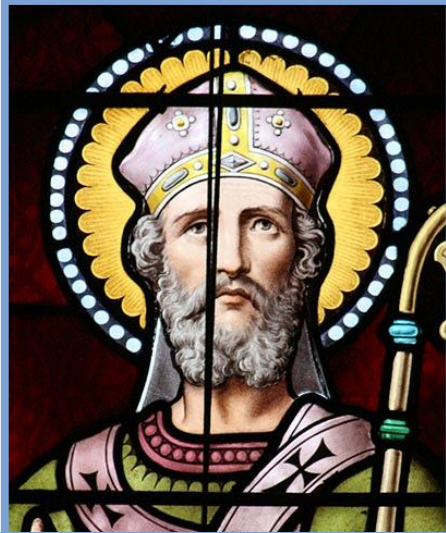


Anselmian Eternalism

1. What is Anselmian eternalism?

Anselmian eternalism is a theory of time; specifically, the theory of time that some key thinkers (e.g. Katherin Rogers) argue Anselm of Canterbury (1093-1109) believed in. Most human beings take the way time works for granted; however, in philosophy, there are numerous theories about how events and objects are related to one another by time. Most of these theories can be grouped together into one of two categories. The first category is presentism, and contains the theories that most human beings in more economically developed countries consciously or unconsciously believe in (they are sometimes referred to as commonsense theories); the second category is eternalism.



Anselm of Canterbury

Presentism: this category includes all theories of time in which the present is believed to exist, but the past and future are not. Human beings who believe in presentism argue that the present is objective, and composed of events and objects that come into and pass out of existence as time passes. This does not mean the past never existed, only that it no longer exists, because it is impossible to retrieve past events or objects. Generally, presentists believe that there are three dimensions (i.e. height, width and depth), and that these three dimensions are modulated by time (or pass through it).

Eternalism: this category includes all theories of time in which the past, present and future are all believed to exist. Human beings who believe in eternalism argue that the present is subjective, and composed of events and objects that a subject (e.g. a human being) experiences as time passes. Generally, eternalists believe that there are four dimensions: the three dimensions of space (i.e. height, width and depth) and the fourth dimension of time. Eternalists believe that objects occupy time in the same way they occupy space, and that the present is just the part of time currently being experienced.

2. How does Anselmian eternalism work?

Anselm of Canterbury argued that God is, "Something than which nothing greater can be thought." Following Boethius (c. 477-524), he argued that God is eternal (because being eternal is greater than not being eternal) and can intervene in the universe. Consequently, Katherin Rogers argues that, "If [God] is an actor in the temporal world, then He must be eternal as Anselm understands the term, where all of space-time is present to him." In other words, if a Christian accepts Anselm of Canterbury's belief that God is eternal and capable of interacting with the universe, then he or she must also believe in eternalism. Fundamentally, this is because if God is eternal presentism results in his power to intervene in the universe being constrained by time, which creates various philosophical conundrums.

Katherin Rogers uses two important analogies to explain how she believes Anselm of Canterbury understood time. The first analogy is between the relationship the centre of a circle has with the points of its circumference and the relationship God has with points in time. Katherin Rogers explains that although the points of a circle's circumference are all in different places relative to one another, they all share the same relationship with the centre of the circle; likewise, God shares the same relationship with each and every point in time. The second analogy is between a mountain climber surveying a landscape and God surveying time: just as a mountain climber can see the entire landscape from the summit of a mountain, so God can see each and every moment in time stretched out before him from his vantage point.

Theory of Time

A proposed explanation of the relationship between events, which influences whether or not certain events are believed to exist.



A mountain: the basis for one of Katherin Rogers's analogies about God and time.

3. **Why** is Anselmian eternalism important?

In brief, Anselmian eternalism is important, because it provides potential solutions to various philosophical conundrums created by presentism. One significant problem that eternalism appears to solve is the tension between belief in God's omniscience and belief in free will, which is challenging for those who subscribe to presentism. The problem is this: if the future does not exist, but God knows what will happen when it does, how can human beings have free will? In other words, if God knows what will happen to someone a year from today, then he or she is not meaningfully free; the future appears to be predetermined. Anselmian eternalism provides a solution to this problem, because the past and future exist simultaneously to the present, even though human beings cannot experience them. This means that all of time exists, and God interacts with it simultaneously, but human beings can only experience one instant at a time (i.e. the present moment). This may seem like a mind-bending idea; however Katherin Rogers claims it makes divine omniscience and human free will possible.

Additionally, Anselmian eternalism enhances any conception of God's omnipotence. According to Katherin Rogers, Anselm of Canterbury believed presentism diminishes the conception of God's omnipotence, because it limits his power to the present moment; according to presentist theories of time, the past and present no longer exist, so God cannot interact with them. By comparison, eternalism enhances the conception of God's omnipotence, because he interacts with all points in time simultaneously. Likewise, Katherin Rogers claims that Anselmian eternalism supports a more coherent reading of the Bible, because certain passages are only intelligible if eternalism is presumed. For example, Katherin Rogers explains that she was raised as a Catholic to believe Jesus died for her sins. If presentism is the correct theory of time, then Jesus could not have died specifically for the sins of Katherin Rogers, because she was not alive at the time of his death; however, if eternalism is the correct theory of time, then this belief makes sense, because God interacts with the death of Jesus and Katherin Roger's life simultaneously.

George Thinks

By anyone's standards, eternalism is a rather mind-bending idea; the central claim is that the past, present and future form a dimension in which events and objects exist, just like the dimensions of space. History is not lost to time, it's there in the past to be experienced (by God, at least, even if human beings can't access it), and the same is true of the future. Interestingly, anyone who believes time travel is theoretically possible has to be an eternalist, because presentists believe that neither the past nor the future exist (it's impossible to travel through time if there's nowhere to go to). Anselm of Canterbury may have been an eternalist, but it's difficult to say with absolute certainty, because key thinkers like William Hasker and Brian Leftow provide a number of counterarguments and competing interpretations. To my mind though, Katherin Rogers's interpretation appears highly plausible: Anselm of Canterbury was a keen philosophical thinker, and it's difficult to imagine that he wouldn't have thought through the consequences of his famous definition of God and what it means for a coherent theory of time.

