

# Contents

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CONTRIBUTORS XI

SERIES EDITOR'S FOREWORD XV

Introduction 1

YITZHAK Y. MELAMED

1 Eternity in Ancient Philosophy 14

JAMES G. WILBERDING

*Reflection: Eternity and Astrology in the Work of Vettius Valens* 56

DORIAN GIESELER GREENBAUM

*Reflection: Eternity and World-Cycles* 64

GODEFROID DE CALLATAÏ

*Reflection: The Eternality of Language in India* 70

ANDREW OLLETT

2 Eternity in Medieval Philosophy 75

PETER ADAMSON

*Reflection: "Eternalists" and "Materialists" in Islam: A Note on the*

*Dabriyya* 117

HINRICH BISTERFELDT

- Reflection: Eternity and the Trinity* 124  
CHRISTOPHE ERISMANN
- 3 Eternity in Early Modern Philosophy 129  
YITZHAK Y. MELAMED
- Reflection: Out of Time: Dante and Eternity* 168  
AKASH KUMAR
- Reflection: Perpetuum Mobiles and Eternity* 173  
MARIUS STAN
- 4 Eternity in Kant and Post-Kantian European Thought 179  
ALISTAIR WELCHMAN
- Reflection: Eternity in Early German Romanticism* 226  
JUDITH NORMAN
- Reflection: Eternity in Hasidism: Time and Presence* 231  
ARIEL EVAN MAYSE
- Reflection: On White Eternity in the Poetry of Mahmoud Darwish* 239  
ABED AZZAM
- 5 Eternity in Twentieth-Century Analytic Philosophy 245  
KRIS MCDANIEL
- Reflection: Borges on Eternity* 277  
WILLIAM EGGINTON
- Reflection: Music and Eternity* 283  
WALTER FRISCH
- Reflection: The Kaddish* 290  
ABRAHAM P. SOCHER

CONTENTS

ix

GLOSSARY 297

BIBLIOGRAPHY 301

INDEX OF NAMES 323

INDEX OF CONCEPTS 323



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## CONTRIBUTORS

xiii

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## Series Editor's Foreword

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The Oxford Philosophical Concepts (OPC) series offers an innovative approach to philosophy's past and its relation to other disciplines. As a series, it is unique in exploring the transformations of philosophy's central concepts from their ancient sources to their modern use.

The OPC series has several goals: to make it easier for historians of philosophy to contextualize key concepts in the history of philosophy, to render that history accessible to a wide audience, and to enliven contemporary philosophy by displaying the rich and varied sources of concepts still in use today. The means to these goals are simple enough: eminent historians of philosophy come together to rethink a central concept in philosophy's past. The point of this rethinking is not to offer a broad overview but to identify problems the concept was originally supposed to solve and investigate how approaches to those problems shifted over time, sometimes radically. Each OPC volume is *a history* of its concept in that it tells a story about changing solutions to specific philosophical concerns.

Recent scholarship has made evident the benefits of reexamining the standard narratives about the history of western philosophy. The editors of the OPC series look beyond the canon and explore their concepts over a wide philosophical landscape. Each volume traces a concept from its inception as a solution to specific problems through its historical transformations and to its modern use, all the while acknowledging its historical

context. Many editors have found it appropriate to include long-ignored writings drawn from the Islamic and Judaic traditions and the philosophical contributions of women. Volumes also explore ideas drawn from Buddhist, Chinese, Indian, and other philosophical cultures when doing so adds an especially helpful new perspective. By combining scholarly innovation with focused and astute analysis, the OPC series encourages a deeper understanding of our philosophical past and present.

One of the most innovative features of the OPC series is its recognition that philosophy bears a rich relation to art, music, literature, religion, science, and other cultural practices. The series speaks to the need for informed interdisciplinary exchanges. Its editors assume that the most difficult and profound philosophical ideas can be made comprehensible to a large audience and that materials that are not strictly philosophical often bear a significant relevance to philosophy. To this end, each OPC volume includes Reflections: short, stand-alone essays written by specialists in art, music, literature, theology, science, and cultural studies that *reflect on* the volume's concept from other disciplinary perspectives. The goal of these essays is to enliven, enrich, and exemplify the concept and reconsider the boundary between philosophical and extraphilosophical materials. The Reflections display the benefits of using philosophical concepts and distinctions in areas that are not strictly philosophical and encourage philosophers to move beyond the borders of their discipline as presently conceived.

