

## What's "Eternal Life", Eternity, all about?

### Eternity's Paradox

Long considerations of Christian theology, and constant, sometimes-dogged, pursuit of the Christian life, has inevitably involved endless thinking about *eternity*. Time and again we are promised eternal/everlasting life as the result of believing in Jesus Christ (eg. John 3, 15). What exactly is *eternity*? Some Christians simply think of an "after-life", which will proceed quite regularly when this one finishes, except that, unlike this life, it will have no end.

Endlessness – and beginning - is perhaps the natural way that purely-time-bound creatures would conceive of it; but eternity is something different from that (we are, actually, incapable of conceiving of it). It must mean something wholly outside time, and as such having the nature of the existence of God; it is *temporality*, we often hear, that is the illusion.

The reconciliation of human freedom of choice with divine omniscience is often understood (well, attempted to be understood) by reference to God's existence completely *outside* time, and the Bible and Judeo-Christian tradition occasionally affirms the idea that God has created us "before the world began"; we, also, come from beyond time – for if eternity "is" to be ours, it has always "been"/always "is".

This thinking produces some curious implications that are not often apparent, and might surprise, even disturb [I tried, in 2010, to grapple with some of these ideas in my poem *Temporality*]. It means, not only that we may well be "in" eternity "before" this life, but also, that we are "there now" (as well as being "here, now" – but not at the same "time", for time does not exist in eternity). Christian theories of Predestination and Election (coming from the time of the early Fathers, from ideas in the Gospels and the Epistles – and found in the theologies of the Reformers) perhaps began as attempts to grapple with this time/eternity paradox).

I remember that (in philosophy of religion lectures, in the early 1970s) we were asked to consider the implications of the situation 'if time was "real"'. Looking back, I fancy one implication was that the "evolution" of Truth (and all else) might be realistic. If it implied that temporality was "all that there is" it surely meant that this life/the purely-this-worldly is all that there is. But does the belief that time 'is "real"' – inescapable, I fancy – of necessity require the idea that *eternity* is an illusion?

Eternity, I have suggested, is strictly inconceivable to us, and therefore – like the existence of God [militant atheists note] – we could not have thought of the idea on our own, having (had) no means, or cause; no, God has put the idea in our hearts (Ecclesiastes 3, 11). The end is, I think, that we have, once again, to be content with, and live within, the tension between two realities, that which we ineluctably experience every day, and that which we cannot conceive of, trusting the God who has told us of this, and who promised us – whatever it is – “eternal” life, if we believe in Him.

Isn't the Christian life always like this?

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