2

The Conceptual Context

Traditional Reflections on God and Time

Barth did not produce his mature understanding of divine eternality in a vacuum. He did not come up with his concepts all on his own. Rather, he incorporated, modified, and rejected various understandings of time and eternity that are represented throughout the history of Western thought. Some of those came from theologians, while some came from figures who would more properly be described as philosophers. In either case, these ideas and the figures who promoted them are significant in the history of ideas, even if Barth had never written a word about them. A discussion of the concept of eternity in Western thought would need to address most if not all of them, even if Barth's name were never mentioned. Of course, Barth did draw on these figures, and so, one may better understand Barth's theological expression of God's eternality if one considers the conceptual approaches that may have influenced Barth, either positively or negatively, implicitly or explicitly. Furthermore,

considering such figures and the options they proposed enables us to approach Barth's own proposal better informed.

Our investigation in this section will thus attend to various figures, six of them in all, whose influence in one way or another may be seen in Barth's understanding of time and eternity. In the next chapter, we will review several theological and philosophical approaches to the problem that have arisen since Barth. The purpose shared by both chapters is to introduce several important concepts and themes that will prove significant for the rest of the book.

Augustine

Augustine of Hippo (354–430) is perhaps the one figure in the Western Christian tradition whose reflections on the nature of time are read more than any other. In book 11 of his *Confessions*, we find an eloquent and searching inquiry into time, which has exercised a profound hold over the thoughts of many subsequent theologians and philosophers. That hold has not always been welcome. Augustine's reflections on time raise a number of apparent problems. Many subsequent thinkers take issue with what they see as Augustine's main conclusion about time, namely, that time may well be unreal, or at any rate nothing but a product of the human mind. Further, the Neoplatonic categories in which Augustine's discussion is cast are difficult for people of later periods to understand, let alone to accept.

These difficulties can be rightly evaluated, however, only when we have rightly understood Augustine's handling of the problem of time, a task to which we now turn. The context of Augustine's exploration of time in the *Confessions* must be kept in mind, for without that context much appears strange and abstract. The entire *Confessions*, clearly, is in the form of a lengthy prayer, through which Augustine undertakes an exploration of the self before God. In book

9, Augustine finishes the narrative about his life up to his conversion, and in book 10 he explores the mystery of human memory, which he describes as a storehouse from which he could retrieve his experiences in order to narrate them. Then, in book 11, Augustine turns to one of his present burdens as a bishop and thus as a leader of the Christian faithful: an exegesis of Scripture (moreover, an anti-Manichaen exegesis), in particular of Genesis chapter 1.[1]

Exposition: Eternity in the *Confessions*

The concern out of which book 11 develops, then, is the right interpretation of Scripture. Evidence for this claim is not difficult to find. The book begins in transition, as Augustine asks why he lays out such an "ordered account" of his life (the content of books 1 through 10). Since God's "vision of occurrences in time is not temporally conditioned," why engage in this extended prayer to a God from whom nothing is hidden? The answer, for Augustine, is that his prayers are for his own edification, rather than for God's.[2] But Augustine wants to be able to edify not only himself, but others as well. "When shall I be capable of proclaiming by 'the tongue of my pen' (Ps. 44:2) all your exhortations and all your terrors and consolations and directives, by which you brought me to preach your word and dispense your sacrament to your people?" Indeed, Augustine's deepest desire at this point in his life is to "meditate

1. A division between books 9 and 10 is easily recognized, as, e.g., in Ulrich Duchrow, "Der sogenannte psychologische Zeitbegriff Augustins im Verhältnis zur physikalischen und geschichtlichen Zeit," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 63, no. 3 (1966): 267–88. He describes the two parts of the *Confessions* as the "pietas-Stufe" (1–9) and the "scientia-Stufe" (10–12).
2. *Conf.* 11.1.1. All quotations from the *Confessions* herein are from Saint Augustine, *The Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991). Note that "the Bible text used by Augustine was the Old Latin version made from the Greek of both Old and New Testaments during the second century," and the numbering of the Psalms is in some places significantly different from the numbering of English translations. I have decided to leave those references to the Psalms unaltered. See Chadwick's note on this, xxvi.

