



TEMPORAL AND ETERNAL GOODS AND THE IDEA OF A THEISTIC SPIRITUALITY

Mark Wynn

*Oriel College, Oxford University, United Kingdom
Correspondence email address: mark.wynn@oriel.ox.ac.uk*

ABSTRACT: In this paper, I consider two objections to the idea of a theistic spirituality, each grounded in a certain conception of eternity: the first maintains that on the relevant notion of eternity, theism issues in a degraded account of the significance of our lives in time, while the second proposes that on a further, related notion of eternity, theism fails to carry any action-guiding import. These objections have some claim to be rooted in Christian traditions of thought, and I relate the first to Augustine’s understanding of eternity and the other to a position that C. S. Lewis appears to endorse. To anchor the discussion, I take as my focus the question of whether there is a properly Christian pattern of grieving following the death of a loved one. In reply to these objections, I sketch a further view of how an idea of eternity may inform an ideal of the spiritual life, one that presents a rather different understanding of the relationship between temporal and eternal goods.

KEYWORDS: spirituality, wellbeing, bereavement, grief, Augustine, C. S. Lewis

Introduction: Two Objections to the Idea of a Theistic Spirituality

In this paper, I consider two objections to the idea of a theistic “spirituality,” each grounded in a conception of eternity.¹ To introduce them very briefly, the first, very familiar objection maintains that theism has a tendency to drain our engagement with

¹ I am grateful for very helpful discussion of a draft of this paper at the D Society, University of Cambridge, including the remarks of my respondent, Cole Bishop, and the Centre for the Philosophy of Religion and Theology, University of Leeds. I have also learned from comments kindly provided by Max Baker-Hytch, Clare Carlisle, Deborah Casewell, John Cottingham, Fiona Ellis, Stewart Goetz, Karen Kilby, Brian Leftow, Tim Mawson, Steven Shakespeare, Tom Simpson, Eleonore Stump, Richard Swinburne, Nick Waghorn, and David Worsley.

the everyday, sensory world of any deep significance, since it represents our temporal mode of life as radically inferior to a further, otherworldly state, in which our true fulfilment is to be found; and the second proposes, on the contrary, that the life of an eternal subject is so radically different in form from that of a temporal subject that eternal life cannot rightly be taken to fulfil or perfect our temporal lives, and therefore cannot serve as an ideal by reference to which we might orient ourselves in our dealings with the everyday world. The first objection, we might say, represents theistic spirituality as having the wrong kind of content, while the second takes it to lack any substantive, action-guiding content. Of course, theistic traditions are concerned with many other matters, besides the relationship between temporal and eternal lives, and temporal and eternal goods, but for present purposes, it will be quite enough to consider the import of this one aspect of theistic thought for an understanding of the nature of the well-lived human life.

In the first part of the paper, I give a fuller statement of these two objections and suggest that they have a measure of theological authority, to the extent that these or cognate views can, arguably, be anchored in the work of Augustine and C.S. Lewis, respectively. I then offer a reply to both objections, one that is intended to preserve the general perspective on the nature of eternity within which Augustine and Lewis are writing, while presenting a rather different view of the relationship between temporal and eternal goods, one that aims to preserve the action-guiding import of the idea of eternity, while affirming the significance of our lives in time.

Augustine and C.S. Lewis: A Contrastive Account of the Relationship Between Temporal and Eternal Goods

In Book IX of the *Confessions*, Augustine famously describes an experience of “eternity” that he shared with his mother, Monica, at Ostia. He writes:

The conversation led us towards the conclusion that the pleasure of the bodily senses, however delightful in the radiant light of this physical world, is seen by comparison with the life of eternity to be not even worth considering. Our minds were lifted up by an ardent affection towards eternal being itself. Step by step we climbed beyond all corporeal objects and the heaven itself, where sun, moon, and stars shed light on the earth. We ascended even further by internal reflection and dialogue and wonder at your works, and we entered into our own minds. We moved up beyond them so as to attain to the region of inexhaustible abundance where you feed Israel eternally with truth for food. There life is the wisdom by which all creatures come into being, both things which were and which will be. But wisdom itself is not brought into being but is as it was and always will be. Furthermore, in this wisdom there is no past and future, but only being, since it is eternal. For to exist in the past or in the future is no property of the eternal. And while we talked and panted after it, we touched it in some

small degree by a moment of total concentration of the heart. And we sighed and left behind us 'the firstfruits of the Spirit' (Rom. 8:23) bound to that higher world, as we returned to the noise of our human speech where a sentence has both a beginning and an ending. (Augustine, 1991, p. 171)²

Here Augustine contrasts the goods of sensory experience, or "the pleasures of the body's senses," and the fulfilments of another, "eternal" mode of life, privileging the second over the first, of course. And more radically, he goes on to suggest that following their shared experience, he and Monica came to understand that the fulfilments of the sensory world are not only relatively superficial when compared with those available in this higher realm, but devoid of any deep significance, and even "contemptible."³ He writes:

Lord, you know that on that day when we had this conversation, and this world with all its delights became worthless [contemptible] to us as we talked on, my mother said 'My son, as for myself, I now find no pleasure in this life. What I have still to do here and why I am here, I do not know. My hope in this world is already fulfilled.' (1991, p. 172)⁴

Some five or so days later, Augustine tells his reader, his mother fell ill with a fever and then, another nine days after that, died at the age of fifty-six. Augustine himself was thirty-three. On the perspective presented in these texts, it is possible to achieve in the historical present, however fleetingly and imperfectly, a state of profound spiritual wellbeing, when we are lifted out of our temporally successive mode of experience, and thereby "touch" eternity. But on the at least implied view of Augustine and Monica, this experience should lead us see that this-worldly kinds of fulfilment are radically inferior to those that are available in eternity, and that at least some Christians can, therefore, quite properly set aside "hope in this world," and disengage from projects that are directed at this-worldly outcomes.⁵

² Augustine explains how "at that moment we extended our reach and in a flash of mental energy attained the eternal wisdom which abides beyond all things" (1991, p. 172).

³ Here following E.B. Pusey's translation (1840). Available at:

<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/3296/3296-h/3296-h.htm>. Accessed 19 January 2024.

⁴ Monica continues: "The one reason I wanted to stay longer in this life was my desire to see you a Catholic Christian before I die. My God has granted me this more than I had hoped. For I see you despising this world's success to become his servant. What have I to do here?" Augustine notes that he later learned that while at Ostia his mother had spoken to some of his friends "of her contempt for this life and of the beneficence of death" (1991, p. 173). We might compare Monica's views with those of St Paul in his letter to the Philippians, when he writes: "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain" (1:21). It is notable that Paul continues: "If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labour for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain [...]" (1:22-25).

⁵ Thomas Williams argues that to understand the distinctive character of Augustine's experience at Ostia, it is important to see that following the experience, he continues to find satisfaction in the sensory

While taking a rather different stance on the question of whether eternal life is a condition to which we should aspire, C.S. Lewis is also struck by the fundamental difference between the goods of this life and those of eternity. Reflecting on the death of his wife, Joy Davidman, Lewis notes how “kind people have said to me ‘She is with God’.” He continues:

I find that this question [of the afterlife], however important it may be in itself, is not after all very important in relation to grief. Suppose that the earthly lives she and I shared for a few years are in reality only the basis for, or prelude to, or earthly appearance of two unimaginable, super-cosmic, eternal somethings. These somethings could be pictured as spheres or globes. Where the plane of Nature cuts through them – that is, in earthly life – they appear as two circles (circles are slices of spheres). Two circles that touched. But those two circles, above all the point at which they touched, are the very thing I am mourning for, homesick for, famished for. You tell me ‘she goes on’. But my heart and body are crying out, come back, come back. Be a circle, touching my circle on the plane of nature. But I know this is impossible. (Lewis, 2013, pp. 20–21)

This passage does not represent Lewis’s final stance on what sense to make, in theological terms, of his wife’s death.⁶ But in this phase of his grieving, he is clearly of the view that there is a deep-seated distinction between the kind of happiness he has known in his relationship to Joy in the course of this bodily life, and the kind that will be possible in eternity, where the identity of each of them will be transformed, to such an extent that they will then be, as he puts the point, two “eternal somethings.”

So Augustine, in his reflections on the experience he shared with Monica at Ostia, and Lewis, at this point in his grieving, agree on this claim: temporal and eternal modes of being are radically different from one another, so that, from our present vantage point, it is hard to offer any substantive characterisation of the nature of the second. As Augustine says, even in the elevated state of consciousness that he and Monica enjoyed, it was possible to “touch” eternity only “in some small degree”; and while as a Christian, Lewis affirms that he and his wife will be reunited in eternity, he also supposes that their relationship will then be so different from what it has been in this life that, from his current perspective, he can say only that they will then be related to one another as two “unimaginable,” eternal “somethings.”

world, specifically, in the sacramental life of the church, and it may be appropriate to extend the account I present here in this respect. See Williams (2002, pp. 143–151, especially p. 150).

⁶ Lewis goes on to describe his experience of what he takes to be a purely intellectual contact with his deceased wife – of “an intimacy that had not passed through the senses or the emotions at all” (p. 58) – and perhaps this account suggests that a meaningful connection between circular and spherical forms of life is possible after all. Allowing for the possibility that Lewis’s view on this point changed, the position he states in the passage I have quoted is worth considering in its own right, since it clearly picks out one very natural reading of what follows from a conception of the post-mortem self as eternal, a reading that he himself found persuasive, at least for a time.