The volumes of the OPC series arrive at an auspicious moment. Many philosophers are keen to invigorate the discipline. The series aims to provoke philosophical imaginations by uncovering the brilliant twists and unforeseen turns of philosophy's past.

Christia Mercer  
Gustave M. Berne, Professor of Philosophy  
Columbia University  
January 2015

# Introduction

*Yitzhak Y. Melamed*



## I ETERNITY

Eternity is a unique kind of *existence* that is supposed to belong to the most real being or beings. It is an existence that is not shaken by the common wear and tear of time. Over the two-and-a-half-millennia history of western philosophy we find various conceptions of eternity, yet one sharp distinction between two notions of eternity seems to run throughout this long history: eternity as *timeless* existence, as opposed to eternity as existence in *all times*. Both kinds of existence stand in sharp contrast to the coming in and out of existence of ordinary beings, like hippos, humans, and toothbrushes: were these eternally timeless, for example, a hippo could not eat, a human could not think or laugh, and a toothbrush would be of no use. Were a hippo an eternal-everlasting creature, it would not have to bother itself with nutrition in order to extend its existence. Everlasting human beings might appear similar to us, but their mental life and patterns of behavior would most likely be very different from ours.

The distinction between eternity as timelessness and eternity as everlastingness goes back to ancient philosophy, to the works of Plato and Aristotle, and even to the fragments of Parmenides's philosophical poem. In the twentieth century it seemed to go out of favor, though one could consider to be eternalists those proponents of realism in philosophy of mathematics, and those of timeless propositions in philosophy of language (i.e., propositions that are said to exist independently of the uttered sentences that convey their thought-content). However, recent developments in contemporary physics and its philosophy have provided an impetus to revive notions of eternity, due to the view that time and duration might have no place in the most fundamental ontology.

The importance of eternity is not limited to strictly philosophical discussions. It is a notion that also has an important role in traditional biblical interpretation. The Tetragrammaton, the Hebrew name of God considered to be most sacred, is derived from the Hebrew verb for being, and as a result has been traditionally interpreted as denoting eternal existence (in either one of the two senses of eternity). Hence, Calvin translates the Tetragrammaton as *l'Eternel*, and Mendelssohn as *das ewige Wesen* or *der Ewige*. Eternity also plays a central role in contemporary South American fiction, especially in the works of J. L. Borges. The representation of eternity poses a major challenge to both literature and arts (just think about the difficulty of representing eternity in music, a thoroughly temporal art). This book aims at providing a history of the philosophy of eternity surrounded by a series of short essays, or reflections, on the role of eternity and its representation in literature, religion, language, liturgy, science, and music. Thus, our aim is to provide a history of philosophy as a discipline that is in constant commerce with various other domains of human inquisition and exploration. Finally, we would like to stress our commitment to expanding the horizons of the philosophical curriculum as taught in Anglo-American universities. Against the still widespread attitude that identifies the history of (especially medieval) philosophy with the

history of Christian philosophy, we see no place for such an attitude, which is not only immoral but also erroneous and deeply misleading.

## 2 A HISTORY OF ETERNITY

The five chapters of this book attempt to trace the development of the concept of eternity, explore the variety of philosophical problems leading to the development of the concept(s) of eternity, and investigate the variety of philosophical problems resulting from it.

Chapter 1, by James Wilberding, studies the emergence of the concept of eternity in ancient Greek philosophy and its close scrutiny in late antiquity. The early history of the concept of eternity turns out to be as slippery as the concept itself. It is generally agreed on that by the end of late antiquity the concept of eternity had emerged, but when exactly it developed and who developed it remains a matter of controversy. Added to these problems are those concerned with the content of the concept of eternity itself. In this chapter, Wilberding investigates the evidence on the notion of eternity in antiquity. He approaches the evidence by looking to see what philosophical problems the introduction of (some notion of) eternity is meant to solve.