in [God's] law," that is, to study Scripture, not simply for his own benefit, but for others as well.[3] "Lord my God, 'hear my prayer' (Ps. 60:2), may your mercy attend to my longing which burns not for my personal advantage but desires to be of use in love to the brethren. . . . May your scriptures be my pure delight, so that I am not deceived in them and do not lead others astray in interpreting them."[4]

Yet the task is not easy, nor is it readily open to the creature. That we exist in time makes Augustine's quest too fragile for him to attempt on his own, because Augustine finds that he simply does not have the time to pursue this quest to his satisfaction. For that reason he prays for divine assistance in understanding Scripture. "At your nod the moments fly by. From them grant us space for our meditations on the secret recesses of your law, and do not close the gate to us as we knock."[5] Augustine plainly needs help, and so he makes his plea for understanding, "so that to me as I knock (Matt. 7:7) may be opened the hidden meaning of your words," through the mediation of Jesus Christ. "I make my prayer through our Lord Jesus Christ your Son, 'the man of your right hand, the Son of man whom you have strengthened' (Ps. 18:15) to be mediator between yourself and us. . . . I make my prayer to you through him 'who sits at your right hand and intercedes to you for us' (Rom. 8:34)." Yet Christ is not only the mediator of this prayer, but is also the one in whom the treasures of Scripture are hidden and hence the one in whom those treasures must be sought. "'In him are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge' (Col. 2:3). For those treasures I search in your books."[6]

At this point let me make clear several important aspects of these first few paragraphs of book 11. Book 11 is concerned from the outset

3. *Conf.* 11.2.2.
4. Ibid., 11.2.3.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., 11.2.4.

with the interpretation of Scripture. Augustine understands proper interpretation of Scripture to be grounded in Christ's mediation between God and humanity. In this we find an important aspect of Augustine's implicit understanding of eternity: God's perspective on temporal events is not itself temporally conditioned. Here time and eternity are separate realms, at least in the manner in which those who exist in those realms know temporal events. Finally, time for Augustine is in itself fragile and fleeting, and yet it is ultimately a gift from God; for this reason Augustine prays that God give this gift for the exploration of the treasures of Scripture.

Augustine then turns to the task of exegesis, as he asks concerning the very first verse of Genesis, "May I hear and understand how in the beginning you made heaven and earth."[7] Augustine's interpretation of these words about creation emphasizes quite strongly the difference between creation and Creator by highlighting the contrast between change and changelessness. For Augustine, creation "suffer[s] change and variation. . . . To be what once was not the case is to be subject to change and variation." Such characteristics are set in contrast to God, who does not change, for the "beauty and goodness and being" of creation are deficient when compared to God.[8] Thus Scripture's testimony that God created heaven and earth points Augustine to the profound contrast between changing creatures and the changeless God.

Yet God's very *manner* of creating is also quite different from our own. God created the heavens and the earth simply by speaking.[9] But such speaking, too, surely differs from how we creatures speak. For when we speak, one word follows another in time, and each word comes into existence and dies before the next one. But God did not

7. Ibid., 11.3.5.
8. Ibid., 11.4.6.
9. Ibid., 11.5.7.

create by speaking in this manner, for nothing in God is transient. When God created by means of speaking, it was not with "words which sound and pass away," for such a way of speaking is that of the creature, and not of the Creator, and thus God would have spoken the words that brought creation into existence through the mediation of a temporal creature. Yet that is clearly absurd, for it implies that there was a "creation" before creation.[10]

What, then, is God's speech of creation? It is the Eternal Word: Christ, the Second person of the Trinity, that is "the Word, God who is with you God (John 1:1). That word is spoken eternally, and by it all things are uttered eternally." Christ is God's Word by which God speaks, yet without a succession of finite words uttered one after another. Indeed, through the Word "everything is said in the simultaneity of eternity" (*simul ac sempiterne*). This Word is not a creature, subject to change or decay, but is of the very essence of the Father, that is, eternal. "No element of your word yields place or succeeds to something else, since it is truly immortal and eternal."[11] This Word, furthermore, is the "Beginning" of which Genesis speaks, the "Beginning" in which God created the heavens and the earth, indeed, the true source of all truth and of our very being, the point of constancy to which we may return from error. Incarnate, this Word is God's eternality communicated to us temporal creatures.[12]