But of course, while agreeing in this respect, Augustine and Lewis disagree on one crucial point: Augustine *eagerly anticipates* the condition of eternity, to such an extent that, as he puts the matter, sensory kinds of fulfilment have come to seem “unworthy not merely of comparison but even of remembrance beside the joy of that life,” whereas Lewis, of course, far from looking forward to his future life with Joy in eternity, is “homesick for,” famished for,” the bodily, temporally extended form of life that they had shared before her death. On this second view, it may seem that the mode of life in which we can be fully ourselves, in which we are “at home,” is temporal in form, although Lewis himself does not draw that conclusion, I take it: he is not, it seems, contesting the claim that our true telos lies in an eternal, that is, changeless, mode of life, but he does seem to deny that that life incorporates or extends those fulfilments that were at the core of his relationship to Joy. This is, I think, the force of his comment that the question of eternal life while important “in itself,” is not important in relation to grief, since – we may surmise – it offers no prospect of recovering the goods whose loss he mourns.⁷

The positions of Augustine and Lewis as presented in these texts appear, at least in broad outline, to map onto the two objections to the idea of a theistic spirituality with which I began. A critic may urge that on Augustine’s view, and perhaps still more certainly on Monica’s view, our temporal lives turn out to be evacuated of any deep significance, once they have been conceived from the vantage point of the goods available in eternity. I am not going to argue that a spiritual perspective that radically downgrades the importance of sensory experience must be to that extent mistaken. For our purposes, it is enough that a charge of this form – of demeaning or diminishing this-worldly experience – has often been taken to discredit theism considered as a basis for the spiritual life. Given that this objection is commonly pressed, it is of some interest to consider what the theist might have to say in reply.

Lewis evidently regards his relationship to Joy as being of very considerable spiritual, and other, significance, and he does not retreat from this view when the life he has shared with her is compared with the prospect of an eternal life – so he is not similarly open to the charge of debasing our ante-mortem experience. But he does all the same draw a sharp distinction between temporal and eternal goods, as when he represents the subjects who enjoy these goods as respectively “circular” and “spherical” in character, and when he at least strongly implies that at least some of the most fundamental of the goods that he shared with Joy, and cognate goods, will not be available in eternity. So we might take Lewis’s position to be that temporal goods are indeed fundamentally different in character from eternal goods, but not in such a way as to diminish their importance.

Speculatively, we might try to fill out Lewis’s position a little, as follows. Lewis’s at least implied view in our text seems to be that many of the goods that were important

⁷ Lewis’s remarks on the significance of the experience of the present moment as an intimation of eternity, in Letter XV of *The Screwtape Letters* (2001), provide some support for this reading of his understanding of eternity. I am grateful to Stewart Goetz for this reference. Elsewhere, Lewis’s view may suggest a temporal conception of the afterlife: see for instance “farther up and farther in” theme at the close of *The Last Battle* (1979). My thanks to Tom Simpson for this reference and very helpful wider discussion of this point.

for him in his life with Joy are intrinsically temporal (that is, change-relative) in character – so cannot be reproduced in eternity. In turn, we might infer that the value or significance of these goods consists, then, in their capacity to enable or constitute a distinctive kind of flourishing, one that is appropriate to our temporally extended mode of existence. And we might conclude that the goods of this life are not to be seen, therefore, as an inferior rendering of the goods to which we will have access in eternity: rather, these two kinds of good serve two quite different forms of life, each exhibiting its own distinctive kind of excellence. Hence there is no reason to downgrade the goods of this life when they are compared with those of eternal life, since they are not a deficient version of eternal goods, but have their own character and worth relative to the distinctive, time-bound contexts in which they can be realised. All the same, it remains true for Lewis, I take it, that eternal goods are in some sense weightier than their temporal counterparts: after all, from his Christian perspective, it is the enjoyment of those goods that constitutes most fundamentally the end of a human life. Nonetheless, on Lewis's view, it would seem that the goods of this life are not to be regarded as imperfect approximations to the goods of eternal life, and for him, there is no question, then, of their value being impugned when they are laid alongside the fulfilments of eternity.

So far, we have been considering whether on Lewis's view, the postulation of eternal goods has any tendency to drain the sensory world of significance. We might also ask whether on that view, the postulation of eternal goods has any tendency to augment or magnify the value of temporal goods. Although he does not address this question, it seems clear from our text that, at this point in his bereavement, rather than having any theological basis, Lewis's sense of the deep value of the life he shared with Joy is grounded directly in his feeling "famished for," "homesick for," that life. And we might conjecture that on his account, the reality of eternal goods ought not to augment, any more than it ought to diminish, the value of our sensory lives, for the reason that these two kinds of goods are ordered to two very different kinds of flourishing.

When read in these terms, with respect to the question of how to relate temporal and eternal goods, it seems that Lewis's position invites something like the second of the objections to the idea of a theistic spirituality with which we began: for if the acknowledgement of eternal goods fails to make any difference to our assessment of the significance of temporal goods – suggesting neither a diminution nor an increase in the value we ascribe to them – then it may seem that theism is not so much spiritually pernicious, as it might be thought to be on the reading of Augustine we noted just now, as spiritually vacuous: that is, it is not that theism offers a perspective from which our ante-mortem lives are demeaned, or drained of importance, but rather that it fails to offer a perspective from which those lives take on a new meaning or significance, one they would not otherwise have held, so that to this extent, it fails to bear any action-orienting import.

