

## Chapter 1

# On Existing All at Once

*Robert Pasnau*

The nature of divine eternity is obscure in both historical and modern discussions. In a way its obscurity is no surprise, given that the nature of time is so mysterious. But the obscurity is still notable relative to the other traditional divine attributes, which are comparatively much better understood. Our perplexities regarding eternity are compounded, I will argue here, by a failure to recognize the full range of conceptual possibilities concerning divine eternity. Modern discussions have been ignoring what is not only an intrinsically plausible conception of eternity, but what might also be regarded as its most historically prominent construal.

### 1.1 Two Conceptions of Timelessness

Discussions of divine eternity ought to distinguish between the sort of complete timelessness – God’s being outside of time – that is sometimes associated with the concept, and a different sort of timelessness, also frequently associated with eternity, that involves lacking temporal parts, and so existing “all at once”. The main thesis of this chapter is that a plausible case can be made for all-at-once existence, rather than complete timelessness, as the best understanding of what eternity is.

To be clear about exactly what these different notions involve, I need some precisely defined terminology:

*A temporal* entity, as I will use the term here, exists at one or more times and, unless it exists for just an instant, exists through time. It coexists – that is, exists simultaneously – with other entities existing at the same time.

An *atemporal* entity, on my usage, is one that is not temporal. It does not exist in time, in the sense that it does not exist at any time and so, *a fortiori*, does not exist through time. It cannot be said to exist simultaneously with, or before, or after any other entity.

A *merechronic* entity partly exists at some instant in time, but also existed or will exist at other times, and does not wholly exist at any one time.

A *holochronic* entity is one that is not merechronic. It exists as a whole, all at once, for all of its existence, and does not partly exist at different times.

To make this last distinction, I might have appealed instead to the standard scholastic terminology of 'successive' and 'permanent' entities, or to the modern terminology of 'perduring' and 'enduring' entities. As will become clear, I think all these terms aim at a similar distinction. This is, however, a conclusion I want to derive from the discussion, rather than build it into my terminology from the start. Hence it will be safer for now to employ these neologisms, so that we can talk directly about the notion of all-at-once existence, without entangling it with various other issues.

Under any name, the notions of merechronicity and holochronicity are seriously obscure. To see what they involve, begin with an ordinary physical event, like kicking a football. The event takes place over time, and we can distinguish between parts of the event, such as the motion of the foot before contact and the motion of the foot after contact. Now try to extend this same idea to a substance that changes over time, like a growing boy. Just as we talked about parts of an event, it seems that we might talk about the six-year-old part of the boy and the seven-year-old part of the boy. Inasmuch as the boy is something that exists through time, it seems possible to conceive of him as having parts, temporal parts, just as he has spatial parts such as his right half and his left half. To have temporal parts in this way is to be a merechronic entity. If it is right to conceive of temporal stages of existence as parts, then anything that changes, at least if it changes intrinsically, must have such parts, and so must be merechronic. But now consider an entity that does not change intrinsically in any way. If such a being is possible, then it cannot be merechronic, because merechronicity itself is a kind of intrinsic change, a part-by-part traversal of a complete life. A wholly unchanging being would therefore have to be holochronic.

As I have defined these terms, atemporality and holochronicity are compatible. Indeed, atemporality entails holochronicity. Since an atemporal entity does not exist through time, there can be no question of its lacking some past or future part of itself. Holochronicity, in contrast, does not entail atemporality. An entity can exist through time, and so be temporal in my sense, and yet not have the sorts of temporal parts associated with ordinary temporal existence. Such a being would wholly exist at one moment and then wholly exist at the next moment, such that no part of it gets left behind. One might want to argue that in fact this apparent possibility is illusory, and that whatever exists through time must have temporal parts. In that case, holochronic existence would entail atemporal existence. This is, however, very far from obvious, and one might even argue to the contrary that ordinary material substances are themselves holochronically temporal entities.

The notion of holochronicity has a venerable pedigree. Skipping over its various antecedents in Greek thought, it appears among Christian philosophers in Augustine:

Why, my soul, do you perversely follow your flesh? It would follow you, if you turned away. Whatever you sense through it is partial. You are unaware of the whole of which these are the parts, and yet these parts delight you. But if the sense of your flesh were suited to comprehend the whole, and were not, in punishment, justly confined to a part of the universe, you would wish to pass over whatever exists in the present, so that the whole would provide you with more pleasure. For so it is that

1  
3  
5

you hear, with the same sense of the flesh, the words we speak, and you certainly do not want to stop at the syllables, but to pass on so that other syllables may come and you may hear the whole. So it always is when all of what makes up some one thing does not all exist at once (*omnia simul*): if it could all be sensed, it would be more enjoyable than it would individually. But far better than these is he who made all things, our God. He does not pass away, because nothing succeeds him.<sup>1</sup>

It also seems to appear in Boethius's famous discussion of eternity:

Eternity is the complete possession all at once of illimitable life. This becomes clearer by comparison with temporal things. For whatever lives in time, as present, proceeds from the past into the future, and there is nothing located in time that can embrace the whole extent of its life equally. On the contrary, it does not yet grasp tomorrow even though it has already lost yesterday, and even in your life today you live no more fully than in a mobile, transitory moment. Therefore whatever undergoes the condition of time, even if (as Aristotle held about the world) it never began or ceases to exist, and even if its life is extended with the infinity of time, still it is not such as is rightly judged to be eternal. For although the extent of its life is infinite, it does not encompass and embrace it all at once; instead it does not now have the future that has not yet arrived. Therefore whatever encompasses and possesses the whole fullness of illimitable life equally and is such that nothing future is absent from it and nothing past has flowed away, this is rightly judged to be eternal.<sup>2</sup>

There can be hardly any doubt that both of these authors are describing the merechronic character of the created world. For Augustine, we sense the present parts of things, 'unaware of the whole' (line 2). For Boethius, 'there is nothing located in time that can embrace the whole extent of its life equally' (lines 3–4). Each author is taking the familiar spatial notion of a whole and its parts, and applying that to temporal extension, conceiving of a thing's existence in a moment of time as a part of its existence, and then imagining how God might exist wholly, entirely lacking in such parts. This is the famous Boethian notion of the '*interminabilis vitae tota simul et perfecta possessio*' (line 1).

