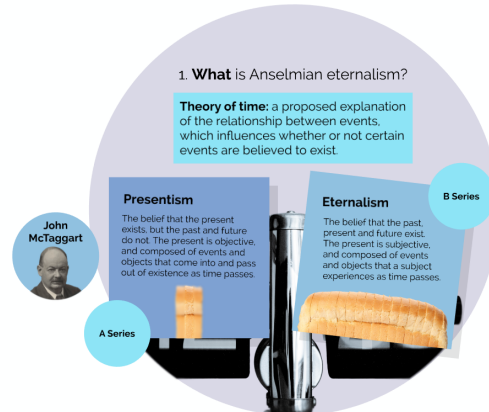


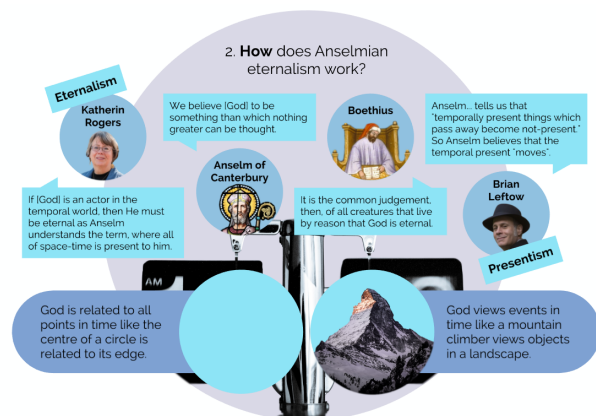
Anselmian Eternalism

Hi! This lesson is all about Anselmian eternalism, which is shorthand for Anselm of Canterbury's four-dimensionalist approach to time. Of course, exactly what this means probably doesn't make much sense regardless of the title, unless you've encountered it already. So, before we get started, two things. First, Anselmian eternalism is the term we use to describe how Anselm of Canterbury understood time. What time is may seem obvious to us at a superficial level; however, if you do too much thinking about it, it can become pretty mind-bending. Second, we can't be sure that Anselm believed in eternalism, because he never explicitly and unambiguously outlined his beliefs about time. So, Anselmian eternalism is a particular interpretation of Anselm of Canterbury's writings; it's one that has a lot of support, but there's certainly disagreement. In fact, it's one of the things we're going to learn about over the course of this lesson, along with what Anselmian eternalism is, how it works, and why it's important.

• So, without further ado, what is Anselmian eternalism? • Well, the first thing we need to understand is that it's a theory of time, meaning a proposed explanation of the relationship between events, which itself influences whether or not we believe certain events exist. Now, there are loads of different theories out there that try to explain how time works, or how events in the past, present and future are related to one another, but broadly speaking they can be split into two major categories. • The first is presentism, which is the belief that the present exists, but the past and future do not. The present is objective, and composed of events and objects that come into and pass out of existence as time passes. It's not a great analogy, but imagine a loaf of bread in which only the slice you're currently eating actually exists; as you finish one slice, another mysteriously comes into existence, but the end of the loaf can't be seen. • The second is eternalism, which is the belief that the past, present and future do exist. The present is subjective, and composed of events and objects that a subject experiences as time passes. In other words, the whole loaf of bread exists, but us humans can only experience one slice at a time. Now, I know I said my loaf of bread analogy isn't a particularly good one, but it's appropriate because the academic literature refers to slices of time as a way of thinking about the differences between these two categories. • John McTaggart was one of the first thinkers to draw this distinction in 1908 using the terms • "A series" • and "B series", but the terms "tensed" and "untensed" can also be used. But regardless of the terms, the difference is this, presentists generally believe that the three dimensions of space (height, width, and depth) are modulated by or passing through time, but slices pass into and out of existence. On the other hand, eternalists believe time is a fourth dimension (hence Anselm of Canterbury's four-dimensionalist approach to time). All slices of time exist, but us humans can only experience one at a time; we can't get at the slices in the past or the future, but they're there, just like the frames of a film that you can't rewind or fast-forward.



