



The Eternity of God: Richard Swinburne vs. Thomas Aquinas

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Introduction

The question of God's eternity has been an age-long problem which has challenged the sagacity and acumen of generations of both philosophers and theologians of different religious extractions, cultural backgrounds, and intellectual pedigrees. Theistic thinkers seem to be in agreement that eternity constitutes one of the essential attributes of God. But when it comes to spelling out what it effectively means to claim that God is eternal, different scholars tend to part ways in their construal of this essential divine attribute. Hitherto, two rival views have been preponderant in the explanation of God's eternity: first, the more classical Christian view which construes God's eternity in terms of timelessness, that is, in the sense of God being outside time; and second, the more dominant view among contemporary philosophers of religion which sees God's eternity in terms of his being temporally everlasting, in other words, his being eternal but existing in every moment of time that ever was, is and will be. There are yet other intermediate views, like the view that presents God as relatively timeless¹, or that which presents God as timeless without creation but temporal with creation².

¹ Alan G. Padgett, for instance, sustains this renovated understanding of God's eternity, arguing that "he is not measured by time nor is he affected by the negative aspects of temporal passage. God is the ground of time, the Lord of time" (A.G. PADGETT, *God, Eternity and the Nature of Time*, Wipf and Stock Publishers, Eugene, Oregon 1992, 146).

² This is the view advocated by William Craig. According to him, "there seem to be two phases of God's life, a timeless phase and a temporal phase, and the timeless phase seems to have existed earlier than the temporal phase. But this is logically incoherent, since to stand in a relation of *earlier than* is by all accounts to be temporal": W. L. CRAIG, "Timelessness and Omnitemporality", *Philosophia Christi* [Series 2] 2 (2000), 32. To resolve the incoherence, he adds, "that 'prior

This paper wishes to critically examine the two predominant views on God's eternity as represented in the thoughts of Thomas Aquinas and Richard Swinburne. Whereas Aquinas understands God's eternity from the point of view of God's timelessness, Swinburne maintains that God is not outside time, but is rather backwardly and forwardly everlasting, in other words, He is in every time that ever was, is and will be. The paper will be developed under three moments. The first two moments will offer a synopsis of the conceptions of God's eternity as articulated by Aquinas and Swinburne respectively, while the last moment critically juxtaposing the two positions, will offer novel insights that will help in clearing the shadow enshrouding the question of God's eternity.

God's Eternity as Timelessness in Thomas Aquinas

Aquinas' conception of God's eternity has an impressive pedigree that stretches back to Origen, St. Augustine, St. Anselm, but especially to Boethius. In his *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Boethius had defined eternity as "the simultaneously-whole and perfect possession of interminable life"³. Aquinas appropriates wholesale Boethius' definition and at the same time expounds it. In the *Summa Theologiae*, I, 10, which constitutes the *locus classicus* of Aquinas' reflections on God's eternity, the first article explicitly asks whether Boethius' definition is a good one⁴. In his *respondeo*, Aquinas contrasts eternity with Aristotelian definition of time. In the thinking of Aristotle, time is the measure of movement whereby we are able to divide movement or change in terms of before and after. Eternity, on the other hand, bespeaks something permanently existing without any change, that is, living its whole life indivisibly without the possibility of any division into before and after: "As therefore the idea of time consists in the numbering of before and after in movement; so likewise in the apprehension of the uniformity of what is outside of movement, consists the idea of eternity"⁵.

to creation there literally are no intervals of time (...) no earlier and later, no enduring through successive intervals and, hence, no waiting, no temporal becoming. This state would pass away, not successively, but as a whole, at the moment of creation, when time begins" (ibid., 33).

³ BOETHIUS, *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, 5,6 (Eng. trans. by D.L. Slavitt, 2010).

⁴ Cf. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 10, a. 1.

⁵ THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 10, a. 1 corpus (Eng. trans. by Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 1969).