But if in Christ God created the heavens and the earth, what was God doing before creation? If there was a time when there was no creation, and then there was a time when there was, it seems to imply a change in God. "For if in God any new development took place and any new intention, so as to make a creation which he had never made before, how then can there be a true eternity in which a will, not

10. Ibid., 11.6.8.
11. Ibid., 11.7.9.
12. Ibid., 11.8.10, 11.9.11.

there previously, comes into existence?" Yet God's will is not, says. Augustine, a created thing, but is identical with God's own substance. So God eternally willed creation. "But if it was God's everlasting will that the created order exist, why is not the creation also everlasting?"[13]

Such a question, however, belies a profound misunderstanding of the difference between time and eternity. For Augustine, "No comparison is possible" between eternity and "temporal successiveness which never has any constancy."[14] It is this successiveness that determines the fundamental and profound difference between time and eternity. "A long time is long only because constituted of many successive movements which cannot be simultaneously extended. Thus in the eternal, nothing is transient, but the whole is present. But no time is wholly present." Time, then, is characterized by successiveness, change, and createdness,[15] whereas God's unchanging eternity is entirely present to God: it is all "today" for God. "All [God's] 'years' subsist in simultaneity, because they do not change; those going away are not thrust out by those coming in."[16]

The eternal, then, is the source of the temporal, but not in such a way that the eternal is not truly eternal. God is "the originator and creator of all ages. . . . You have made time itself. Time did not elapse before you made time. . . . There was no 'then' when there was not time."[17] Yet "it is not in time that you precede times. Otherwise you would not precede all times. In the sublimity of an eternity which is always in the present, you are before all things past and transcend all things future, because they are still to come, and when they have

13. Ibid., 11.10.12.
14. Ibid., 11.11.13.
15. Ibid., 11.13.15.
16. Ibid., 11.13.16.
17. Ibid., 11.13.15.

come they are past."[18] In short, Augustine insists that God created all time while remaining eternal.

Out of this conviction of time's creation by God, Augustine undertakes a lengthy consideration of time. Such an investigation, Augustine admits, is very difficult if pursued with the resources normally at our disposal. The initial difficulty seems to lie in our language, which insists on speaking in past and future tenses as if the past and future events to which they refer actually exist at that moment. They do not now exist, for the past has passed into nonbeing, and the future has not yet come into being. Indeed, time seems to have very little existence at all, for past and future do not properly exist. "The cause of [time's] being is that it will cease to be. So indeed we cannot truly say that time exists except in the sense that it tends toward non-existence."[19] This judgment is confirmed when Augustine considers what normal parlance means by "lengths" of time. When we speak of lengths of past or future time, such talk seems quite empty, for these times exist no longer or not yet. Even to speak of the length of present time is improper, for every length of time, such as years, months, days, hours, minutes, and seconds, seems to be divisible into smaller and smaller quanta that make up the unit, among which some will be past, as already gone, and others future, as not yet arrived, and only one is left to designate as the infinitesimally small "present." "If we can think of some bit of time which cannot be divided into even the smallest instantaneous moments, that alone is what we can call 'present.'"[20] Left with that one tiny dot to call "the present," Augustine concludes that "the present occupies no space."[21]

Yet if the present has no extension, the past exists no longer, and the future does not yet exist, how, then, do we measure time?[22]

18. Ibid., 11.13.16.
19. Ibid., 11.14.17.
20. Ibid., 11.15.20.
21. Ibid.

Whence does the future come, and whither goes the past? The solution is not to be found in defining time as the movement of heavenly bodies, for any physical object would do, and the response does not solve the problem of how we are able to discern that one length of time is longer than another.[23] Indeed, "it follows that a body's movement is one thing, the period by which we measure is another," and only the latter is rightly called "time."[24]

Augustine is thus led to suspect "that time is simply a distension . . . of the mind itself."[25] The mind measures time in the memory,[26] by means of a painful stretching out or distension of the memory in two directions: in anticipation of the future, and in remembering the past.[27] Yet to speak of "a distension . . . of the mind itself" is ambiguous.[28] The words *of the mind* could be taken either as a subjective or as an objective genitive. If *of the mind* is read as a subjective genitive, the phrase would mean that time is a distension *by* the mind itself, an operation in which the mind itself distends reality and thus produces time, which then has no other form of existence. On the other hand, if *of the mind* is understood as an objective genitive, the phrase would mean that time, as an ongoing passing