• Our next question is how Anselmian eternalism works. • Ultimately, it rests on Anselm of Canterbury's definition of God as, "Something than which nothing greater can be thought," • and was inspired by Boethius, who wrote, "It is the common judgement, then, of all creatures that live by reason that God is eternal." This part, of course, is pretty straightforward: in a nutshell, it's greater to be eternal than just to be very long lived, so God must be eternal. • Now, according to Katherin Rogers, God's eternal nature combined with Anselm of Canterbury's belief that he can intervene in the world means that time must be eternal. In her words, "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." • This is an example



of eternalism, or the idea that the entire loaf of bread exists. We might only be able to experience the particular slice that we're in, but God can see and feel the entire loaf. This is where it's worth saying that not everyone agrees with this particular interpretation of Anselm of Canterbury's writings. • In an article that responds to Katherin Rogers, Brian Leftow writes, "Anselm... tells us that "temporally present things which pass away become not-present." So Anselm believes that the temporal present "moves". • This is an example of presentism, and I only include it here to make the point that some thinkers disagree that Anselm had a four-dimensionalist, or eternalist, approach to time. Anyway, returning to the ideas of Katherin Rogers, she uses two important analogies to describe how God experiences time. • The first is the analogy of a circle, and she explains that God is related to every slice of time much as the centre of a circle is related to every point of its edge or circumference (they are in different places relative to one another, but share the same relationship with the centre). • The second is the analogy of a mountain climber, who she explains can see the entire landscape stretched out beneath the summit, much like God can see the totality of time laid out before him. • To these analogies I add one of my own. • Think about this very video recording; there are thousands of frames, thousands of slices if you will, but you and I can only ever experience a single frame at a time, the frame located where the so-called playhead is (it's the one in your viewfinder now). • God, on the other hand, can experience the entire scrubber bar at once; he experiences all the thousands of frames (or slices) simultaneously. If you're stuck on the playhead of time, as we humans are, then there are frames in the past and frames in the future, but you can't experience them until you get there. But God isn't stuck on the playhead, he experiences the entire scrubber bar, all the frames, simultaneously; there's no past, present and future for him (the reason, in fact, that eternalism is sometimes referred to as untensed, meaning without a past-tense or future-tense).

•• This brings us to our final question: why is Anselmian eternalism important? In brief, it's important because its proponents, like Katherin Rogers, argue that it solves a number of really big philosophical and theological problems. • First, Anselmian eternalism resolves the conflict between omniscience and free will. The problem with free will for a presentist, is that if God is omnisicent, and knows what's going to happen in the future, then human beings can't have free will. Put another way, you might not know what you're going to be doing on this day next year, but God



does, which begs the question; if our future is predestined, how on Earth can we have free will? I'm now going to be guilty of some gross oversimplification, but for an eternalist with an untensed view of time, their simply is no future. God is omnisicent because he experiences future slices of time simultaneously to past and present slices of time. God know how the film ends because he's already experiencing it, we're just not their yet. Of course, my film analogy breaks down here, because it suggests that the end is still fixed; better to imagine here that what you're watching is a live televised sports event. Live televised sport is genuinely open-ended, it's not fixed like a film; Katherin Rogers simply believes that Anselm of Canterbury believed, that God experiences the last plays of the game simultaneously to the starting whistle. • Second, Anselmian eternalism requires a more powerful God than presentism, because eternalism requires God to act at all places and all times simultaneously, whilst presentism limits God's actions to the present moment (according to this view he is powerless to act in the future, because it doesn't exist yet). • Finally, and perhaps most compellingly, Anselmian eternalism supports a more coherent reading of the Bible. Katherin Rogers writes movingly about how her Catholic upbringing led her to believe that Jesus died for her sins. This doesn't make sense if, when Jesus died, he couldn't have experienced her because she wasn't yet born; however, for a Christian eternalist, this isn't an issue: God experiences death on the cross simultaneously with the life of Katherin Rogers. God experiences all these frames, all these slices of time, at once.

•• That brings us to the end of our quick survey of Anselmian eternalism. The reason why I really love Katherin Rogers's work on this topic is because she fully acknowledges how strange the idea is, which is refreshing. Presentism is often referred to as the "commonsense theory", because it agrees with how we experience time passing; however, plenty of scientific evidence suggests that how we experience time isn't how it really is. In particular, Katherin Rogers's analogies help us to make sense of how time might be, and even though (full disclosure) I'm a presentist, I find her lines of argument really compelling. So, I would encourage you to read her work, consider your assumptions, and think long and hard about whether or not how you experience time is that good an indicator of how it actually is. And on that intoxicating note, goodbye!