The chapter is divided into four sections. In the brief first section, Wilberding introduces and discusses the vocabulary the ancients used to discuss eternity. Here he pays particular attention to the Greek term *aiôn*, which by the end of late antiquity comes to refer to eternity but which was originally used to denote “life,” with varying connotations. These connections to life become important in subsequent sections. The second section is devoted to Parmenides, who is taken by some to be the first thinker to have articulated some notion of timeless eternity. The third section is devoted to Plato and Aristotle, both of whom grapple with one of the central problems of eternity in antiquity: determining how the sensible world, which is changing and in time, can be caused by an eternal principle. Although both Plato and Aristotle see eternity (*aiôn*) as an alternative to time and thus as

timeless, Wilberding argues that there is no pressing reason to assume that they are working with a concept of durationless eternity. Here an attempt is also made to unravel Plato's enigmatic characterization of time as a "moving image of eternity [aiôn]" in the *Timaeus*. The final and longest section is devoted to later Platonic theories of eternity. This section begins with an in-depth examination of Plotinus's understanding of eternity. After introducing some necessary background on Plotinus's metaphysics, Wilberding argues that on Plotinus's view eternity is the durationless manner of presence of the plurality of forms as they are contemplated by the intellect. This discussion will show that emanationist metaphysics provides a metaphysical background that makes the notion of eternity as metaphysical *life* more comprehensible by allowing for timeless activities that have a bearing on the temporal goings-on in the sensible world. The chapter concludes with a brief look at a selection of post-Plotinian Christian Platonists, Augustine, Philoponus, and Boethius, who explore various puzzles that God's eternity poses for creation and divine omniscience.

The chapter dedicated to medieval discussions of eternity is by Peter Adamson. The topic of this book as a whole provides an unusually good opportunity for tracing a philosophical concept from the late ancient period through the Islamic philosophical tradition and on into the Scholastic Latin west. This chapter looks at three distinct but frequently interacting conceptions of eternity in the Islamic world before moving on to look at the impact of this tradition on Christian medieval philosophy. The look at eternity in the Islamic world will include Jewish authors as well as Muslims: both Sa'ādīa Gaon and Maimonides are prominent contributors to the debate over the eternity of the world in Arabic philosophy.

Of the three conceptions of eternity considered in this chapter, two derive from the ancient Greek tradition and will already have been explored in the chapter by Wilberding (chapter 1). These conceptions are (1) eternity as timelessness, and (2) eternity as an infinite duration supervening on an infinite motion. The former comes into the Islamic

world in late Platonic texts, especially translations of Plotinus and Proclus produced in al-Kindi's circle in the ninth century. Accordingly, it is unsurprising to find al-Kindi saying: "God is above time, since He is the cause of time." Al-Kindi favors this idea of eternity over the more Aristotelian idea of infinite duration supervening on motion: he is unusual among Islamic philosophers in rejecting the eternity of the created world. On the other hand al-Kindi is also influenced by a third concept indigenous to the Islamic world (though certainly resonating with the late Platonic conception): (3) eternity as a near-synonym of divinity. Al-Kindi, like other authors of his period more associated with *kalam* (Islamic theology), assumes that "eternal" means "on an ontological par with God." This identification of eternity and divinity was not broken decisively until the work of the Ash'arites in theology and Avicenna in philosophy in the tenth to eleventh centuries.

Another figure who draws on these conceptions, negatively and positively, is the ninth- to tenth-century philosopher al-Razi. He is another unusual case among Islamic philosophers in that he had Plato's *Timaeus* as his primary influence rather than the late Platonists or Aristotle. Under this influence, he set forward a strikingly original theory that departs from both the late Platonist and the Aristotelian conceptions. For al-Razi, eternity is an infinite extension that does *not* supervene on motion. He calls this not only "eternity" but also "absolute time." Here eternity is not atemporal but is rather the "empty" temporal extension within which God creates the world. (Thus al-Razi treats it as similar to void, which he calls "absolute place.") Al-Razi is arguably the first philosopher to put forward a conception of time as both infinitely extended and independent from motion (though he draws here on Galen's critique of Aristotle in the lost *On Demonstration*).