So far, I do not think that I have said anything controversial. I am, however, right on the brink of various controversial questions. One such question is whether this Boethian conception of eternity as holochronicity might best be captured without removing God from time entirely. Rather than make any bold assertions, I will frame this as a query:

Query 1: Is eternity just illimitable, temporally extended, holochronic existence?

A start toward answering Query 1 in the affirmative would be to observe that holochronicity appears to be a plausible candidate for a perfection. Certainly, at any rate, merechronicity looks like an imperfection. Beings that are only fragmentarily realized at an instant look quite imperfect, and it looks to be quite an improvement to exist holochronically. Indeed – given that the two options are exhaustive – it seems plausible that a perfect being would have to exist holochronically. I thus take

<sup>1</sup> *Confessiones*, IV.11.17. Throughout, all translations are my own.

<sup>2</sup> *Consolation of Philosophy*, bk. V, prose 6

it to be uncontroversial that holochronicity is at least part of what it is to be eternal. The crucial question then becomes whether atemporality is also required.

Here it is important to be very clear about the notion of timelessness. Although it is commonly agreed that eternity requires timelessness, there are different ways of being timeless.<sup>3</sup> Particularly relevant for present purposes is that one can be timeless by being either atemporal or by being holochronic. It seems to me that the messy interconnections between these three concepts – timelessness, atemporality, holochronicity – have led to much confusion regarding eternity. Boethius, in the famous passage above, is committed not just to holochronicity but also to timelessness, when he remarks that ‘there is nothing located in time that can embrace the whole extent of its life equally’ (lines 3–4). From this we can safely infer that God is not ‘located in time’. It is certainly not unreasonable to suppose, then, that Boethius is committed to God’s atemporality. On this reading of the passage, one would have a ready explanation of why he talks about holochronicity, since holochronicity follows trivially from atemporality. But there is another way to read the passage. Mere holochronicity itself might be considered a kind of timelessness. Since such a being is entirely changeless, without even a distinct past or future, it fails to be located in time in the usual way. Hence it might be argued that Boethius’s denial of God’s being located in time should be understood merely as the denial of God’s merechronicity, not as the claim that God is entirely outside of time. I am not taking a position on whether this is the most plausible reading – we would need to look at more texts – only that we should be alert to the conceptual room here for different sorts of timelessness, including illimitable holochronicity, rather than atemporality.<sup>4</sup>

Why suppose that, in addition to illimitable holochronicity, eternity also requires atemporality? One reason, as noted already, would be that atemporality is the only way to achieve holochronicity. Suppose for now, however, that this is not so, and that there is nothing logically impossible about the notion of existing holochronically through time. Why, then, insist on adding atemporality? One reason to doubt whether atemporality should be added is that, in a sense, it diminishes

---

<sup>3</sup> As LEFTOW remarks, ‘Discussions of God’s eternity often proceed as if there were just two options, that God is temporal and that he is not. But there is in fact a continuum of possible views of God’s relation to time – as it were, of just how temporal God is’ (*The Eternal Present* [2002], p. 23). Although Leftow does not here or elsewhere usually consider holochronically temporal existence, he does offer a brief, seemingly supportive discussion of the view in his *Parts, Wholes, and Eternity* [2001].

<sup>4</sup> Many recent discussions seem to leave no room for even the conceptual possibility of temporally holochronic existence. CRAIG, for instance, remarks at the start of *God, Time, and Eternity* [2001] that ‘God is temporal if His duration has phases which are related to each other as earlier and later’ (p. 3), thus associating temporality with what I call merechronicity, and atemporality with holochronicity. But on the next page ‘atemporality’ is taken to mean ‘wholly outside of time’: ‘if, then, God exists timelessly, He does not exist at any moment of time’. The conjunction of these claims leaves no room for holochronically temporal existence.

the perfection of holochronicity. Although an atemporal being is, strictly speaking, holochronic, it satisfies the definition vacuously, inasmuch as an atemporal being does not exist through time in such a way as even possibly to have temporal parts. *Anything* that might exist outside of time – the number 9, a Platonic form, a solitary, immutable rock – would be holochronic in this sense. It is only when holochronicity is manifested in time that it appears to be a positive perfection, because we then have the picture of a being existing wholly at one time, possessing its whole life, and also existing wholly at the next time, still possessing its whole life, and so without any gain or loss between the two times. Supposing such holochronicity is a possible mode of existence, it surely looks like a great-making feature. An atemporal being, in contrast, is holochronic only trivially, by default, in virtue of being unable to pass from time to time. Hence there is a real sense in which those who wish to associate eternality with atemporality are turning their back on the perfection of holochronicity. They are, to be sure, avoiding the clear imperfection of merechronicity. But they are doing so in a way that debars them from capturing what appears to be the great-making feature of being holochronic.

Of course, this would be a serious objection to atemporality only if there are no countervailing advantages in adding atemporality to the notion of holochronicity. It is a familiar idea that some great-making features have to drop out of the concept of a perfect being because they do not fit within the overall package of the divine attributes. So the real issue behind Query 1 is whether we have good reasons for thinking that atemporality, once distinguished from holochronicity, must be a feature of a perfect being. Here then is a second query, directly flowing from the first:

Query 2: Is atemporality a perfection?

Once atemporality is distinguished from holochronicity, it seems far from clear that it is a perfection. Abstract objects, such as numbers, are supposed to be atemporal, supposing they exist at all. They do not, however, seem obviously more perfect for that reason than concrete entities. Suppose, to switch examples, that God is atemporal and that God creates two and only two things: an ordinary rock that exists in time and a rather unusual rock that does not exist in time. I cannot see that the second rock is impossible. Perhaps that rock would have to be utterly changeless, perhaps it would be wrong to call it a 'rock', but still it seems to me that if anything can exist outside of time, a rock-like entity might do so. My question then, of course, is whether the second rock is any more perfect than the first, simply in virtue of existing out of time. It is not clear to me that it is.