For Aquinas then, eternity means timelessness, it transcends time and so cannot be measured by time. He argues that “those things are said to be measured by time which have a beginning and an end in time, because in everything which is moved there is a beginning, and there is an end. But as whatever is wholly immutable can have no succession, so it has no beginning, and no end”⁶. However, Aquinas’ conception of eternity even goes beyond the mere absence of beginning and end, since this could be interpreted in terms of perpetual but temporary continuity, which, in his thinking, could be considered philosophically possible for creation⁷. According to Aquinas, there are two sources from which eternity is known: “first, because what is eternal is interminable...that is, has no beginning nor end (that is, no term either way); secondly, because eternity has no succession, being simultaneously whole”⁸. Thus, for Aquinas, besides timelessness, eternity further implies the absence of change, it implies simultaneous possession of unlimited life. This is why only God is eternal. According to Aquinas, “The idea of eternity follows immutability (...) Hence, as God is supremely immutable, it supremely belongs to Him to be eternal. Nor is He eternal only; but He is His own eternity; whereas, no other being is its own duration, as no other is its own being. Now God is His own uniform being; and hence as He is His own essence, so He is His own eternity”⁹. The reason for which God is His own being is because, being the Unmoved Mover, He is Pure Act – while movement is passage from potency to act. Being Pure Act, therefore, there is no change or movement in Him, and so, He is timeless. David B. Burrell explains that “Other things, which for one reason or another, may be unaffected by time or to which time is irrelevant, may be said to be atemporal (or timeless), but not properly speaking, eternal. For what eternity adds to timelessness is the ‘perfect

⁶ THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 10, a. 1 corpus.

⁷ Cf. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 46, a. 2 corpus: “By faith alone do we hold, and by no demonstration can it be proved, that the world did not always exist (...) The reason is that the newness of the world cannot be demonstrated on the part of the world itself (...) Hence it cannot be demonstrated that man, or heaven, or a stone were not always Likewise can it be demonstrated on the part of the efficient cause, which acts by will. For the will of God cannot be investigated by reason, except as regards those things which God must will of necessity; and what He wills about creatures is not among these (...)”.

⁸ THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 10, a. 1, corpus.

⁹ THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 10, a. 2.

possession all at once of limitless life'(...) the 'perfect possession' in question is the identity of the divine subject with its to-be, the absence of any composition whatsoever, and hence a perfect at-one-ness with itself. And such an unrestricted act of existing amounts to 'limitless life'(...) So eternal does not mark a division among beings like rational among animals, but rather names a unity and simpleness which quite transcends any mode of being with which we are acquainted"¹⁰.

God's eternity, therefore, in the thinking of Aquinas, includes God's life which is more than just mere existence or being, for as he underscores in his reply to one of the objections, "What is truly eternal, is not only being, but also living; and life extends to operation, which is not true of being"¹¹. This explains why it is possible to have a relationship between God, who is timeless, and other things that exist in time. In fact, for Aquinas, though God is outside of time, he is not separated or dissociated from time, his eternity embraces all time, it contains all time, so that everything that occurs in time is clearly present to God. As Aquinas would affirm in relation to God's knowledge of contingent things, "God knows all things; not only things actual but also things possible to Him and creature; and since some of these are future contingent to us, it follows that God knows future contingent things (...) The reason is because His knowledge is measured by eternity, as is also His being; and eternity being simultaneously whole comprises all time (...) Hence all 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"¹². In this way, God knows everything about the past, the present and the future; the temporal structure of reality does not in any way restrict His knowledge. In response to one of the objections, he affirms that "Things reduced to act in time, as known by us successively in time, but by God (are known) in eternity, which is above time. Whence to us they cannot be certain, forasmuch as we know future contingent things as such; but (they are certain) to God alone, whose understanding is in eternity above time"¹³.

¹⁰ D.B. BURRELL, "God's Eternity", in *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers* 4 (1984), 393.

¹¹ THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 10, a.1, ad. 2.

¹² THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 14, a. 13, corpus.

¹³ THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 14, a. 13, ad. 3.

Perhaps conscious of how difficult it would be for us to understand how God would know in eternity what we perceive successively in time, Aquinas resorts to two analogies in order to drive home his point. First, he compares our knowledge of successive events and God's simultaneous knowledge of all that happens to a person moving along the road who cannot see those coming after him and another person standing on a height who sees at once all those travelling along the road. According to Aquinas, "Hence what is known by us must be necessary, even as it is in itself; for what is future contingent in itself, cannot be known by us. Whereas what is known by God must be necessary according to the mode in which they are subject to the divine knowledge, as already stated, but not absolutely as considered in their own causes"¹⁴. The second analogy derives from geometry. The relation of God's eternity to the succession of events in time is compared to the relation between a point at the centre of a circle and different points of the circumference of the circle. The different points at the circumference have different distances from themselves but are all equidistant to the point at the centre. As Aquinas wrote in his *Summa contra Gentiles*, "Let us consider a determined point on the circumference of a circle. Although it is indivisible, it does not co-exist simultaneously with any other point as to position, since it is the order of position that produces the continuity of the circumference. On the other hand, the center of the circle, which is no part of the circumference, is directly opposed to any given determinate point on the circumference. Hence, whatever is found in any part of time coexists with what is eternal as being present to it, although with respect to some other time it be past or future"¹⁵. It is in this way that the different temporary events are related to God's knowledge of them in eternity. Definitely, like every other analogy, these analogies employed here by Aquinas are only approximative and so do not perfectly capture the reality they represent.