In sum, Lewis and Augustine appear to share a radically contrastive view of the relationship between the goods of our temporal lives and those of an eternal mode of life. While Augustine moves from an affirmation of the beauty and perfection of eternal life, to the thought that our sensory lives can offer no deep fulfilment, at least

not to the person of spiritual maturity, Lewis seems in effect to move in the other direction, from an affirmation of the profound goodness of our temporally extended form of life, to the idea that while an eternal mode of life may be the ultimate good for a human being, when measured by some objective scale of value, all the same, that life cannot be an object of unalloyed attraction from the vantage point of the bereaved person – in part because it is hard to envisage, substantively, what such an existence might involve, but more fundamentally because we know enough about that state, Lewis thinks, to see that it is inconsistent with many of the fulfilments that are central to our lives in time, including, of course, fulfilments of the kind he has known in his relationship to Joy. And each of these ways of developing the contrastive view presents, I have been suggesting, a difficulty for the idea of a theistic spirituality.

We might wonder whether the positions I have associated with Augustine and Lewis are consistent with Christian teaching in the round. For instance, on Lewis's view it may appear that the incarnation secures for human beings at best an ambiguous good, and at points, we might even take Lewis, in the depth of his grief, to be raising a question about whether eternal life can be deemed all things considered a good, once we recognise that admission to that state depends upon surrendering the distinctive fulfilments of our temporal mode of existence. Similarly, Augustine's version of the contrastive view might seem difficult to reconcile with the implications of the orthodox teaching that the temporally extended life of the incarnate Christ is fully a human life. So we might think that the objections to the idea of a theistic spirituality that we have been considering pose no difficulty for the possibility of a Christian spirituality, specifically – once the full sweep of Christian teaching has been considered.

However, the understanding of the character of eternal life that is at least implied in the passages that I have cited from Augustine and Lewis seems to be somewhat widely current among Christians, and if that understanding generates the difficulties we have been discussing, then those difficulties will pose to that extent a question for Christian theists too – perhaps a question about the self-consistency of the Christian ideal of the spiritual life. So let's persist a little further with our enquiry by asking: is there a way of meeting our two objections to the idea of a theistic spirituality, while retaining, in general form, the notion of eternal life that appears to be advanced in the texts we have been examining? I am going to approach this question by, first of all, elaborating on the conception of eternity that has provided the focus for our discussion to this point. We can then consider whether this further, extended account offers some resources for addressing our two objections.

Eternity as "Gathered Time"

According to Charles Taylor, in Christian thought in the medieval period, there were in fact two ways of conceiving of the relationship between "higher" and "secular" time. As he explains:

The Middle Ages had [...] two models of eternity: what we might call Plato eternity, that of perfect immobility, impassivity, which we aspire

to by rising out of time; and God's eternity, which doesn't abolish time, but gathers it into an instant. This we can only have access to by participating in God's life. (Taylor, 2007, p. 57)

In his account of the vision he shared with Monica at Ostia, Augustine seems to be concerned most fundamentally with what Taylor calls here "Plato eternity." There is no direct reference in this passage to the divine perspective as one that "gathers" time: Augustine's emphasis is on the idea that the eternity they 'touched in some small degree' was devoid of relations of past and future. And on the reading we have been following, his remarks do indeed invite us to "aspire to" eternity so conceived "by rising out of time." Having considered this conception of eternity, let's think a little further about the other approach that Taylor distinguishes here, namely, eternity as gathered time.⁸

On what is perhaps the single most widely cited philosophically grounded account of the nature of the divine life, "eternity is the simultaneously-whole and perfect possession of interminable life."⁹ After quoting Boethius's comment on this point with approval, Aquinas draws out its implications for the divine knowledge in these terms, here tracking Boethius's position once again:

[A]ll things that are in time are present to God from eternity, not only because He has the types of things present within Him, as some say; but because His glance is carried from eternity over all things as they are in their presentiality. (ST 1a. 14. 13)

So on this Boethian-Thomistic account, relations of before and after do not cease to be real from God's vantage point in eternity – as Taylor puts the point, time is not "abolished" – but they are differently apprehended from the divine perspective, since to the mind of God the events of secular time are presented, as we might say, all at once, rather than successively, so that, in this sense, we can speak of time as "gathered" from the divine vantage point.

I take it that any theist who thinks of God's mode of being as changeless – and we should include within the scope of this claim Augustine and, presumably, Lewis – will need to think of the divine knowledge in these terms: on such a view, the divine knowledge of creation cannot develop over time, but must instead take in the whole sweep of its history all at once. So while the idea of eternity as gathered time does not feature explicitly in the texts from Augustine and Lewis that we have been discussing, it is, I suggest, entailed by the conception of eternal life, as free from change, that they

⁸ Taylor (2007, p. 57) also distinguishes a third kind of higher time, in addition to Plato eternity and gathered time, what he calls a "Great Time," a primordial time where the pattern for later events was laid down, in such a way that the pattern continues to infuse and give shape to events in the present. For a very instructive review of the options available to theists when addressing these questions, see Deng (2019), especially Ch. 3.