It may be that atemporality is not a perfection, but simply a concomitant divine attribute entailed by some other perfection. Yet once we distinguish atemporality from holochronicity, it is unclear whether this is so. Both immutability and simplicity entail holochronicity, but it is not clear that they entail atemporality. Another idea would be that atemporality, while not strictly implied by any other attribute, is nevertheless extremely useful to explain various problematic features of God's nature and God's relationship with creation. Obvious candidates here are divine

foreknowledge of contingent events and the tension between divine omniscience and immutability. This large issue deserves a separate query:

Query 3: Does atemporality play a crucial theological role that temporally extended holochronicity cannot play?

Of course, this is far too vast a question even to begin discussing here, since it requires coming to grips both with whether atemporality does any work at all in explaining divine foreknowledge or anything else, *and* with whether holochronicity might do just as well.<sup>5</sup> Here I will content myself with wondering whether part of the reason that holochronicity and atemporality have sometimes been conflated is that the first looks like a perfection we should ascribe to a perfect being, but that the second has seemed useful in solving the various paradoxes involved in a changeless, provident God's activity in the world. In any event, holochronicity and atemporality are quite different notions, and it is important to be clear about which, if either, belongs in the concept of a perfect being.

## 1.2 Presence in Time

God either exists through time or does not, and if God exists through time, then He does so either merechronically or holochronically. I am supposing, for purposes of this chapter, that we can rule out merechronic existence. That is to say, I am working within the Anselmian tradition of perfect-being theology that takes God to be simple and immutable. Suppose, then, that we decide atemporality is not a perfection, and that we want to conceive of God's existing through time, holochronically. What does it mean to locate God in time in this way? We should, at least initially, leave open the question of whether God would exist through our time or through some other distinct time of His own. One might of course wonder what it means to distinguish between 'our' time and some other time. I do not have a good answer to such questions, but I nevertheless think this has to be registered as a possibility – at least an epistemic possibility from our limited vantage point. Even so, I think there is an argument to be made to exclude the obscure notion of God's existing through His own, distinct time. The argument is that if we decide to locate God in any time at all, then we should decide to locate God in all times. This seems to follow from divine perfection: If God is a temporal being, then why would we limit His existence to only some times? This is not a demonstrative argument, to be

<sup>5</sup> To be even a candidate for helping with the problem of divine foreknowledge, holochronically temporal eternity would presumably need to yield the familiar lemma that there is no 'fore' in God's knowledge. Whether it can get this lemma would seem to depend on whether it can get the prior result that, as ANSELM puts it, 'in the eternal present all time is encompassed at once, as well as whatever occurs at any time' (*De concordia* [1968], 5). It is unclear to me whether this is a legitimate result, on any account of eternity, because it is unclear what the meaning of 'encompassed at once' (*simul*) would be, in a non-temporal context. This is a crucial issue for any discussion of eternity and foreknowledge, but is much too large a problem to be taken up here.

sure, but I think it plausible enough that we should concentrate our attention on the two scenarios on which I have implicitly been concentrating: the scenario in which God is wholly atemporal, and the scenario in which God exists through the whole temporal extent of our universe.

In restricting my focus in this way, I mean to leave open the possibility that God came to exist in our time only when He created the world and only for as long as He sustains it, and that He is otherwise not in time at all, or perhaps only in some other time.<sup>6</sup> Reaching a conclusion about these various possibilities would require a discussion of the nature of time that goes beyond the scope of this chapter. In order to remain neutral on this issue, then, I will focus only on the question of whether, for the period in which there is a spatiotemporal universe, God should be said to be in it.

When our topic is so restricted, several possible ways of talking about eternity are excluded, and purposely so. First, it is traditional to speak of eternity as a kind of duration.<sup>7</sup> It does not seem to me (as it has to others) that this need be a contradiction in terms, but I think it more confusing than helpful to depict God as having duration in a way that is wholly outside of time (and so atemporal in my sense of the term). The concept of duration, if it has any meaning at all, must be linked with time in some sense of the term. This may be some wholly distinct temporal (or spatiotemporal) framework, and it may be holochronic rather than merechronic, but I do not think we should tolerate a notion of duration that is wholly atemporal. I therefore think we must choose between describing God as atemporal, and so as not having any duration, and describing God as being in time, and so persisting through time.<sup>8</sup> Second, it seems to me similarly unhelpful to speak of God's being co-existent with or present with creatures, and at the same time to insist on atemporality. To be sure, an atemporal being may be epistemically aware of all creatures, for all time, and may be causally active on all creatures at all times. Such epistemic and causal facts certainly license the claim that, in some sense, an atemporal God might be present to us. But although this would be a very robust and significant form of presence, it would also be a wholly equivocal use of the term. It is crucial that discussions of eternity distinguish between the sort of presence that comes from epistemic and

---

<sup>6</sup> For this sort of view, see CRAIG, *God, Time, and Eternity* [2001]. For further considerations, see ZIMMERMAN, *God Inside Time* [2002].

<sup>7</sup> See, e. g., the opening sentences of SUÁREZ's discussion of eternity: 'First and principally duration is divided into created and uncreated. Uncreated duration is eternity spoken of unconditionally, or essentially. Created duration is every duration that is not true eternity' (*Disputationes* [1866], 50.3.1).