These discussions provide the background for what may be the most prominent single philosophical issue in Islamic philosophy (or at least in western perceptions of that tradition): the eternity of the world. I have already mentioned that al-Kindi rejected the world's eternity,

apparently in order to avoid putting the world on a par with God. Sa'adia Gaon does the same, using some of the same arguments drawn from the late Platonist John Philoponus. More famous, though, is the clash over this issue in al-Ghazali and Averroes. The question receives a more aporetic answer in both Maimonides and (following him) Aquinas, both of whom try to show that because neither side has compelling arguments, the issue can only be decided by recourse to revealed truth. Thus, the debate over the eternity of the world becomes largely a methodological one—what sorts of argument could in principle settle the question? This issue is closely linked to the different conceptions of eternity canvassed above. The idea that the eternity of the world can be proven *physically* is linked to the Aristotelian conception of eternity as infinite duration supervening on time, whereas the idea that revelation or metaphysics has the last word on the subject goes hand-in-hand with the late Platonic and Islamic theological conceptions of eternity as timelessness and/or divinity.

Modernity seemed to be the autumn of eternity. The secularization of European culture provided little sustenance to the concept of eternity with its heavy theological baggage. Yet our hero would not leave the stage without an outstanding performance of its power and temptation. Indeed, in the first three centuries of the modern period—the subject of the third chapter, by me—the concept of eternity will play a crucial role in the great philosophical systems of the period. The first part of this chapter concentrates on the debate about the temporality of God. While most of the great metaphysicians of the seventeenth century—Suárez, Spinoza, Malebranche, and Leibniz—ascribed to God eternal, nontemporal existence, a growing number of philosophers conceived God as existing in time. For Newton, God's eternity was simply the fact that “He was, he is, and is to come.” A similar view of God as being essentially in time was endorsed by Pierre Gassendi, Henry More, Samuel Clarke, Isaac Barrow, John Locke, and most probably Descartes as well. In the second part of the chapter I examine the concept of eternal truth and its relation to the emerging notion



of Laws of Nature. The third part of the chapter explicates Spinoza's original understanding of *eternity* as a *modal* concept. For Spinoza, eternity is a unique kind of necessary existence: it is existence that is *self-necessitated* (unlike the existence of other things whose necessity derives from external causes). Eternity is the existence of God or the one substance. Yet Spinoza claims that if we conceive finite things adequately—"sub specie aeternitatis"—as nothing but modes flowing from the essence of God, even finite things (like our minds) can take part in God's eternity. The fourth and final part of the chapter is mostly focused on the reception of Spinoza's original conception of eternity by Leibniz and other eighteenth-century philosophers.

Kant's philosophy decisively reorients the understanding of the eternal for European thought of the next two centuries, claims Alistair Welchman in the fourth chapter, whose subject is the conceptions of eternity in nineteenth- and twentieth-century continental philosophy. At one level, Kant's mature thought clearly involves a critique of the metaphysical speculation characteristic of the early modern era, including speculation about the eternal. At the same time, one of the core claims of Kant's positive doctrine of transcendental idealism is that space and time are subjective forms of appearance. A well-known—though controversial—corollary of this doctrine is that things in themselves are nontemporal and hence eternal. To the extent that the post-Kantian tradition of German idealism emphasizes such issues, it is sometimes regarded as regressing to a precritical metaphysical position. But there is, Welchman argues, a marked change after Kant, even if metaphysical and theological issues do not altogether disappear. That change is the result of Kant's famous dictum that he has denied knowledge of things in themselves in order to make way for faith, specifically the faith that we, as human persons understood as things in ourselves, might still be free even though we, as appearances, are rigorously causally determined. As a result of this change, Kant inaugurates an association of the eternity of things in themselves with the subjective experience of human freedom that was to be taken up by

a number of thinkers in the nineteenth century, including Schelling, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche. A brief first part of the chapter paints an appropriate picture of this Kantian background.