¹⁴ THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 14, a. 13, ad 3.

¹⁵ THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa contra gentiles*, I, c. 66, 7 (Eng. trans. by A.C. PEGIS, 1955).

God's Eternity as Everlastingness in Swinburne

Like Aquinas, Swinburne also affirms eternity as one of God's essential attributes. In fact, his basic understanding of theism is "the doctrine that there is a God in the sense of a being with most of the following properties: being a person without a body (that is, a spirit), present everywhere (that is, omnipresent), the creator of the universe, perfectly free, able to do anything (that is, omnipotent), knowing all things (that is, omniscient), perfectly good, a source of moral obligation, eternal, a necessary being, holy, and worthy of worship"¹⁶. However, when it comes to spelling out what it means to say that God is eternal, as is the case also with many of the enumerated properties of God, Swinburne breaks away from the traditional conception advocated by Aquinas. He argues that such a conception of God's eternity is not substantiated by both the Old and New Testaments of Christian scriptures, insinuating that it has its roots in Neoplatonism which has a deprecating conception of temporal things. Let it however be remarked here that Swinburne's recourse to the Scriptures shifts the question to the plane of revealed theology. If we wish instead to reason on the plane of philosophical theology, the question to be asked should not be whether the conception of God's eternity proposed by Aquinas is "substantiated" by the Scriptures, but rather whether it is in contradiction with the Scriptures, and it is certainly not, taking into consideration also the metaphorical language in which the Scriptures are encoded. But Swinburne based on his presumed lack of scriptural grounding for the traditional conception of God's eternity considers it "quite unnecessary for the theist to burden himself with this understanding of eternity"¹⁷, contending that it is incoherent and incompatible with many other things theists claim about God. Swinburne champions instead the interpretation of God's eternity in terms of God being everlasting. In his view, a natural understanding of the claim that God is eternal "is that he has always existed, exists now, and will always exist – that there was, is, or will be no (period of) time at which he does not exist"¹⁸. Swinburne expresses this in terms of God being backwardly and forwardly everlasting. What does he mean

¹⁶ R. SWINBURNE, *The Coherence of Theism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2016², 1.

¹⁷ R. SWINBURNE, *The Existence of God*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2004², 7.

¹⁸ R. SWINBURNE, *The Coherence of Theism*, 228.

by these expressions? According to Swinburne, to say that God is backwardly everlasting means that He always existed, and entailed in it is the claim that He never began to exist, He has always been there. To say that God is forwardly everlasting is to be understood as His existing for every future period of time. In other words, for Swinburne, God does not exist outside of time, He rather exists in time. Swinburne conceives time in terms of periods of time as against instants of time. In other words, every period of time has a duration, no matter how minute. To claim that God began to exist entails that there was a period of time when he did not exist and then at a period of time he began to exist. This, according to Swinburne, does not accord with the idea we have of God. So for him, there is no period of time that God was not to warrant his beginning to exist at a certain period of time. In the same vein, it is also logical to say that time never really began to exist, because to claim that time began to exist means that there was a period of time before time began to exist, which is illogical. In other words, time is co-eternal with God, not having any beginning and any end. We recall that in trying to establish the existence of an eternal being in his *Metaphysics*, Aristotle had affirmed the eternity of both time and movement¹⁹. Swinburne's argument here might be considered in tandem with Aristotle's argument. It is nevertheless equally true that commenting on Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, Aquinas had impugned and weakened Aristotle's argument, contending that "it is evident that the argument which he does give here to prove that time is eternal is not demonstrative. For if we suppose that at some moment time began to be, it is not necessary to assume a prior moment except an imaginary time; just as when we say that there is no body outside of the heavens what we mean by 'outside' is merely an imaginary something. Hence, just as it is not necessary to posit some place outside of the heavens, even though 'outside' seems to signify place, so too neither is it necessary that there be a time before time began to be or a time after time will cease to be, even though before and after signify time"²⁰.