<sup>8</sup> STUMP AND KRETZMANN, *Eternity* [1981], p. 432 hold that 'the life of an eternal entity is characterized by beginningless, endless, infinite duration', but then go on to speak of such existence as 'atemporal' (p. 433). PADGETT remarks that 'Stump and Kretzmann have chosen the wrong word. The word 'duration' means an interval of time, namely that interval of time through which something endures. The notion of an atemporal duration is, therefore, a contradiction in terms' (*God, Eternity, and the Nature of Time* [1992], p. 67).

causal ties, and the literal sense of presence at issue in the question of whether God is in time.<sup>9</sup>

I wish to focus exclusively on presence of the most literal sort. Such presence might be thought to require both temporal and spatial presence – that is, God's being located in both time and space. I do not want to presuppose that these questions have to be dealt with in conjunction. Although one might argue that a being can be in time only if it is in space, and vice versa, these issues are murky enough that it is reasonable to treat them separately. Still, the spatial case is worth discussing, if only briefly, because it can help illuminate the temporal case. Just as holochronicity was defined as a kind of temporal all-at-onceness, we might similarly define a kind of spatial all-at-onceness:

A *meremeric* entity partly exists at some location in space, but also partly exists at some other location in space. It is an extended entity, having part outside of part.

A *holenmeric* entity is one that is not meremeric. It exists as a whole, altogether, wherever it exists, and so lacks extended parts.<sup>10</sup>

One way of being holenmeric is to exist outside of space. But just as with holochronic existence, a thing might exist holenmerically through space, so long as it wholly exists in every place where it exists. This is how philosophers from Plotinus through Descartes standardly understood the human soul's existence within the human body: whole in the whole, and whole in each part.<sup>11</sup>

Just as holochronic existence counts as a kind of temporal existence, so holenmeric existence counts as a kind of extension, although not the usual, meremeric

<sup>9</sup> Compare STUMP AND KRETZMANN, *Eternity* [1981], p. 441: '[T]he entire life of any eternal entity is co-existent with any temporal entity at any time ... From the standpoint of eternity, every time is present, co-occurrent with the whole of infinite, atemporal duration.' Although their work sometimes gives the impression that God will be literally present to creatures in time, they expressly deny this in various places, e. g.: 'Of course, if simultaneity must be understood as occurrence or existence at the same time, then clearly the concept of eternal-temporal relationships is incoherent and nothing eternal can be simultaneous with anything else, eternal or temporal' (*Eternity, Awareness, and Action* [1992], p. 474). In place of literal presence, they define God's co-existent presence in terms of cognitive and causal connections. I am hardly alone in wanting to distinguish literal presence from other senses of the term. See, e. g., HELM, *Eternal God* [1988], p. 29: '[S]omething being present to His [God's] mind has not to be confused with God being temporally present with anything.'

<sup>10</sup> The term 'holenmerism' was coined by MORE, the seventeenth-century Cambridge Platonist, in his *Enchiridion Metaphysicum* [1671]. See ROZEMOND, *Descartes* [2003] and the discussion in Ch. 16 of my *Metaphysical Themes* [2011].

<sup>11</sup> See, e. g., PLOTINUS, *Enneades* [1951], IV.2.1; AUGUSTINE, *De trinitate* [1968], VI.6.8; JOHN DAMASCENE, *De fide orthodoxa* [1955], 13.3; AQUINAS, *Summa theologiae* [1888], I, q. 76, a. 8; DESCARTES, *Oeuvres* [1897], *Passions de l'âme* I.30.



sort of extension. (Descartes calls the latter ‘true extension’, and it is this extension that he describes as the principal attribute of body.<sup>12</sup>)

Although it is now commonly supposed that God exists outside of space, this was not the standard conception among earlier theologians. Medieval Christian authors, despite being generally misread on this point, are in complete agreement that God is literally present, spatially, throughout the universe. One simply does not find anyone wanting to remove God from space, all the way through to the end of the seventeenth century.<sup>13</sup> Of course, no one wanted to say that God has spatial, integral parts. So the universally accepted view was that God exists holomERICALLY throughout space, wholly existing at each place in the universe. It does not immediately follow that God is also located HOLOCHRONICALLY throughout time, but of course the two views form a neat package. God can be said to exist everywhere, and at every time, and to exist wholly wherever and whenever he exists.

I am less confident about whether medieval Christian theologians universally held the analogous claim that is my focus here: that God exists wholly (that is, HOLOCHRONICALLY) at every time. This was, however, certainly a common view. It is, for instance, very clearly Anselm’s view in the *Monologion* [1968]. There he quite quickly arrives at the view that God’s constant causal role in the universe requires God to be ‘everywhere, and throughout all things, and in all things’ (Ch. 14). But he returns to this issue later in the same work, in a brilliant discussion that runs continuously through Chapters 20–24. He begins by recalling his earlier conclusion and then describing ‘a little voice within of contradiction, which compels me to inquire more carefully into where and when that Being exists’ (Ch. 20). He then sketches the argument for God’s being located in all places and times. God is either in none, some, or all places and time. The finite middle ground – *some* place and time – is untenable given God’s perfection. But the no-location view is even worse, and he makes two quick arguments against it:

- ‘what would seem more contradictory than that what exists most truly and supremely exists nowhere and never?’

---

<sup>12</sup> See Descartes’s correspondence with More, DESCARTES, *Oeuvres* [1897], V.270 and V.342.

<sup>13</sup> The *locus classicus* for discussions of God’s ‘immensity’ is LOMBARD, *Sententiae* [1971], I.37. The consensus in this area is noted by SUÁREZ: ‘God is intimately present to this corporeal universe, not just by presence (that is, cognitively) and by power or action, but also by His essence or substance, just as all the theologians teach, as certain to the faith, on account of divine immensity’ (*Disputationes* [1866], 51.2.8). There was no unanimity among Muslim authors. AVERROES, for instance, regards literal omnipresence as a ‘puerile’ doctrine (*Destructio* [1961], 14, p. 375).

HASKER is typical of the modern conviction that God must be outside space: ‘Few points in the theistic metaphysics are as clear as that God is not simply a very large object occupying huge amounts of space or even all of it. God must, somehow, *transcend* space.’ (*God, Time, and Knowledge* [1989], p. 178) Of course, God is not “simply” a very large object, but that he is a very large object, existing throughout space, was the unchallenged consensus for most of the history of Christian theology.