⁹ Here following Aquinas's citation of Boethius's *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Ch. V, in *Summa Theologiae* 1a. 6. 1. Available at: <https://aquinas.cc/la/en/~ST.I.Q10.A1>. Accessed 6 January 2024.

present there, given that both are writing as theists.¹⁰ So the idea of eternity as gathered time is of some interest for our purposes: since it is entailed by the conception of eternity that we have encountered in Augustine and Lewis, we can be confident that if the idea of eternity as gathered time can be brought to bear on our two objections, then the conception of eternity that we have associated with our two focal authors can also be brought to bear on those objections. So let's consider next whether this expanded view, and specifically the idea of eternity as "gathered" from the divine vantage point, may be of some relevance for the two objections to the notion of a theistic spirituality that we are seeking to address.

The divine vantage point is of course, by definition, the perspective from which the true nature of things is definitively disclosed. (On the traditional view, this is not least because the divine gaze is the source of whatever exists apart from God, so that this gaze is not simply observational, but productive.)¹¹ If that is so, then on the view of eternity that we are considering, it seems we should say that the distinction that we draw in our everyday experience between past, present and future fails to track the fundamental nature of things, since this distinction does not show up from the divine perspective. Again, on this account, it is not that the divine perspective erases relations of before and after: rather, from the divine viewpoint, there is no privileged present moment, or "now," and therefore no past and future relative to any such now, since the divine gaze extends on the same basis to all times, by taking in all of them "all at once."

Here we have, I think, one way of at least beginning to address Lewis's thought that the notion of eternity fails to speak to the loss that he has sustained – so that reference to eternity "is not after all very important in relation to grief," as he puts the point. As we have seen, if eternity is conceived in terms of gathered time, then events that from our vantage point, in historical time, are past, present and future should be considered as alike equally real, since the existence of every event is held secure, on the same basis, by the divine gaze, regardless of whether it is – from our viewpoint – past, present or future. If that is so, then the "circular" life that Lewis shared with Joy, although no longer available to him in his present experience following her death, except as remembered, has nonetheless not passed into a state of non-being, and is indeed, from the divine vantage point, that is, with respect to the fundamental nature of things, just as real as the world as it is presented to him in his current experience.

This conception of eternity, as gathered time, while not simply removing the grounds for Lewis's grieving, is I take it relevant to his grieving. In the text we have discussed, Lewis anticipates sharing eternal life with Joy, and finds little solace in that thought, because in that eternal future, they will be radically transformed, having

¹⁰ Augustine himself presents such an account in the *Confessions*, Ch. 11. Moreover, in the passage I cited earlier, Augustine says that "Life there is the wisdom through whom all these things are made [...] in her there is no 'has been' or 'will be,' but only being, for she is eternal, but past and future do not belong to eternity." We could perhaps take this text to affirm that the divine Wisdom surveys from the perspective of eternity, or all at once, "all these things [that have been] made."

¹¹ The point is developed in *Summa Theologiae* 1a. 14. 8. A theist might nonetheless suppose, contrary to the view I go on to sketch, both that there is a fundamental fact of the matter about where "now" falls, and that this fact eludes the divine gaze. My thanks to Brian Leftow for instructive discussion of this point.

become “spheres” rather than “circles.” Here, Lewis seems to hanker after a further, future life which resembles the life he has shared with his wife – and he appears to find eternity an unconsoling prospect because it does not offer a further life of that, temporally extended, kind. But on the view we have been discussing – a view to which Lewis is himself committed, I suggest, in so far as he takes God’s mode of life and in turn the divine knowledge to be free from change – it seems that when weighing the nature and extent of his loss, Lewis ought to consider not only the character of any future life he might share with Joy in eternity, but also the fact that the very life he shared with her, whose loss he is now grieving, is just as much real as his life in the present moment.

When read in these terms, the notion of eternity does seem after all to speak to Lewis’s condition in some measure: it reveals that while his life with Joy may have been lost in the sense of being no longer accessible to him from his current location in time, it has not been lost absolutely – has not been reduced to nothingness – but is on the contrary no less real, no less an object of divine vision, than his present. And in one important respect, this state of affairs is still better than the one which Lewis is “famished for,” because what Lewis craves, as a way of addressing his loss, is, it seems, a continuation of the kind of life he shared with Joy, allowing for the fact that the earlier episodes of that life have ceased to be – whereas on the view we are considering, that very life, whose loss he is now mourning, has not ceased to be. So on this account of eternity, he is being offered not merely a restoration of the kind of life he formerly shared with Joy, as a substitute for the life that has been lost, but the very life he shared with her, in so far as that life is enduringly real, and no less real than his present life or any future life that he might lead.¹²

Even so, there is, it seems, one significant element of Lewis’s sense of loss that remains to be addressed on this account. Granted that from the divine vantage point, his life with Joy remains fully real, it is still the case, of course, that from Lewis’s own vantage point, in his historical present, that life is no longer accessible, except as remembered. And we might wonder: is that consideration not reason enough for Lewis to conclude that, in the end, theological categories do not touch the core of his grief? Speculatively, we might respond to this question by trying to extend the idea of divine eternity to which Lewis is committed in a further respect, by elaborating on the idea of eternity as gathered time.