Being everlasting, and so in time, Swinburne thinks that there must be in God a succession of distinct conscious experiences as long as

¹⁹ Cf. ARISTOTLE, *Metaphysics*, XII, 1071 b 3-22.

²⁰ THOMAS AQUINAS, *Commentary on the Metaphysics*, L. 12, lect. 5, 2498 (Eng. trans. by J.P. ROWAN, 1961).

there exists a changing world. But although the universe changes, God Himself never changes, hence another essential attribute of God closely related to the attribute of eternity – God’s immutability. Theism claims that God is essentially immutable, by which is meant that He never changes, as we have also seen in Aquinas’ thought. But Swinburne, contrary to the traditional view represented by Aquinas, advocates a weak sense of God’s immutability, in the sense of His not being able to change only in respect of His essential properties. Aquinas claims, for instance, that God is altogether immutable, arguing among other things that “everything which is moved acquires something by its movement, and attains to what it had not attained previously. But since God is infinite, comprehending in Himself all the plenitude of perfection of all being, He cannot acquire anything new, nor extend Himself to anything whereto He was not extended previously. Hence movement in no way belongs to Him”²¹. Swinburne thinks that such understanding of immutability would be incompatible with God being essentially everlasting. In response to Aquinas, Swinburne argues that “the perfection of a perfect being might consist not in his being in a certain static condition, but in his being in a certain process of change”²². Swinburne’s argument is that since God created free agents that are liable to change, He will also be liable to change, though not essentially, in line with the changes which may occur in these free agents. This is because, if these agents are truly free, God can only have confident beliefs about what they will do in future only after they shall have done it, and that would imply change in God’s beliefs. As Swinburne argues, “if God is everlasting, inevitably his knowledge of, and so his beliefs about, what is unalterable and so past, and of what is causable and so future will change. That would be so, even if God had predetermined the whole history of the world before he ever caused it to exist”²³. In other words, the free choices of these agents will be the cause of God’s knowledge of their free actions since God cannot know those actions beforehand. In the thinking of Swinburne, if God were to be totally immutable, what he calls immutability in the strong sense, then He would be a very lifeless being, and it would be impossible for us to have any personal relation-

²¹ THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 9, a. 1.

²² R. SWINBURNE, *The Coherence of Theism*, 234.

²³ R. SWINBURNE, *The Coherence of Theism*, 233.

ships with such a being. Just as he claims that the traditional Christian doctrine of God's timelessness has its roots in Neoplatonism, he also claims that the conception of God's immutability in the strong sense must as well have its roots in the philosophy of Neoplatonism.

Swinburne thinks that the reason why the third and fourth century Christians weren't satisfied with the understanding of God's eternity in terms of everlastingness is because they felt it would make God time's prisoner. But Swinburne reasons that is really not true, arguing on the contrary that "for a timeless God every period of time would be beyond his control. In his timeless moment, such a God would see the world as it is, and he could not then make it any other way, whereas an everlasting God could control an infinite future"²⁴. A further reason for which traditional Christians have adopted the view which interprets God's eternity in terms of timelessness, according to Swinburne, is that they consider it capable of providing formidable support for the doctrine of God's immutability in the strong sense. But Swinburne thinks that a totally immutable being does not necessarily need to be timeless for it to continue existing, it could still be totally immutable but in time. However, as we have already seen, Swinburne is clearly against the idea of God's total immutability. For him, God is immutable only in his essential properties. There is yet another reason for which traditional Christians privileged the timelessness doctrine. According to Swinburne, "it allowed them to maintain that God is omniscient in the strong sense"²⁵. This expression seems pleonastic, since omnipotence, by definition, is an absolute concept and so does not allow degrees of strongness. However, just as Swinburne argues against the doctrine of God's immutability in the strong sense and advocates its interpretation in the weak sense, he also rejects the interpretation of God's omniscience in the strong sense and urges that we have to settle for a weaker sense of omniscient, especially for two reasons. The first, in his thinking, is that the omniscient being cannot know his own future free choices. And secondly, since God has given human beings free will, that is, the power to choose between good and evil, Swinburne also thinks that God cannot know the future free choices of free human beings. St. Thomas, as

²⁴ R. SWINBURNE, *The Coherence of Theism*, 237.