- ‘since there is no good nor anything at all without that Being, if it exists nowhere or never then nowhere or never is there any good, and nowhere and never is there anything at all’ (Ch. 20).

Despite these quick arguments, Anselm’s next chapter reconsiders the matter anew, offering a line of argument for the conclusion that God cannot be in either space or time. That chapter begins by distinguishing the two options we have already been considering: existing merechronically and meremerically, or else existing holochronically and holenmerically. In Anselm’s terms:

How does it exist as a whole, everywhere and always? For either it is to be understood that it exists as a whole at once, in all places or times, and by parts in individual places and times; or that it exists as a whole, even in individual places and times. (Ch. 21)

The first option gets rejected out of hand, on the grounds that God does not have parts (something that Anselm takes himself to have shown back in Ch. 17). Consideration of the second option leads Anselm into a lengthy discussion of ‘the nature (*ratio*) of place and the nature of time’ (Ch. 21). What both of these natures require, he argues, is part-by-part existence. Nothing can be wholly present at more than one place at once, nor wholly present at more than one time. With respect to the temporal case, he argues as follows:

How does anything exist wholly at once (*totum simul*) at individual times, if these times do not exist at once? If it exists as a whole, separately and distinctly, at individual times – just as a whole human being exists yesterday, today, and tomorrow – then it is properly said that it was and is and will be. Therefore its age, which is nothing other than its eternity, does not exist wholly at once, but is extended by parts in keeping with the parts of time. But its eternity is nothing other than itself. Therefore the supreme being will be divided into parts, according to the divisions of time. For if its age passes through periods of time, then with these times it has present, past, and future. (Ch. 21)

It follows from the nature of time, according to this argument, that what exists through time has distinct temporal parts: ‘its age ... is extended by parts in keeping with the parts of time’ (lines 4–6). Hence temporal holochronicity is impossible: nothing can exist through time without acquiring temporal parts. An analogous argument for the spatial case leads Anselm to the general conclusion that God exists ‘in no place or time, that is, nowhere and never’ (Ch. 21).

Anselm thus faces paradox: he seems to have identified decisive arguments showing both that God is in time and space, and that God is outside time and space. His next chapter therefore attempts to resolve the apparent conflict, contending that since God is not contained by time and place, God is not bound by the nature of time and place. This means that, contrary to the argument we just saw him offer in Chapter 21, God can exist wholly at more than one place at the same time, and can exist wholly at more than one time. Anselm thus concludes:

Since inevitable necessity requires that the supreme Being, as a whole, be lacking to no place or time, and no nature of place or time prevents it from being whole at once (*simul totam*) at every place or time, it is necessary for it to be present as a whole

at once in every individual place and time. For, because it is present at one place or time, it is not thereby prevented from being likewise and simultaneously present to this or that other place or time. Nor, because it was, or is, or will be, has any [part] of its eternity thereby vanished from the present time, along with the past that no longer exists; nor does it pass with the present that barely exists; nor will it come with the future that is not yet. (Ch. 22)

So Anselm in the end holds onto the initial arguments for God's being in every place and time, and rejects the arguments to the contrary. Holochronicity and hollenmerism are possible for a being in space and time, and divine perfection in fact requires them.<sup>14</sup>

Modern theologians have spectacularly misunderstood medieval views in this domain. The mainstream of medieval Christian thought does not remove God from space and time, but rather invokes holochronic and hollenmeric existence so that a simple, immutable being can nevertheless exist in all places and all times.<sup>15</sup> I do not,

---

<sup>14</sup> The conclusions of the *Monologion* [1968] are reiterated in the *Proslogion* [1968], although so briefly that their significance might be (and generally has been) missed. *Proslogion* [1968], 13: 'Since, then, nothing is greater than you, no place or time contains you; but you are everywhere and always.' 'Uncircumscribed is that which exists all at once everywhere, which is understood of you alone.' Readers have been thrown off by his remarks in *Proslogion* [1968], 19: 'You exist neither yesterday nor today nor tomorrow, but simply you exist, outside all time. For yesterday and today and tomorrow exist only in time; but although nothing exists without you, you nevertheless do not exist in place or time, but all things exist in you. For nothing contains you, but you contain all.' Out of context, this of course looks like atemporality. But read in the context of his other remarks, it becomes clear that Anselm is putting weight on the unsuitability of putting God *in* time, since 'in' implies containment. Thus, as *Monologion* [1968], 22, puts it, 'If the usage of language permitted, it would seem to be more fittingly said that [this Being] exists *with* place or time than that it exists *in* place or time. For a thing's being said to be *in* another signifies that it is *contained*, more than does its being said to exist *with* another.' Most modern readers of Anselm seem to have read him as committed to divine atemporality. Perhaps an exception is Rogers, but she adds the doubtful idea that Anselm ascribes to a tenseless (or B-series, or four-dimensional) conception of time (ROGERS, *Anselm on Eternity* [2006]). There is perhaps some evidence for this in the *De concordia* [1968], but it strikes me as thin – too thin for one to be confident about the matter, given how unprecedented it would be to defend a B-theory of time. For another paper associating a tenseless theory of time with Anselm, see LEWIS, *Eternity, Time and Tenselessness* [1988], although LEWIS thinks that Anselm (along with Boethius and Aquinas) were unwittingly committed to this consequence (p. 83). The only pre-modern author I have found expressly defending a tenseless conception of time, with all the attendant metaphysical consequences for the reality of past and future, is JOHN WYCLIF, *De ente praedicamentali* [1891], ch. 20 (see my *Metaphysical Themes* [2011], ch. 18).