Metaphysical and theological issues are by no means absent from many of these nineteenth-century discussions, especially from Schelling and Kierkegaard. But we can begin to note a change, due in large part to the intervening philosophical influence of Kant, in the way the concept of eternity is deployed. The concept comes to be not simply associated with metaphysical descriptions of God but also increasingly connected with questions of subjectivity, of the concrete manner in which we experience the world and especially our freedom within it. This of course is true in different ways and to different degrees in the thought of Schelling and Kierkegaard. However, this concept further introduces the possibility of a secular, sometimes even psychological, dimension, which one sees continuing to influence subsequent thinkers and, for example, remaining in force right up to Nietzsche's conception of eternal return.

Even where Schelling and Kierkegaard do engage in a more conventional metaphysics of eternity, they draw on literary methods to sustain some ironic distance from the content of their discussions: Schelling by means of a mythological register and Kierkegaard by masking himself under his pseudonyms. Eternity, for Schelling, describes both what is "prior to" temporality as well as the perspective that transcends temporality. It describes the nature of the act that constitutes temporality itself, that is, the act of divine creation; but this act is also one that is recapitulated in the free act of deciding in which a human being constitutes himself or herself as an authentic individual. Schelling's conception of eternity as a moment of radical and unmotivated choice of character is a piece of anti-Hegelianism (it does not stand in a dialectical relation to temporality) that links him to Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard is concerned with eternity as a lived experience of freedom—encapsulated in his theory of the moment—as the condition for the possibility both of an authentic grounding in

temporality and of religious redemption. Of particular importance for all these thinkers—starting with the Kant of the *Religion* text—is the idea that human freedom (and responsibility) is linked to an act that takes place in eternity, “outside” time. This paradoxical thought will form the link between the thinkers discussed in the longer second part of the chapter.

In the—again shorter—third part, Welchman investigates the concept of eternity’s contemporary fate in European thought. Until very recently, this fate has been, it seems, ignominious. The development of the (at least potentially or problematically) secular understanding of eternity in the nineteenth century, one centered on the experience of human freedom, has been stymied by developments in the twentieth century. There is still some talk of the eternal in a number of significant twentieth-century thinkers such as Martin Heidegger, Henri Bergson, and Gilles Deleuze. But Welchman argues that it is mainly diagnostic in intent. These thinkers are primarily interested in the concept of *time*. They want to develop a deeper thought of temporality (often in relation to lived human experience) than that of empirical (“clock”) temporality, and they see the metaphysical and theological notions of eternity as conceptually confused ways of doing this. Correlatively, there is some discussion of the concept in avowedly religious thinkers like Emmanuel Lévinas and, more recently, Giorgio Agamben. As a result, one might argue that the fate of the concept of eternity in the twentieth century suggests that the continued interest of nineteenth-century thinkers in the eternal was a result of an incomplete movement toward secularization. But this result is contradicted by what appears to be a genuine revival in recent years of a full-fledged and unapologetic conception of eternity in the work of Alain Badiou, a radical Maoist and philosopher of mathematics. His interest in mathematics suggests a rapprochement with Anglophone interests in eternity as descriptive of the status of numbers and propositions. But Badiou’s *political* interests also point to a revival of nineteenth-century notions of the relation of human freedom with the eternal.

The fifth and final chapter, on the conception of eternity in the twentieth century and contemporary analytic philosophy, is written by Kristopher McDaniel. At the beginning of the twentieth century, claims McDaniel, many attempts were made to demonstrate by means of speculative metaphysics that time is a mere appearance. The most famous of these purported demonstrations is McTaggart's argument for the unreality of time. Although this argument is not widely viewed as successful, it did set the agenda for analytic philosophers pursuing the philosophy of time in the second half of the twentieth century.

Complementing the arguments of speculative metaphysics are the arguments of speculative philosophy of physics. The theory of special relativity seemed to some to show that temporality per se was not metaphysically fundamental but should instead be seen as an aspect of spatiotemporality. Kurt Gödel attempted to argue from the unreality of time by appeal to considerations stemming from the theory of general relativity. More recently, some physicists and philosophers of physics have entertained the hypothesis that spatiotemporality is itself a derivative feature that emerges from a more fundamental non-spatiotemporal framework.