²⁵ R. SWINBURNE, *The Coherence of Theism*, 238.

we have seen, sustains that God knows future contingent things, since they are present to him in his eternity. Swinburne takes up a contrary position. Following his view that God is in time and not outside time, he reasons that God existed yesterday and knew propositions yesterday, He exists today and knows propositions today, and He will exist tomorrow and will know propositions tomorrow. Consequently, God can only know the free choices and actions of free human beings only after they shall have made those choices and performed those actions. For Swinburne, “God outside time can never know our free actions, even though they may sometimes be future from our point of view”²⁶.

Critical Reflections

The crux of Swinburne’s disagreement with Aquinas on the understanding of God’s eternity lies in Swinburne’s rejection of Aquinas’ interpretation of God’s eternity as timelessness. For him instead, God’s eternity has to be understood in terms of his everlastingness, by which he means that God, though having no beginning or end, is not outside time, but is in every period of time that ever was, that is and that will ever be. The first consideration I wish to make regards the use of the term “everlasting” to refer to God’s eternity and to interpret it as meaning that God is within time. I wish to argue that whether we use the word eternal or everlasting to refer to this essential attribute of God, they mean one and the same thing, and have to be interpreted in terms of God’s timelessness. Let us return a moment to a consideration of the ordinary language meaning of both words. Of course, Swinburne favours the use of words employed in theology in their ordinary sense, what he calls their mundane sense. Even though I do not share this opinion, for reasons I will still make clear as we go on, but if we have to follow his prescription, and look up the word “eternal” in any dictionary, “everlasting” would usually appear among the meanings. In the same vein, if we look up the word “everlasting” in any dictionary, “eternal” is usually prominent among the meanings. Moreover, if we have to look up the synonyms of both words, they both appear reciprocally. In other words, in ordinary language usage, both words are used interchange-

²⁶ R. SWINBURNE, *The Coherence of Theism*, 238.

ably. Furthermore, in other world languages, there doesn't seem to be two different words for both words, they both seem to share the same translation. In French, we have "éternel" for both words; in German, "ewig"; in Spanish, Portuguese and Italian, "eterno". Even in the more ancient languages like in Hebrew, we often find *אֵלֶּם* (*olam*) for both words. In Greek, even though we have *αἰώνιος* and *αἰδίος* which are standardly translated as eternal and everlasting respectively, in ordinary language, they seem to be used interchangeably. In fact, Plato, to whom the coinage of *αἰώνιος* is attributed uses both words in his *Timaeus* in reference to the Paradigm²⁷, and scholars don't seem to be in agreement regarding the interpretation of Plato's text where these words are employed.²⁸ In Latin, both words are commonly translated "aeternus", even though sometimes "perennis" and *sempiternus* are also used in the translation of everlasting. In my native language, Igbo, both words as well translate "ebebe". Thus, though there may be a very subtle difference between the two words in English, since everlasting strictly refers to something that is enduring in time, in ordinary language, they are used interchangeably. They are words applied to God and to other beings that are not God, for example, when angels are referred to as eternal, or one can hear of eternal hills, or I can say that I am eternally grateful to someone. It is precisely in the application of both terms to God on the one hand and to things that are not God on the other hand that difference is to be seen. And it is from here that one can better appreciate Aquinas' contribution, because we go beyond their ordinary language meaning to their analogical meaning.

Of course, Aquinas doesn't seem to have made any distinction between eternal and everlasting, he wrote in Latin and talked about God's "aeternitas", which in English translates both eternity and everlastingness. His argument is that "aeternitas" — whether we translate it as eternity or everlastingness — applies only properly to God and refers to God's timelessness, God's transcendence over time. When it is used for other things that are not God, it is used in an extended sense, because God participates His eternity to these other things, and not because they are timeless. Only God is timeless, and so properly eternal. As Aquinas

²⁷ Cf. PLATO, *Timaeus*, 37c6-38b5.