<sup>15</sup> In addition to being Anselm's view, I believe it is AQUINAS's: '[W]e ascribe to God words of all times, because he is absent (*deest*) from no time' (*In Sent.* I.8.2.3c); 'eternity is there as present (*praesentialiter adest*) to every time or instant of time' (*Summa contra gentiles* [1918], I.66.548); 'words of different times are attributed to God inasmuch as his eternity includes all times' (*Summa theologiae* [1888], I, q. 10, a. 2 ad 4). Admittedly, these passages

however, mean to brandish these historical remarks as an argument from authority. What Harold Bloom famously suggested about poetry in *The Anxiety of Influence*<sup>16</sup> is even more clearly the case in philosophy: what we call innovations are the result, very often, of our misinterpretations of the past. So it may be that entirely removing God from space and time is a step forward. Of course, I am doubtful whether this is so, in part because I think the general thrust of Anselm's remarks has a certain force. There is something quite unattractive about the picture according to which God created space and time and yet does not – perhaps even cannot – exist within it. Intuitively, one would expect God to exist at every place and every time, rather than at no place and no time. Still, there is nothing about Anselm's argument that *compels* assent. The two quick arguments for putting God in time and space, as quoted above, are the only ones that he gives, and they depend on two questionable assumptions: that what exists 'nowhere and never' is not real, or at least not fully real; and that for an agent to bring about some effect, it must exist at the time and place of that effect. These were standard assumptions during the Middle Ages, but they are ones that a proponent of divine atemporality will of course be ready to deny, and it is not clear how the issue might be adjudicated. Hence my earlier queries stand as open invitations to investigate the matter further.

---

are not decisive, because it is possible to suppose Aquinas has in mind some non-literal sense of 'presence'. See also SUÁREZ, who describes 'the whole eminent perfection by which eternity has the power (*vim*) of coexisting with every succession' (*Disputationes* [1866], 50.4.15).

LEIBNIZ takes it as a given, in his exchange with CLARKE, that 'God's immensity makes him actually present in all spaces. In like manner, God exists in all time' (*Leibniz-Clarke Correspondence* [1956], fifth paper, n. 45). The phrase 'in like manner' is significant because it is certain that Leibniz takes God to be literally present in space: that is just what the doctrine of divine immensity holds. So 'in like manner' suggests that 'in all time' should likewise be understood literally. Clarke, however, refuses to grant this: '[W]hen, according to the analogy of vulgar speech, we say that he exists in all space and in all time, the words mean only that he is omnipresent and eternal, that is, that boundless space and time are necessary consequences of his existence; and not that space and time are beings distinct from him, and in which he exists' (*Leibniz-Clarke Correspondence* [1956], fifth reply, n. 45). Of course, it is unclear whether Clarke's Newtonian view actually *removes* God from space and time.

Unsurprisingly (given his anti-realist views about space and time), Kant departs from this earlier tradition. He recognizes the position I am describing: 'Some have tried to prevent the difficulties which arise from representing God's existence as within time by insisting that all the consecutiveness of time be thought as simultaneous in God; but rejects it as incoherent: 'yet this is a pretension which requires us to think a contradiction: consecutive states of a thing, which are nevertheless *simultaneous*' (KANT, *Writings on Religion* [1996], p. 384). He reaches the analogous conclusion about spatial presence. Therefore, since Kant does insist on God's immutability, he concludes that God is wholly outside space and time.

<sup>16</sup> BLOOM, *The Anxiety of Influence* [1997].

### 1.3 What Exists All at Once?

Investigation by means of queries seems an appropriate way to proceed in a domain as obscure as this, where even the very existence of our subject matter – a perfect, necessarily existing being – is shrouded in doubt. Yet as obscure as these questions are, reflection on them helps to shed light on questions that are at least somewhat less obscure, regarding how ordinary material objects exist in and through time. As mentioned earlier, the notion of merechronicity is closely related to a thesis popular in modern metaphysics: that objects do not *endure* through time in such a way as to exist as a whole at each instant, but instead *perdure* through time, partly existing at one time and partly existing at another, and existing as a whole only when viewed as a four-dimensional object, extended through space and time.<sup>17</sup> This is an issue later medieval authors were also much concerned with, under the heading of the distinction between permanent and successive entities. Although medieval authors disagreed on how precisely to define the distinction between permanent and successive entities, they agreed that the central notion is of existing all at once (*tota simul*). Thus, according to Nicole Oresme's mid-fourteenth-century definition,

[‘Successive’ is used] for that which at no time is such that what existed in its first part exists in its second part. Instead, for any time you take, some of that successive entity exists in one of its parts, and a totally different such exists in another part. ‘Permanent’ is used in the opposite way, when for some time, over some instants, the same thing exists all at once (*totum simul*), from one instant to another.<sup>18</sup>

The leading examples of successive entities were time and motion, which were judged to be successive on the grounds that neither could exist all at once, from instant to instant. The parts of motion and time do not endure, and moreover neither motion nor time even could exist at an instant. Motion-at-an-instant is not motion at all; time-at-an-instant is not time.

Not everyone was willing to postulate successive entities; Ockham, for instance, as one might expect from his generally parsimonious approach, thought there were no such things.<sup>19</sup> Most of the debate focused on motion, time, and other potential successive entities. But the debate is obviously relevant for the notion of eternity, given the unmissable affinities between the definition of a permanent thing and the definition of an eternal thing. Thomas Aquinas's discussion of eternity makes this connection explicit, defining the difference between eternity and time in these terms:

<sup>17</sup> One classic discussion is LEWIS's *Plurality of Worlds* [1986], pp. 202–5. For an accessible introduction, see LOUX, *Metaphysics* [2002], ch. 6.

<sup>18</sup> ORESME, *Questiones super physicam* [1994], III.6, dist.1. A provisional edition of this section of the *Physics* commentary can be found in CAROTI, *La position de Nicole Oresme* [1994]. Caroti and others are preparing a critical edition of the whole of this recently identified and extremely important work.

<sup>19</sup> For a discussion of Ockham's view and other aspects of this debate, see my *Metaphysical Themes* [2011], ch. 18.