It is natural to think of the goal of the theistic life, as lived in “secular time,” as a matter of the person coming to take on so far as possible the divine vantage point on the world, so that, for example, what weighs with them in situations of practical choice is what is in fact – that is, what is from the divine vantage point – most important or most deserving of attention in those contexts. And by extension, it might be argued that we should think of eternal life as a matter of the person adopting the divine perspective in a still more radical way. And how might that be possible? Well, given the idea of eternity as gathered time, we might suppose that, in eternity, the person can take on the divine perspective on the world still more profoundly in so far as their

¹² In so far as God preserves the past in this way, we might think of the Christian view of eternity as allied to the kind of “conservatism” that G.A. Cohen presents (2011). My thanks to Tom Simpson for drawing my attention to the connection between Cohen’s concerns and the present discussion.

gaze, like the divine gaze, will then range across a variety of times, even if their perspective does not then extend, as the divine perspective does, to the full spectrum of times.

In his account of eternal life, Aquinas seems to advance something like this understanding of the sense in which, in eternity, human beings can share still more deeply in the divine perspective.¹³ Aquinas directs his reader's attention, first of all, to the nature of the divine vantage point on time, here articulating once again the idea of eternity as "gathered time":

God, by seeing his essence, knows all things whatsoever that are, shall be, or have been: and he is said to know these things by his 'knowledge of vision', because he knows them as though they were present in likeness to corporeal vision. (*ST Supplement 92.3*)

Aquinas then draws out the implications of this view of God's relationship to time for human beings who share in the life of God in eternity:

[O]f those [creatures] who see God in his essence, each one sees in his essence so much the more things according as he sees the divine essence the more clearly: and hence it is that one is able to instruct another concerning these things. Thus the knowledge of the angels and of the souls of the saints can go on increasing until the day of judgment, even as other things pertaining to the accidental reward. But afterwards it will increase no more, because then will be the final state of things, and in that state it is possible that all will know everything that God knows by the knowledge of vision. (*ST Supplement 92.3*)

So on this account, by seeing his essence, God has the "knowledge of vision" of "all things that are, shall be or have been" – where these tensed distinctions are to be drawn, presumably, from the perspective of one located in time. And human beings who in eternity come to see the divine essence will also have thereby, it seems, a "knowledge of vision" that extends to at least some of these same "things that are, shall be or have been" – and we should even allow that, following the day of judgement, the saints may know "everything that God knows by the knowledge of vision." Setting to one side the details of Aquinas's teaching on this matter, in terms of his remarks on God's knowing of his essence, it seems that theists who subscribe to the idea of divine eternity have some reason to favour a view of this general form: if eternity is a sharing in the life of God, and if the life of God consists, in part, in God's "knowledge of vision," from eternity, of creation's history in its entirety, then should we not expect human beings to be afforded a share of that vision – perhaps especially in so far as it concerns their own lives in time? And as I have noted, in that case, we can understand how it is that a central goal of the theistic life in secular time – of taking

¹³ The idea is also implicit in the comments of Taylor that I cited earlier: "God's eternity [...] doesn't abolish time, but gathers it into an instant. *This we can only have access to by participating in God's life.*"

on the divine vantage point on the world – can be realised still more profoundly in eternity.

If all of this is so, then we should admit the possibility, in principle, that in eternity, Lewis will have an experiential, and not merely memorial, kind of access to the life he shared in secular time with Joy. Of course, this access will be in the eternal mode, and not from the vantage point of the historical present, when times are presented successively. Nonetheless, if we follow this account, then on theological grounds, we can affirm both that Lewis’s life with Joy in secular time remains real, and indeed, from the vantage point of eternity, just as real as the life he is leading in the historical present, following his bereavement, and also that Lewis himself can have experiential access to that life, not only as a participant in the life in secular time, but also from the vantage point of eternity.

Further Specifying the Idea of Eternity as “Gathered Time”

In reply to this account, it might be wondered whether we are entitled to speak of this access as “experiential” in character. If we follow Aquinas, then we should say that in eternity, a person can, in some measure, know the divine essence, and thereby have a “vision” of events in time – rather as God, by virtue of his comprehensive knowledge of his own essence, sees all events in time. But ought we to think of “vision” in this sense as a case of perception? On Aquinas’s view, we are evidently meant to suppose that the divine knowledge of events in time is of an especially intimate, penetrating kind: God knows these events, including the events that comprise our mental lives, by virtue of holding them in existence. This may not be in the conventional sense a case of “vision” or perception but, it might be urged, is a form of cognitive contact with them that in fact runs deeper than any that is available in perception, where the subject stands in some less immediate relation to an object. And by extension, perhaps we can think of the human person’s knowledge of events in time by way of their knowledge of the divine essence in eternity to be similarly profound.

