all that exists in order for it to exist. What does "present" mean here? Anselm is working within the metaphysical framework of Augustinian Neoplatonism, and entitles the chapter, "That it [the highest being] is in everything and through everything, and everything is from it and through it and in it."¹⁰ Anselm subscribes to a strong doctrine of participation in which God is really immanent in His creation, and created things reflect and in some sense genuinely share in the nature of God.¹¹ They are an expression of the divine mind, immediately kept in being by God's thought. At the same time, in good Neoplatonic fashion, Anselm balances his claims for the pervasiveness of God with the insistence that God is transcendent.

In *Monologion* 20 Anselm argues that we must say that God is in all place and time. He is careful to note that this does not mean that God may be circumscribed by some determinate place and time while His *power* reaches to all place and time. God is simple. His power is not separable from His being. Where His power is, He is. "And so since [the highest being] does not exist at some determinate 'somewhere' or 'somewhen,' it is necessary that it exists everywhere and always, that is, in all place and time."¹² Yet God is also transcendent, not circumscribed by any place or time. We must say that He is in "no place or time."¹³ In his typical analytic way Anselm proves this by noting that He would have to be "in" either as a whole or by parts, proposing all the possible divisions of whole and part applicable to place and time, and showing that none of them is consistent with the nature of God.

⁹ See my "Augustine's Compatibilism," *Religious Studies* 40 (2004) pp.415–435.

¹⁰ *Monologion* 14; S. I p.27 ll.17–18 (i.e., Vol. I of the Schmitt edition of Anselm's *Opera Omnia* page 27, lines 17–18. Translations of Anselm are my own.)

¹¹ See my *The Neoplatonic Metaphysics and Epistemology of Anselm of Canterbury* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1997) pp.91–112.

¹² *Monologion* 20 S. I p.36 ll.2–3.

¹³ *Monologion* 21 S. I p.36 l.5.

Perhaps the most interesting part of the discussion is the question of why God cannot be wholly separate and distinct in each single time. (This is what the divine situation would have to be if presentism were true.) After all, the whole human being exists yesterday, and then today, and then tomorrow, so it is correct to say that he was, is, and will be.¹⁴ Anselm, then, if one were to try to map his theory onto contemporary metaphysics, would seem to be an endurantist with regard to objects; the temporal object is wholly present at each time that it exists. But, he continues, if we said the same of God, “His life, which is nothing other than His eternity, would not exist all at once, but rather in parts, extended through the parts of time.”¹⁵ This seems to suggest perdurantism with regard to events. A life which exists over time is the sum of all of its temporal parts. One might consistently be an endurantist about objects, including human persons, and a perdurantist about events, such as a person’s life. But, according to Anselm, we cannot adopt this position with regard to God. Being absolutely simple, His life and His being as a person are identical. “But His eternity is nothing other than His very self...if His eternity has a past, present, and future, it would follow that His very being has a past, present, and future. And what is past, is not present or future; and what is present, is not [etc.]....”¹⁶ The divine essence would be divided into parts, and that is not possible.

Anselm concludes that it is impossible that God should be everywhere and always, and yet we have already seen that, since He is the immediate causal source of all that exists, it is necessary that God be everywhere and always. He goes on to reconcile the apparent contradiction and show “How [God] is in all and in no place and time.”¹⁷ In canvassing the various ways God might be in time, the impossibilities arose because we assumed that God was subject to the laws of time and space. But the laws of time and space, by which something cannot be wholly present at different times or places “at the same time,” apply only to spatial and temporal things. God transcends these laws. In asking whether or not God is “in” place and time, we should recognize that we must use the term in a somewhat special way when we speak of God. When we say that a spatial thing is “here in this place” or that a temporal thing is “present in this time (now),” we mean both that they are present to the place and time and also that they are contained within, limited to, this place and time. It is quite right to say that God is not “in” any time or place if we mean to say that He is not limited and circumscribed by space and time as physical creatures are. But if by “in” we mean “present to” in the sense that by His causal power He is immediately sustaining each and every place and time, then we should say that He is “in” all times and places, though “...if customary usage permitted it, it would seem better to say that He is ‘with’ place and time rather than ‘in’ place and time.”¹⁸ And in the final analysis it is better to say that He exists “always” (*semper*) rather than “in all time,” to distinguish His mode of being from that of temporal creatures, for His eternity is “limitless life existing all at once, wholly and perfectly.”¹⁹

¹⁴ Ibid. p.37 ll.19–21.

¹⁵ Ibid. p.37 ll.21–23.

¹⁶ Ibid. pp.37-38 ll.23–2.

¹⁷ *Monologion* 22 S.I p.39 l.1.

¹⁸ Ibid. pp.41 ll.1–2.

¹⁹ *Monologion* 24 S.I p.42 ll.24–25.