Eternity is all at once (*tota simul*), which does not apply to time, because eternity is the measure of permanent being, whereas time is the measure of motion.<sup>20</sup>

Although Aquinas does not here use the term ‘successive’, readers would immediately have recognized motion as the paradigm of a successive entity. The passage might therefore seem to suggest that, for Aquinas, God is the only permanent entity, and that everything else is a successive entity, existing through time in virtue of having temporal parts, but never existing all at once. Indeed, the Boethian idea of eternity as holochronic, in contrast to the merechronic existence of temporal beings, might seem directly to entail this result. For if ordinary material objects count as permanent entities, then they must in some sense exist all at once, rather than being composed of temporal parts. But in that case it would seem that we have lost the distinction insisted on by both Augustine and Boethius, among others, between the part-by-part existence of creatures and the all-at-once existence of God. Divine eternity would turn out to be nothing special.

I have presented this puzzle in historical terms, but the issue is relevant to anyone concerned with eternity. If one wishes to characterize God’s eternity in terms of holochronic existence, one must confront the question of how this differs from the existence of ordinary material objects. Do they not have all-at-once existence? Do I, for instance, not wholly exist right now? Is there really a part of me that existed yesterday, and that no longer exists? Insisting on the atemporal version of holochronic existence answers these questions only in part. To be sure, someone who goes down that road can draw a clear distinction between the existence of God and creatures, inasmuch as only God is atemporal. Divine eternity therefore *would* be something special. But the point of eternity, on the Boethian approach, was to avoid the successiveness of temporal existence, the inability of temporal creatures to ‘encompass and embrace it [their life] all at once’ (p. 13, line 10). It looks as if the only way to motivate eternity, when it is so conceived, is to insist that creatures have merechronic existence, which then allows God’s mode of existence to distinguish itself as the only way of existing all at once. If creatures can themselves exist all at once, without temporal parts, then it becomes hard to see why God needs some special mode of existence. Our ordinary mode of existence might be perfect enough even for God.

A holochronically temporal account of eternity thus threatens to push us toward a merechronic account of how creatures exist – that is, in the usual modern parlance, toward perdurantist four-dimensionalism.<sup>21</sup> Even so, it seems to me that there is considerable room for defending holochronic eternity without treating

<sup>20</sup> *Summa theologiae* [1888], I, q. 10, a. 4.

<sup>21</sup> It should not be entirely surprising to find Boethian holochronic eternity pushing us toward perdurantism. For it is often held that divine eternity requires a tenseless, B-series conception of time (according to which the passage of time is an illusion) and there are strong affinities between that doctrine and perdurantism. Still, the two metaphysical doctrines – perdurantism and the tenseless conception of time – are logically independent, and I cannot see that anything in the present chapter depends on either a tensed or a tenseless theory of time. On the alleged link between eternity and a tenseless conception of time, see DELMAS

creaturely existence as merechronic. Indeed, medieval authors offer plenty of indications regarding how this might be done. Consider first Boethius's famous passage. Although it might seem at first glance as if he is committed to a merechronic conception of how creatures exist, in fact the passage is careful to say that it is the *life* of a creature – rather than the creature itself – that has temporal parts and cannot be 'embrace[d] all at once' (p. 13, line 10). Boethius does not say that 'you' fail to exist all at once. He does not say that temporal beings have temporal parts, but that their lives do; hence 'there is nothing located in time that can embrace the whole extent of its life equally' (p. 13, lines 3–4).

This is clearer still in Anselm. One might at first glance take him to be committed to the merechronicity of creatures, in view of his remarks regarding 'the nature of place and time'. But Anselm does not argue that the nature of time requires creatures to perdure part-wise through time. Rather, much as Boethius had done, Anselm distinguishes between a temporal entity and the ongoing event of its life. Thus Chapter 21's provisional argument against God's being in time runs by first establishing that being in time entails having an 'age' (*aetas*) that is extended part-wise. This would not ordinarily show that the temporal being itself does not wholly exist – indeed, Anselm is happy to say in this passage that 'a whole human being exists yesterday, today, and tomorrow' (p. 20, line 3) – but the inference holds in God's case, through the crucial middle premise of the argument: that God's age, his eternal life, is nothing other than God Himself (p. 20, line 6). Hence, if God's life has parts, then God must have parts. A creature, in contrast, can exist wholly at different times even if its life is an event that goes through time merechronically.

Both Boethius and Anselm are counting on a distinction between a thing and the events associated with that thing. When I first introduced the notion of merechronicity, I motivated it with the example of an event, kicking a football, and then suggested that this analysis in terms of temporal parts might be extended to a substance, like the boy kicking the football. But the only intuitively natural way to make that extension is to focus on the life of the boy, which seems to have parts just as much as does the act of kicking a football. This is a natural extension, because we are still talking about events, a life. To say that the boy himself has temporal parts – e.g., his six-year-old part and his seven-year-old part – strains our ordinary modes of expression. It is far more natural to say that the whole boy exists each and every day of his life. This is precisely how later medieval authors understood the distinction between permanent and successive entities. They were aware that, formulated incautiously, the distinction threatens to put all creatures on the successive side, and God alone on the permanent side. The result they wanted, however, was to put motion and other events on the successive side, and to put substances and properties on the permanent side. The way Nicole Oresme gets this result is to distinguish between two ways of being successive. A thing can be successive in some respect or another by being successive only in part, 'when

---

LEWIS, *Eternity, Time and Tenselessness* [1988]; PADGETT, *God, Eternity, and the Nature of Time* [1992]; and CRAIG, *God, Time, and Eternity* [2001].

a thing does not endure as a whole, but yet something of it always endures'. In contrast, something that is successive *simpliciter* is wholly successive – such a thing 'neither with respect to itself nor with respect to some of it endures through any time'.<sup>22</sup> Motion would therefore count as successive *simpliciter*, since there is no part of a motion that endures through time. Material substances, in contrast, will be successive in various respects, in virtue of constantly undergoing change. Still, even if some parts of a material substance do not endure, 'yet something of it always endures', as Oresme says. Elsewhere, he identifies this permanent core as the essence of a thing:

Some things are so successive that they cannot endure in any way, like time and motion. Other things are permanent in such a way that although they have existence or endurance temporally, divisibly, and successively, nevertheless their essence remains the same for that whole time.<sup>23</sup>