If a Lewisian were not to be content with this reply, we could perhaps develop other ways of representing the nature of the perspective on events in time that is available to the human person located in eternity, which have more evidently a perceptual character. Very speculatively, we might perhaps wonder if this perspective could have a spatial character – so that the person views a certain scene in time as though located at some point spatially removed from it. (Spatial metaphors are integral, of course, to the traditional picture, advanced by Boethius and others, of God surveying the sequence of events in time from a vantage point above it.) Or might we perhaps think of an eternal vantage point on events in time not as third-personal in character, but first-personal, so that the person takes on, in some fashion, the experiential vantage point of some subject located in time, perhaps by entering into a qualitatively similar mental state?¹⁴ These are indeed speculations, but if there is some prospect of one or another such account proving to be at least not evidently incoherent, then we will have

¹⁴ Zagzebski (2023) explores some related issues with respect to the question of God’s knowledge of creatures’ mental lives.

some basis for saying that the doctrine of eternity, understood in terms of gathered time, can speak to Lewis's condition in this further respect: it will follow from this account not only that his former life with Joy is enduringly real, but also that he can himself have renewed contact with that life from the vantage point of eternity, where that contact will be not simply memorial in character, but perceptual or perhaps deeper than perceptual.

Of course, there remains a question about whether such an account actually has much prospect of evading incoherence. How could Lewis, from some vantage point external to secular time, have experiential access to the life that he himself lived in secular time? How is it possible for the one subject to have these two vantage points on the same life, one in time and one not? For present purposes, I am simply going to bracket these questions about the intelligibility of this "dual perspective" account. For us, it is enough, I think, to note once again the conditional plausibility of the view: the idea that God's eternity involves a "gathering" of time is basic to some central stands of theistic tradition including, in the case of the Christian tradition, figures as important as Augustine, Boethius and Aquinas; and these figures hold, of course, that human beings will, in some sense, share in the life of God in eternity so conceived – and *if all of that is so*, then that suggests at least the possibility that human beings will also enjoy from the vantage point of eternity a "vision" of some stretch of secular time, even if not the full sweep of secular time.

It is also notable that the defining Christian doctrine of the incarnation, understood in orthodox terms, attributes something like this dual perspective to God: on this teaching, while occupying the vantage point of eternity, the Logos is also the subject of a life that is lived out in secular time. Of course, this is a rather distinctive case since, on the traditional view, even as incarnate, the Logos does not undergo change – whereas you and I, as the subjects of our lives as lived in secular time, evidently do undergo change. Nonetheless, the idea of the incarnation, so understood, lends perhaps a measure of further, intra-Christian support to the thought that it is possible to stand in this dual relationship to a human life as lived in secular time: that is, of being the subject of such a life, while also having an eternal perspective upon it. This is not to say that the dual perspective view is manifestly coherent, let alone a lively contender for truth, from the viewpoint of general metaphysics, but it appears at least that Christians with the relevant background commitments, which is to say, it seems, many Christians, have reason to take the view seriously as a potential reference point for the spiritual life.¹⁵

We might also think that this account of eternity calls for further specification and examination not only with respect to the question of its coherence, but also in so far as it appears to make certain theological puzzles, not more, but less tractable. For instance, it seems to be an implication of the idea of a gathered time that it is not only the good in human lives that is enduringly real, but the bad – and would that position not exacerbate the problem of evil? Similarly, it might be thought that an atemporal

¹⁵ Kant's conception of the human subject as having both a noumenal and a phenomenal aspect suggests one parallel within general metaphysics for the dual perspective approach – so the view is not without interest on extra-Christian grounds, for this reason among others. For discussion of Kant's position, see Insole (2016, Ch. 5).

conception of eternity poses a theodical challenge to the extent that, by contrast perhaps with the lives of Joy and of Lewis himself, many human lives are not evidently fulfilled within the span of ordinary, secular time – and do these lives not call, therefore, for extension within an afterlife conceived in temporal terms? And of course, the idea of gathered time raises very directly the question of whether the future, as considered from the vantage point of our historical present, can be open, in the ways that are required for a theologically robust conception of human freedom.¹⁶ While recognising that if we wish to endorse the idea of a gathered time, and of a “dual perspective,” then these and like issues will crowd in very quickly, our immediate concern here is simply with the question of whether such a conception of eternity offers a reply to the difficulties for the idea of a theistic spirituality that arise, arguably, from the two ways of representing the relationship between temporal and eternal goods that we have taken from Augustine and Lewis. In concluding, let’s briefly review the implications of the account we have been developing for this question.