In the *Proslogion* Anselm again discusses the relationship of God to time in his unpacking of the concept, “that than which no greater can be conceived.” Chapter 19 is entitled, “That He is not in place or time, but all times and places are in Him.” Here he writes:

In your eternity is there anything past, so that it does not exist now, or anything future as if it does not exist yet? It is not that you existed yesterday and will exist tomorrow, but yesterday, today and tomorrow, you exist. On the contrary, you exist neither yesterday, nor today, nor tomorrow, rather you are simply beyond all time. For yesterday, today and tomorrow are nothing other than temporal. You, however, although nothing exists without you, are not thereby in place or time, but everything is in you. Nothing contains you, but you contain everything.²⁰

In Chapter 20 Anselm explains how God is beyond other “eternal” things, that is, things like human and angelic spirits which have no end. They still have a life in which the past slips away and the future is yet to come. “And thus you are always beyond (*ultra*) [these “eternal” creatures], since you are always present ‘there,’ or rather since it is always present to you, which for them has not yet arrived.”²¹

These earlier discussions of time clearly suggest four-dimensionalism. Note the parallel way in which Anselm treats times and places. He does say in *Monologion* 21 that the investigation of time and place cannot be treated as simply identical problems, and so he discusses them separately. But he sticks with the basic claim that God, not being subject to the laws of space and time, both transcends and is present to all times and places “at the same time” (*simul*). There is no doubt at all that all the places to which God is present exist equally. The proof for God’s ubiquity consists in the argument that the places could not exist were God not present to them. And exactly the same argument is made regarding time. God must be present to all times, and so Anselm must intend the obvious conclusion that all times exist equally.

In Chapters 19 and 20 of the *Proslogion* Anselm writes that God transcends past, present, and future, but that it is all “contained” in Him. There is no suggestion that He simply *knows* past, present, and future. The clear import is that all of these times are equally there “in” God. But in that case they are equally real. Were there any texts in Anselm’s philosophical work which suggested any other understanding of time, then perhaps more caution would be advisable in the interpretation here, but the texts consistently point to four-dimensionalism.

The clearest statement of four-dimensionalism comes in *On the Harmony* etc., where Anselm discusses time and eternity as related to the dilemma of freedom and foreknowledge. He writes:

Just as something in eternity neither was nor will be but just *is*, and nevertheless it was or will be in time without any contradiction, in the same way that which

²⁰ *Proslogion* 19 S.I p.115 ll.10–15.

²¹ *Proslogion* 20 S.I p.116 ll.2–3.

cannot change in eternity, in time at some temporal point before it happened, is shown to be changeable through free will without any inconsistency. However, although nothing is there [in eternity] but what is present, it is not a temporal present like ours, but an eternal [present] in which all times are contained. Just as the present time contains all place and whatever is in any place, in the same way the eternal present encloses all time and whatever exists in any time.... For eternity has its own unique simultaneity (*Habet enim aeternitas suum simul*) in which exist all the things that exist at the same place or time, and whatever exists in the different places and times.²²

Anselm consistently describes things and events that exist in time as always there and present to God. It is not that propositions about them are known by God or that God knows them through knowing what He Himself intends to do. The things and events *themselves* exist in divine eternity. There are two ways of looking at exactly the same phenomena. There is our temporal perspective relative to each fleeting moment from which our past is gone and our future has not yet come to be. And then there is the divine perspective that sees all as equally real. And of course it is the divine perspective which sees reality as it is, which, in fact, pervades and sustains reality as the cause of its being. Anselm's description of divine eternity as a sort of fifth dimension makes this very evident. "Just as the present time contains all place and whatever is in any place, in the same way the eternal present encloses all time and whatever exists in any time."²³ All the places that exist at a given time exist equally. Anselm is saying, then, that all places and *all times* exist equally within divine eternity. This makes him the first clear and consistent four-dimensionalist.

How does four-dimensionalism relate to the contemporary criticisms of the view that God is eternal? One criticism is that if God is eternal, He cannot be omniscient since He does not know what time it actually is now. But if all of time is equally real, there just is no italicized "now" with unique ontological status. God understands that time t is "now" for a temporal creature at time t, and what that means to the creature phenomenologically. But what any given temporal perceiver at any given time views as "now" is no more ontologically privileged than what any given spatial perceiver at any given place views as "here." It is the critic who makes a mistake in thinking that his "now" is special.

What of the criticism that positing divine eternity does not solve the dilemma of freedom and foreknowledge? Anselm's solution goes like this: God does know today that you will choose x tomorrow. And so it is necessary, in a way, that you choose x tomorrow. But God knows that you choose x because tomorrow is present to Him. He "sees" you choosing x as you choose it. Anselm holds that people do make choices that are free in the libertarian sense. In such a case it is the actual choice that is the ultimately originating source of God's knowledge. The necessity which follows from God's knowledge is, then, a logical necessity which follows from the fact of the event. Necessarily, if A, then A. But this logical necessity is certainly not

²² *De concordia* 1.5 S.II p. 254 ll.2–15.

²³ *Ibid.* p.254 ll.8–10.

causally determining. And more than that: It is a necessity stemming from the choice of the free agent himself and so it is what we might call a self-imposed necessity. It is you choosing x tomorrow which makes it the case that you cannot do other than choose x tomorrow. And surely, the logical necessity of “if you choose x, then, necessarily, you choose x,” does not conflict with libertarian freedom. If it does, then no one has libertarian freedom, divine foreknowledge or no divine foreknowledge. God’s knowledge in eternity is “fixed” in that He knows what happens at every moment in all of space-time. And His knowledge cannot be changed just as what happens cannot be changed, that is, it cannot be made not to happen. If x happens at t, x happens at t. But the fact that God’s knowledge cannot be changed does not entail that a free choice cannot be the cause of God’s fixed and eternal knowledge. And this is Anselm’s claim.

True, this sets Anselm at odds with those, like Aquinas and Boethius and Augustine, who say that God cannot possibly learn from us, so our choices cannot be the source of God’s knowledge. Anselm recognizes that this unpopular claim follows from his libertarianism. He is willing to accept it because he believes that to deny it is to accept the much worse claim that God is the cause of sin. But that dilemma lies outside the bounds of the present paper, and, alas, cannot be solved simply by adopting the correct, that is, the four-dimensionalist, theory of time.