In the first part of this chapter, McDaniel discusses in more detail arguments for the eternality of some entities, specifically focusing first on the case for ideal meanings, including propositions, and then turning to questions concerning the purported eternity of God. In the second part of the chapter, McDaniel begins by critically discussing some of the arguments of speculative metaphysics for the unreality of time and then tracing some of the highlights from the twentieth-century philosophy of time. The third part of the chapter turns to a discussion of the hypothesis in speculative philosophy of physics that space-time derives from a more fundamental basis. This hypothesis has received comparatively little attention from metaphysicians, despite the tempting prospects for speculation it offers. Accordingly, McDaniel explores how the truth of this hypothesis would impact various other disputes in metaphysics, including disputes about what it is to be an abstract

rather than a concrete object, the nature of material composition, and the relationship between necessity and eternity.

### 3 PROBLEMS WITH ETERNITY (AND WITH THE WRITING OF ITS HISTORY)

The issue of eternity is replete with problems. If you are a thinker who enjoys reflecting on a good question: welcome aboard! The five chapters of the book will unfold and investigate in a chronological order the study of these problems throughout the history of philosophy. But just as a starter (wait for the meal!), here is a cluster of problems and questions surrounding the issue of eternity: Why is eternal existence considered by many to be more real than temporal existence?—What is the relation between timeless eternity and the present tense (both have no temporal measure)? What kinds of relations, if any, obtain between timeless and temporal entities? (Are these causal relations? If so, what kind of causality is operative? Explanatory relations? If so, must the explanatory relation be asymmetric?)—Is the notion of *timeless action* consistent? If God is supposed to be “living,” in what sense can he be eternal?—Can nonexistent things be eternal?—Can material things be eternal?—Are there eternal truths, and if so, how can temporal minds access them?—Are numbers eternal?—Can there be more than one eternity? (If so, how are they to be distinguished?)—Can we make sense of the predicate “eternally eternal” and, if so, how is it to be distinguished from just “eternal”?

Next to these philosophical questions, studying the history of the philosophy of eternity raises basic and crucial questions regarding the methodology of the history of philosophy. I have already mentioned that the English term “eternity” and its Latin original, *aeternitas*, have the two distinct senses of (1) being in all times, and (2) timeless existence. However, this is nothing but a historical accident, and we can easily conceive of languages in which each of these senses of “eternity” has its own distinct term. In fact, we can easily conceive of situations in

which one and the same term in the same language loses or gains a new sense. (This is one of the most natural processes of living languages.) For this reason we attempted to fix our attention on the concept(s) of eternity and its development, rather than the terms. Still, in order to complement the five chapters that study the development of the concept of eternity, we have added a brief glossary at the end of the book that aims at providing an overview of the terminology of eternity in some of the major languages that have been employed in the two and half millennia of western philosophy.

#### 4 A FUTURE FOR ETERNITY?

A quick survey of various recent companions, handbooks, and guides to metaphysics would hardly uncover any discussion of eternity. In many, eternity does not even appear as a marginal term in the index. Usually, we relegate eternity to the somewhat less rigorous and less prestigious field of “philosophy of religion.” This need not be the case. Metaphysics as an independent discipline has a surprisingly short history. Till the early eighteenth century, many, perhaps even most, of the writers on “metaphysics” had primarily the outstanding work of Aristotle in mind. In the writings of the early eighteenth-century German rationalists—Christian Wolff and Alexander Baumgarten—we find a conception of metaphysics that is no longer tied to Aristotle’s great work. But metaphysics as a discipline was not blessed with longevity, as a dozen years or so before Louis XVI it was condemned to the guillotine by Kant’s first critique. The fate of metaphysics after the Kantian revolution is a story that still needs to be told, but it would be fair to say, I think, that for the past two centuries engagement with heavy metaphysical concepts, such as eternity, has been taken to be either a form of backwardness (religious or otherwise) or a kind of eccentricity.

Luckily, things seem to have changed over the past twenty years. Suddenly, for example, we are seeing debates about monism appear

in the most mainstream journals. (This could hardly be imagined in the 1970s or 1980s.) The emergence of interest in metaphysical monism seems to open a window of opportunity through which eternity might again take her rightful seat as a fundamental notion of metaphysics.