Once Again, the Idea of a Theistic Spirituality

We began this discussion by noting two conceptions of eternity: one advanced by Augustine and the other by C. S. Lewis. These conceptions share, I have suggested, a view of eternity as free from change. They also share a “contrastive” account of the relationship between the goods of eternity and those of our everyday, temporally extended lives, while developing that idea in different ways: Augustine, we could say, moves in one direction, from an appreciation of the profound goodness of the eternal realm he encountered in his mystical vision with Monica, to the conclusion that the fulfilments of this temporal life are at best insubstantial, while Lewis in effect moves in the other direction, from an affirmation of the goodness of the life that he shared with his now deceased wife, Joy, to the conclusion that whatever the fulfilments of eternal life may be, they cannot be an object of deep attraction for him, at least not relative to his current desires, since so much of what he valued in his “circular” life with Joy cannot be reproduced there. The first view, I suggested, may be open to the charge of giving theistic spirituality the wrong kind of content, while the second risks giving it no content at all.

If we extend the notion of eternity as free from change in the ways we have discussed, by introducing the ideas of “gathered time” and of a “dual perspective,” then we appear to have, if the case I have been making is at all plausible, at least the beginnings of a response to these two objections to the idea of a theistic spirituality. I have focused on the reply that may be made to Lewis when he remarks that the

¹⁶ In fact, the core of the case that we have presented here, in response to Lewis’s concern, depends on the thought that *the past* is as real as the present, and this view does not of itself require us to say that the future is as real as the present. So if desired, we could, in principle, make this case while endorsing a “growing block” view of time, rather than the view that from the vantage point of eternity, past, present and future are all equally real. This would be one way of addressing some of the potential difficulties for the idea of eternity as gathered time that I list here. My thanks to Tim Mawson for very instructive discussion of these and other themes in the paper. For discussion of the growing block view, see Zimmerman (2013, pp. 163–246).

question of eternal life “is not after all very important in relation to grief,” proposing that Lewis is committed to a larger view of eternity than one might at first suppose on reading this text, one that does speak fairly directly to the nature of his loss. On this larger view, we should say both that Lewis’s life with Joy remains enduringly real, and that from the vantage point of eternity, it is possible for Lewis to have a kind of experiential, or perhaps deeper than experiential, contact with that life. If all of that is so, then the doctrine of eternity seems to bear quite directly on the question of the ultimate significance of temporal goods, suggesting that the doctrine can after all carry action-guiding and emotion-ordering import – a possibility we have been exploring, of course, with reference to the particular case of Lewis’s bereavement.

I have not engaged so directly with Augustine’s rendering of a contrastive view of the relationship between eternal and temporal goods, but for the same reasons, the extended view of eternity touches on that account too. Granted the idea of gathered time, we should allow that so far from being ontologically and axiologically superficial, events in time stand in their way at the bedrock of reality, and of the divine life, by virtue of being held in the divine vision in eternity. And supposing that we have an experiential, or perhaps deeper than experiential, access to our lives in time from the vantage point of eternity, then we should also allow that our temporally extended experience stands at the bedrock of our own lives, as the object of our own vision in eternity. So, far from thinking that we will simply slough off our lives in time when admitted to eternity, as on the contrastive view of the relationship between temporal and eternal goods, on this extended view of eternity, we should suppose, on the contrary, that eternal goods include temporal goods, since to share in the divine life in eternity is to share in the divine perspective on our lives in time.

It is implied in this view that, in eternity, we will have a deepened relationship to our own lives, and the lives of others, as lived in time, to the extent that we will then have a more integrative, less fragmentary, kind of access to those lives, one that ranges across times. So in this respect too, the significance of our temporal lives is affirmed and indeed deepened, in so as they can be newly appreciated in this way. Lewis comments that in eternity, we will be like globes. On the perspective discussed here, we might say that it is, rather, our mode of “vision” that will then be global, in the sense that our lives will then be presented to us not episode by episode, or time slice by time slice, but integrally – rather as a set of circles of varying radii, when superimposed on one another, can be experienced as a sphere.

While favouring an inclusive account of the relationship between eternal and temporal goods, this approach can also acknowledge, with Lewis, the distinctive goodness of our lives as lived out in time: on the view sketched here, our moment-by-moment mode of engagement with the world yields a form of life that has its own fragile beauty and dignity, one that cannot be replicated first personally, exactly, in the experience of an eternal subject. So Lewis’s sense of his loss is to that extent accommodated: the life of an eternal subject does not simply reproduce the values that we know from our lives as lived in time, even if in one sense it includes them. But on the perspective we have been considering, it is also true that those values, as embedded in particular episodes of temporally ordered experience, are not therefore

lost, but are enduringly real, and that we ourselves can stand in a new and, in some respects, deepened relationship to them in eternity.

In sum, granted his convictions, the contrastive conception of eternity that seems to be implied in Lewis's response to his bereavement is, I have been suggesting, unduly restrictive. There is another, more expansive reading of the idea of eternity; and if we have the relevant background commitments, this further reading may perhaps be of help in sustaining our hope for an enduring and meaningful connection to those we love.

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