²⁸ Cf. J. WILBERDING, "One Eternity in Ancient Philosophy", in *Eternity: A History*, ed. Y.Y. MELAMED, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2016, 22-25.

argues, “Eternity truly and properly so called is in God alone, because eternity follows on immutability (...) But God alone is altogether immutable (...) Accordingly, however, as some receive immutability from Him, they share in His eternity”²⁹. Here, analogy plays a very essential role. When eternity is used with reference to God and to beings that are not God, it has to be understood analogically: with reference to God, it means timelessness; with reference to other beings, it means without end, because they have beginning but no end. Only God has neither beginning nor end. Of course, Swinburne admits that the understanding of God’s eternity as timelessness can only be sustained if words are understood analogically. But he contends that he sees no reason why we have to understand this and so many other attributes of God analogically. For him, they have to be used in their ordinary or mundane sense. But I totally disagree with Swinburne. There is every reason for which attributes referred to God and to creatures have to be understood analogically. Aquinas was clear in the enunciation of his doctrine of analogy that “whatever is said of God and creatures, is said according to the relation of a creature to God as its first principle and cause, wherein all perfections of things pre-exist excellently”³⁰. We have to recognize the infinite difference between creator and creatures. God is not on equal ontological footing with creatures, and we cannot make God equal to creatures if he is still to be God, unless we are no longer talking about God. It is thus a grievous error to assimilate God to our human mode of existence. As Battista Mondin argues, and I entirely agree with him, “If our words mean exactly the same thing when applied to God and to creatures, then God’s transcendence is eliminated: God ceases to be God in order to be a creature or vice versa. On the other hand, if our words bear an altogether different meaning when applied to God, then God’s immanence is obscured: man is no longer in a position to know God”³¹. In talking about God and creatures, therefore, recourse to the use of analogy becomes inevitable. God’s timelessness derives from his being the first principle and the ground of everything that exists. Swinburne rightly considers God the ultimate explanation of all that there is and argues

²⁹ THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 10, a. 3.

³⁰ THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 13, a. 5, corpus.

³¹ B. MONDIN, “The Meaning of Theological Language”, in ID., *The Principle of Analogy in Protestant and Catholic Theology*, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, The Hague 1963, 174.

that His existence is a brute fact in the sense that His existence gives explanation to every other thing without itself having an explanation. In other words, for Swinburne, God constitutes the proper terminus for the explanation of every phenomenon with Himself needing no explanation³². How wonderful it would have been for Swinburne to stick to this assumption with respect to God's eternity, but he unfortunately wouldn't do that. God's timelessness, if we have to follow the same line of thinking, has to be understood in the same way, that is, from the point of view of his being the ultimate explanation of everything that exists in time without himself existing in time or needing to exist in time. If we may borrow Swinburne's terminology, God's timeless existence a "brute fact". Moreover, if God is really the ultimate explanation of everything that is, as Swinburne argues, then He is invariably the ultimate explanation of time because time is included in the "everything that is". God cannot be coeternal with time and still be the ultimate explanation of time. He is the cause of time, and so, ontologically precedes time. Brian Leftow sustains in his *Time and Eternity* that the timelessness of God derives from other claims of theism like the necessary existence of God, omnipotence of God, God as the creator of other things that exist outside himself, including time, etc³³. However, even though the timelessness of God is compatible with these other attributes which theism refers to God, contrary to Swinburne's thesis, it is not affirmed in order to salvage the claims of theism but to give ultimate explanation to what we have from experience.

In fact, it may be asked why actually there are disagreements and discrepancies in the interpretations of God's eternity. Is it, on the one hand, perhaps because we have an idea of God, and this idea requires his eternity? This type of reasoning is *a priori* and would of course be fallacious because we cannot infer a real being from an ideal being. On the other hand, is it because the contingent being, which falls within the purview of our experience, requires the eternal being as its cause? This second reasoning which is *a posteriori* really seems a more adequate reasoning. The same applies to the question of God's immutability. We need to ask ourselves why we say that God is immutable. Is it be-

³² Cf. R. SWINBURNE, *The Existence of God*, 79.