22. Ibid., 11.21.27.
23. Ibid., 11.23.29.
24. Ibid., 11.24.31. Of course, Augustine could not have anticipated the position offered by modern physics, for which the standard reference for time is, more or less, the "movement" of a "heavenly body," that is, the speed of light; nor could he have anticipated its other component, the affirmation that there is no absolute time. See, however, n30 below.
25. Ibid., 11.26.33.
26. Ibid., 11.27.35.
27. Ibid., 11.28.37, 38.
28. I would suggest that such ambiguity gives rise to interpretations of Augustine's view of time as psychological or even solipsistic. A different tack in addressing this misconception is pursued by Duchrow: "Not until one sees that Augustine did not simply factor out the question of physical and historical time in favor of a 'psychological' concept of time, but that even in connection to his Confessions it inevitably presides over the problems abandoned with it, can one appreciate his historical and objective attempts at an answer. But then one can also ask critically whether the correlation of physical, historical and psychological time is successful for him." Duchrow, "Der sogenannte psychologische Zeitbegriff Augustins im Verhältnis zur physikalischen und geschichtlichen Zeit," 269–70, my translation.

of moments, is an experience in which the mind itself is distended, stretched out, even painfully, and indeed, problematically.

That the second reading is to be preferred is shown by how Augustine himself views the results of his investigation. He measures (not creates) periods of time in his mind, and he measures by means of a distension, in memory and anticipation. Yet for Augustine, this distension of the soul is a painful experience, from which he prays to God to be liberated.

> "Because your mercy is more than lives" (Ps. 62:4), see how my life is a distension in several directions. . . . But now "my years pass in groans" (Ps. 30:11) and you, Lord, are my consolation. You are my eternal Father, but I am scattered in times whose order I do not understand. The storms of incoherent events tear to pieces my thoughts, the inmost entrails of my soul, until that day when, purified and molten by the fire of your love, I flow together to merge into you.[29]

Even more problematic is Augustine's seeming equation of time with this mental operation: "Time *is simply* . . . a distension of the mind itself." Does this mean that Augustine believes that time has no reality apart from his thinking about it? The answer is a qualified yes and no. We might paraphrase him as follows. Time, as we look at it and experience it, has no substantial reality. If we try to grab onto it, it passes through our fingers. It has no extension nor duration: the past is gone, the future is not yet, and the present is an infinitesimal point having no length. How then can we speak of time's reality? How can we measure it? We cannot, other than in our minds marking the changes brought about over time by remembering and storing the past and anticipating the future. Things that exist in time have some substance, but time *itself* is measured and known and experienced only in the minds that (sometimes painfully) are stretched out in the act of grappling with time.[30]

29. *Conf.* 11.29.39.

Augustine's discussion of time, then, ends in his confession of his need for salvation from the distension of time, a salvation only God can deliver, for the eternal God suffers no distension: "You are unchangeably eternal, that is the truly eternal Creator of minds. Just as you knew heaven and earth in the beginning without that bringing any variation into your knowing, so you made heaven and earth in the beginning without that meaning a tension between past and future in your activity."[31]

Summary of Augustine's Concept of Eternity

Having walked through book 11 of Augustine's *Confessions*, we are now in a position to state some major features of his understanding of eternity. What is surely obvious is that time and eternity are contrasted along lines precisely parallel to the contrast between creature and Creator, and to that of change and changelessness. Those contrasts are religiously very significant, for time as experienced and thus explored by Augustine is a very fragile reality, one that makes the human condition very problematic and begs for a solution that in the end only God can provide.

For that reason I believe that Gotthard Oblau is mistaken when he concludes that for Augustine, "the time that arises in the activity of the human mind is unproblematic: he undoubtedly has it, he masters

30. Here we can see connections with modern existential understandings of time characteristic of Heidegger and others. But one might also note a correspondence with the judgments of modern physics, in that Augustine likewise seems close to rejecting the idea of a universal time, in the sense that the measuring of time is so dependent on the minds that measure it. See n24 above.