On Oresme's account, then, material substances count as permanent because they possess a stable, enduring essence. This essence counts as existing *tota simul*, as wholly existing at every moment that it exists, and so as lacking temporal parts: the essences of material substances are, in this sense, holochronic. But the substance as a whole has parts that come and go with time: these parts might be changing properties (which themselves are permanent for as long as they exist), or they might be actions or events (which would be successive *simpliciter*).<sup>24</sup>

Oresme's approach offers a way of explaining what is special about God's holochronic existence without making all creaturely existence merechronic. On his account, material substances have a permanent core, but they are not permanent *simpliciter*, and so not holochronic *simpliciter*. This serves to distinguish them from God, who of course is entirely permanent and holochronic. Only something that is entirely unchanging could exist like that. Thus Oresme immediately continues the previous passage with the remark that 'God has neither a successive essence nor an existence or duration that is in any way successive. Instead, he indivisibly and infinitely endures through himself in his indivisible and illimitable eternity, which is the same as God himself'.<sup>25</sup>

To get these results, Oresme needs a distinction between a thing's essence and its changing attributes. Material substances can come out as permanent entities –

<sup>22</sup> *Questiones super physicam* [1994], III.6.

<sup>23</sup> *Nicole Oresme and the Medieval Geometry* [1968], II.13, p. 298.

<sup>24</sup> Another, more extended treatment along these lines can be found in SUÁREZ's account of how the permanence associated with eternity is distinct from the permanence of creatures: 'Every created duration is such as to admit of succession either in itself or in the operations of its supposit. For although a substance can be created that is permanent and even immutable in its being (*esse*), no substance is or can be created that does not admit of some variation or succession at least in its accidents or internal motions' (*Disputationes* [1866], 50.3.7).

<sup>25</sup> See also the similar discussion in Oresme's contemporary, ALBERT OF SAXONY, who remarks that 'we can imagine something being permanent *simpliciter* – namely, with respect to both its substance as a whole and also its states. In this way perhaps (*forte*) nothing is permanent except for the first cause' (*In Physicam* [1999], III.3, p. 483).



which is to say holochronic, which is to say enduring rather than perduring – only if they have some sort of unchanging core or essence. If one conceives of material substances as simply a bundle of ever-changing properties, then – at least by Oresme’s lights – one would have to treat them as wholly successive entities, and therefore (in our modern parlance) embrace a four-dimensional perdurantist account. As Oresme conceives of the situation, this unchanging core must be distinguished not only from a thing’s changing properties, but even from its ‘existence or endurance.’ This mirrors the way we saw Boethius and Anselm talking earlier. What makes created substances fundamentally successive and temporal is that their very existence – their ‘life’ or age – is an event that unfolds successively through time, no part of which endures through time. In this way, the famous but obscure medieval distinction between a thing’s being and essence gets put to some extremely interesting work, inasmuch as it accounts for the intuition that in some sense (with respect to its essence) a material substance does wholly exist at each moment of time, whereas in another sense (with respect to its existence) it perdures through temporal segments.

To be wholly permanent, then, without any successive aspect, a thing’s very life or existence must be possessed *tota simul*. There is perhaps room to wonder whether such a life could possibly be in time. This depends on an issue I have said almost nothing about: what does it mean to exist at a time, simultaneously with other things? I have been supposing that it is coherent for something – at least something divine – to be wholly holochronic, even with respect to its very life, and still be said to exist in and through time. One might instead think that this is incoherent, and that to exist in or through time just is to have a merechronic life. In that case, complete holochronicity would entail atemporality, and the conceptual space I have been attempting to carve out would disappear entirely. Yet I cannot see why this would be so. It seems to me that a thing might exist all at once, with respect both to itself and its life, while still the question would remain of whether that thing exists right now, at the same time that we exist. If this is an open possibility, then it seems to me there is a strong case to be made for thinking that a perfect being would have that kind of complete all-at-once existence, throughout all time.

#### 1.4 Conclusion

When the notion of holochronic existence is distinguished from the notion of atemporal existence, it becomes important to reconsider the supposition that God exists outside of time. God’s existing all at once, holochronically, is most naturally understood as a way of enduring through time, rather than being wholly outside of time. To be sure, such holochronically temporal existence is very different from the sort of temporal existence ascribed to God by some theologians today. To exist holochronically, a thing must be immutable, and so contemporaneous with creatures but still not responsive to creatures in the way proponents of a temporal conception of

God often seek.<sup>26</sup> Hence, a holochronically temporal account of eternity is not in any sense a compromise between atemporal and temporal approaches. Indeed, for all I have shown, the theory may bear some of the disadvantages of both approaches, without sufficient compensating advantages. Even so, the theory at least deserves serious consideration.

When eternity is understood as holochronically temporal, it satisfies the common view that eternity is a kind of duration. One might even say, as Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann have urged, that eternity is the only ‘genuine’ and ‘fully realized duration.’<sup>27</sup> This would follow if God alone endures through time, holochronically, whereas creatures exist merechronically. One need not, however, go so far. For it may be – as Oresme suggests – that even ordinary material substances have a genuinely enduring, permanent core, beneath their fluctuating, successive lives. This would not mean that the essences of material substances exist eternally. To count as eternal, a thing must have illimitable existence, holochronic in every respect. But it would mean that the mode of existence manifested by divine eternity is simply the perfect instantiation of a phenomenon displayed by ordinary substances all around us. What seems the very most mysterious of the divine attributes might therefore turn out to be very familiar.<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> See, e. g., the classic discussions of PIKE, *God and Timelessness* [1970], and SWINBURNE, *Coherence of Theism* [1993].

<sup>27</sup> STUMP AND KRETZMANN, *Eternity* [1981], p. 445.

<sup>28</sup> I am grateful to Bradley Monton, Wes Morriston, Ryan Mullins, Allen Wood, and the Berlin conference participants for their helpful suggestions.