³³ Cf. B. LEFTOW, *Time and Eternity*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London 1991, 4.

cause the idea of God implies immutability or because our experience of mutable realities warrants the existence of an immutable reality as the source of their existence? The answer is that the movement in the world requires an immovable mover to account for it. As Aquinas argues in his *Summa contra gentiles*, “according to its manner of knowing in the present life, the intellect depends on the sense for the origin of knowledge; and so those things that do not fall under the senses cannot be grasped by the human intellect except in so far as the knowledge of them is gathered from sensible things (...) beginning with sensible things, our intellect is led to the point of knowing about God the He exists, and other such characteristics that must be attributed to the First Principle”³⁴. So, it always has to do with *a-posteriori* reasoning: from the real which we experience to the reality that renders it possible. This seems fundamentally the difference between Aquinas and Swinburne in their reasoning about God. Whereas Swinburne’s reasoning seems *a priori*, since he takes his point of departure from the idea theists have about God, Aquinas’ reasoning is *a posteriori* since he departs from ontology, that is, he moves from the things of our experience in search of their ultimate cause. For him, the temporal and mutable realities of experience require a timeless and immutable ultimate cause to account for their being.

Eternity may be likened to an unbounded state, without beginning or end, without any divisions. That is why Aquinas, following Boethius, defines it as “simultaneous whole”; “interminable life”. Eternity is different from time, precedes time and embraces all time. In fact, time, as sustained by Aristotle, may be considered the division of change in terms of before and after. Once you begin putting divisions, or talking about beginning and end, or before and after, you enter into the realm of time. The reality of God, that is, God in himself, in his existence, together with all his attributes belongs to eternity and is timeless. However, because we are in time, and we perceive God according to the mode of our being, it is our perception of him that is in time. So, a distinction has to be made between the reality of God in Himself, what He is in His existence, and our perception of Him. Because we are temporal creatures, confined within space and time, we cannot perceive God outside

³⁴ THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, I, c. 3, 3.

our close-jacketed temporality, but in Himself, He transcends time and all our temporal categories. However, the fact that we, being in time, cannot perceive an eternal or timeless existence does not negate God's eternity or timelessness. A person born blind who has never seen red colour can never perceive or conceive red colour or even any other colour, no matter how much you try to explain to such a person. The blind person is totally bereft of the sense of colour and so for him/her, there is absolutely no colour. But for him/her to maintain on this basis that there is no colour would be highly arbitrary. That the blind person does not perceive any colours does not imply that colours do not exist. In the same way, we can never in our temporality understand how God exists timelessly and how relationship between Him and temporal creatures is possible, but this does not negate God's timeless existence. We will only be able to conceive, perceive and adequately explicate it if we were God, but we are not God. So, I would think that while Swinburne's view expresses our human perception of God from our human reference frame and with our human logical categories, Aquinas' view expresses ontologically the reality of God in Himself from God's reference frame which is eternity and is far beyond whatever we can perceive or conceive.

Swinburne maintains that the Scriptures, both Hebrew and Christian, do not corroborate the doctrine of God's timelessness, even though he admits there are occasional indications in the New Testament pointing to divine timelessness which he however considers "reading far too much into such phrases to interpret them as implying divine timelessness"³⁵. I have earlier pointed out that this recourse to the Scriptures shifts the question from the ambit of natural theology to the ambit of revelation. But even if we have to call into question the Scriptures, I should rather think that it is Swinburne's interpretation that has to be considered an erroneous, reductive and literal reading of the Scriptures. It seems clear that eternal and everlasting are used indistinctively in the Scriptures in reference to God and to his attributes. In Psalm 136 called the great hymn in praise of God's mercy, for example, we find repetition of *lā- 'ō-w-lām ḥas-dōw*. Whereas *lā- 'ō-w-lām* means eternal, everlasting, forever, *ḥas-dōw* means mercy. So, *lā- 'ō-w-lām ḥas-dōw*

³⁵ R. SWINBURNE, *The Coherence of Theism*, 236.