31. *Conf.* 11.31.41. "The eleventh Book, in point of fact, neither begins nor ends with the self. It begins, as it ends, with God." Robert Jordan, "Time and Contingency in St. Augustine," in *Augustine: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. R. A. Markus (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, Doubleday & Co., 1972), 263–64.

and commands it."[32] Rather, the result of Augustine's task is truly described by Robert Jordan as follows:

> Augustine's investigation of time is a study in contingency, finiteness, creatureliness, dependency, incompleteness, imperfection, a study of the limitation of being that characterizes *any* finite entity, that entity which *is*, but which is not He Who Is. Time exists because there are existent things in the universe which are just so much reality, but no more.[33]

Oblau is of course referring to a passage from *Die kirkliche Dogmatik* (*KD*) I/2 (51), where Barth offers a critique of Augustine. But Barth is not making precisely the same point Oblau interprets Barth to make. Indeed, Oblau goes far beyond Barth, first by insisting that Augustine held that time was unproblematic for human experience, and, second by asserting that Barth's description of time in §47.2 ("Given Time") constitutes a *rejoinder* to Augustine and the whole *existentiell Zeitbegriff*. We will return to Barth's interpretation of Augustine soon, but for now let me simply describe Oblau's interpretation of Augustine as a mistake and his evidence for Barth's massive disagreement with Augustine as unconvincing.

Time for Augustine is in origin God's gift, yet mediately, from the perspective of human experience, a painful distending of the soul, and ultimately, something from which Augustine seeks salvation. For time as analyzed is a succession of infinitely small quanta, a rushing stream of moments that hurtle by, from nonexistence to brief existence to nonexistence.[34] The present is what we arbitrarily call one of the many quanta that happens to pass by. The present, for us,

32. "Die im Akt des menschlichen Geistes entstehende Zeit ist für den Menschen unproblematisch: Er hat sie unangefochten, er meistert und beherrscht sie." Gotthard Oblau, *Gotteszeit und Menschenzeit: Eschatologie in der Kirchlichen Dogmatik von Karl Barth* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1988), 37.

33. Jordan, "Time and Contingency in St. Augustine," 256.

34. "Augustine's image of the historical process is that of a flowing river or rivers, with many stormy cataracts. Underlying this passage is the language of Plotinus (6. 6. 1. 5) about the fall away from the One as a scattering and an extending. Temporal successiveness is an experience

is thus a vanishingly small item that comes into and out of experience, and is held onto, if it is, only by anticipation and memory. Eternity, however, is quite different. Not by change or succession, but rather by permanence and simultaneity is eternity characterized. "No times are coeternal with you since you are permanent. . . . You say all that you say in the simultaneity of eternity."[35]

Yet such a characterization may rightly strike us as odd. For *permanence* and *simultaneity* are temporal terms.[36] In what sense does Augustine mean these terms in their new, atemporal, context? Such "category breaking" is not even limited to these terms, nor to the two cited passages. For Augustine also speaks of God's *present*: "Your Today is eternity," prays Augustine.[37] Yet what Augustine means is that God has a "present" that does not disappear into the past, a "present" that is not characterized by successively fleeting "present moments." Let us return to a passage we considered earlier:

> In the sublimity of an eternity which is always in the present, you are before all things past and transcend all things future, because they are still to come, and when they have come they are past. "But you are the same and your years do not fail" (Ps. 101:28). Your "years" neither go nor come. Ours come and go so that all may come in succession. All your "years" subsist in simultaneity, because they do not change; those going away are not thrust out by those coming in. But the years which are ours will not all be until all years have ceased to be. Your "years" are "one day" (Ps. 89:4; 2 Peter 3:8), and your "day" is not any and every day but Today, because your Today does not yield to a tomorrow, nor did it follow on a yesterday.[38]

of disintegration; the ascent to divine eternity is a recovery of unity." Chadwick, in *Confessions*, 244n31.

35. *Conf*. 11.13.17, 11.7.9.

36. I thank Prof. William Babcock for first making me aware of this problem. The question is also raised by Paul Helm, *Eternal God: A Study of God without Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), particularly in the second chapter, "What Is Divine Eternity?," 23–40.

37. *Conf*. 11.13.16.