means that his mercy lasts forever; God's mercy is eternal, it is everlasting. We are told that God's mercy, which is an attribute of God, is eternal. If his mercy is eternal, that means that he himself is eternal. Here no distinction is made between eternity and everlastingness. The same word used - *lā- 'ō-w-lām* - can comfortably be translated as eternal or everlasting. There are so many other scriptural passages, both in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, which refer to God's eternity and use the same word that can be indistinctively translated as eternal or everlasting. Secondly, even though none of the passages explicitly tells us that God is timeless, there are different passages from which we can infer God's transcendence over time, his timelessness³⁶. God's revelation of his name to Moses, for instance, in the Book of Exodus as *'eh-yeh 'ā-šer 'eh-yeh*; ("I am who I am": Ex. 3.14), is an expression of God's timelessness and immutability; in him there is no beginning or end, no before or after; he does not change; he simply is. In the New Testament, Jesus tells the Jews, "Before Abraham was, I am" (Jn. 8:58). He did not say, "Before Abraham was, I was". This goes to underscore his eternity as the Son of God, his transcendence over time. Psalm 89 tells us that to God's eyes, "a thousand years are like yesterday come and gone, no more than a watch in the night". Swinburne, in his argument against Stump and Kretzmann who have tried defending Aquinas' conception of God's eternity³⁷, has for instance asked: "But how could God be aware at his timeless moment of two things happening at different times, unless the two awarenesses are simultaneous with each other, and so two events happening at different times would have to happen at the same time – which is logically impossible. How could God be aware of the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 587 BCE as it happens, and of its destruction by the Romans in 70 CE as it happens, when these two times are not simultaneous with each other?"³⁸ My response to Swinburne is that if a thousand years in the eyes of God are like yesterday come and gone, that is a day, then 660 years in the

³⁶ Swinburne in his book mentions, for instance, Rev 1:8, 22:13, 1:17 where God is referred to as Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End, the First and the Last. There are however other passages which more clearly point to God's timelessness than these.

³⁷ Cf. E. STUMP – N. KRETZMANN, "Eternity", *Journal of Philosophy* 78 (1981), 429-456; E. STUMP, *Aquinas*, Routledge, London – New York 2003, 130-158.

³⁸ R. SWINBURNE, *The Coherence of Theism*, 239.

eyes of God are not even up to a day and so those two events can be taking place in the eyes of God in less than a day. So how is this possible? The fact is that there are even no days in the eyes of God; talking about days in his eyes are just metaphorical ways of expressing the reality of God in our human language which effectively is incapable of adequately capturing that which it wishes to express. By the way, what are we to understand by the eyes of God? Are they human eyes, material or what? Does God really have eyes? The Scriptures, as we know, are not just ordinary everyday literature, they are rather theological literature and are full of metaphorical language. To interpret the contents of the Scriptures literally could be very misleading. It would, for example, be too naïve and myopic on our part to interpret God's creation of the world in 6 days literally. The problem in fact is that Swinburne is sometimes culpable of what may be termed naïve anthropomorphism, writing about divine realities as if they were mere human realities, confined within the limits of human logic. But the Scripture is clear about the yawning abyss between our human logic and the logic of God, as God himself affirms through the prophet Isaiah: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways" (Is 55:8). This tells us how impossible it is for us humans to penetrate and understand God's infinite ways and thoughts. In fact, for the Bible, God is indeed a mysterious God (Is 45:15); and thus invisible and incomprehensible (Rm 1:20; Col 1: 15; Ps 139: 6; Jb 36: 26); his thoughts and resolutions are unfathomable (Rm 11:33); and he lives in inaccessible light (1 Tm 1:17)³⁹. Consequently, what the Bible reveals to us about God, his nature, being and operations are grasped through faith and not through mere philosophical reasoning. Of course, this does not exclude or diminish the role of reason, but faith is indispensable. It is in this light that John Paul II affirms faith and reason as "like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth"⁴⁰.

³⁹ Cf. D.L. SIWECKI, "Linguaggio teologico su Dio incomprendibile e ineffabile", *Roczniki teologiczne* 69 (2022), 40.

⁴⁰ JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter *Fides et ratio* (14 September, 1998), n. 1.

Conclusion

When we were kids, it often marvelled us when we were in a moving vehicle to see that stationary things we drove past seemed to be moving by. That was our perception, different from the real situation of those stationary things. Also, when we look out through the glass windows of a stationary train and see another train moving, it seems it's our own train itself that is moving. This is also our perception which is different from the real situation of our train. Though imperfect analogies, these may help us understand better the question of the eternity of God and its different interpretations. The reality of God, that is, his existence and his attributes are eternal in the sense of transcending time, being beyond time and outside of time. This does not impugn his relationship with things that are in time. He is the ultimate timeless ground of all the things that exist in time, without which there would be nothing existing in time. However, because we are in time and are congenitally unable to conceive and perceive timeless existence, we can only perceive God in time. So what is in time is our human perception of God and not God himself. We may then say that whereas Aquinas' conception of God's eternity on the one hand captures the reality of God as he is in his existence, Swinburne's conception of God's eternity expresses our human perception of God, his being and his relationship to time and to the things existing in time.