38. Ibid.

Augustine is surely aware that he is using, or even misusing, terms native to a temporal context to express something about the divine reality in its eternality. His awareness is signaled by the way in which he qualifies his use of "temporal" words to speak of eternity. For he does not simply speak of God's *years*, or *present*, or *today*; rather, he describes a fundamental contrast between the significance of such terms in their normal, creaturely context, and their significance when applied to God. Indeed, Augustine seems to affirm (if only implicitly) the principle later articulated by Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite: "Regarding things divine, negations are true and affirmations inadequate."[39] Furthermore, Augustine uses *simultaneity* to clarify further the distinction between creaturely and divine reality, and thus this use is a further indication of his awareness that none of these terms (*years*, *present*, *today*, *simultaneity*, *permanence*) are used univocally in both creaturely and divine contexts.

Why, then, does he use these terms, besides to emphasize the contrast between Creator and creature? First, he does so in order to take up the language of Scripture, which speaks of God's *years*, God's *day*, and God's *today*. Quite simply, it is a controlling feature of the literary context of these terms. We do well to recall that in this part of the *Confessions* Augustine is pursuing a commentary on Scripture.

Second, Augustine's use of these terms suggests that even for Augustine, as Neoplatonic as he was, God's eternity was not construed merely as "timeless," or rather "timeless" in the way a mathematical equation is timeless,[40] but was construed as a fundamental aspect of God's living being. Eternity, for Augustine, is

39. Dionysius the Areopagite, *De coel. hier.* 2.3. Cited in Wolfgang Beinert and Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, *Handbook of Catholic Theology* (New York, NY: Crossroad, 1995), 5.

40. Such a meaning of *timeless* I find suggested by the historical examples to which the Kneales draw attention. W. C. Kneale, "Time and Eternity in Theology," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 61 (1961): 87–108; Martha Kneale, "Eternity and Sempiternity," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 69 (1969): 223–38.

not a timeless and thus contentless point, and for that reason neutral and irrelevant, but rather it envelops our past and future, because *God* is "before all things past and transcend[s] all things future."[41] Such a point is made clearer by the way in which Augustine specifies the word *simul*. In a passage quoted above from book 11, Augustine says that God speaks through the divine Word *simul ac sempiterne*. The force of this, I suggest, cross-clarifies *simul* and *sempiterne*. For *simul* has the sense of things happening at the same time, but with no sense of duration, while *sempiterne* implies everlasting duration, but of a kind that normally means succession. By using *simul* and *sempiterne* together, Augustine defines eternity as a duration that is nonsuccessive, a present that is much more than infinitesimal.

Third, by using the various temporal terms to speak of eternity, Augustine implies, not merely *via negationis* but indeed *via eminentiae*, that God possesses that which alone makes time real, the present, and possesses it in an infinite manner. The difference between the divine and the human present is that God's present is immense, or rather, infinite.

Barth's Interaction with Augustine

Such will have to suffice as an exposition of Augustine's understanding of time and eternity, as he expresses this in book 11 of the *Confessions*. What then does this have to do with Karl Barth?

41. It may even be said that whereas human beings *have* a present (if only the most fragile of senses), only God *is* God's own present. In putting it this way I am indebted to Sarah Heaner Lancaster, who makes a similar point concerning Augustine's understanding of the Trinity: "In Book XV [of *de Trinitate*] Augustine says that though we can begin to understand the Trinity through the image of the Trinity that is in us, even our perfected image falls short of the Trinity that God is. A human is not the same as memory, understanding, and will. One can say 'I *have* these three,' but not, 'I *am* these three.' With supreme simplicity, though, God *is* Trinity." Sarah Heaner Lancaster, "Three-Personed Substance: The Relational Essence of the Triune God in Augustine's De Trinitate," *The Thomist* 60, no. 1 (1996): 138.

Quite a bit. For Barth did explicitly refer to Augustine, indeed, in order to criticize him. He also alluded to Augustine, but in doing so, I will argue, Barth signals his agreement, albeit limited, with Augustine.

It is true that Barth criticizes Augustine's view of time. Yet what Barth criticizes is not a view of time in general, but the inadequacy of that view for understanding a quite specific time, the time of revelation.[42]

> If by the statement, "God reveals Himself" is meant the revelation attested in Holy Scripture, it is a statement about the occurrence of an event. That means it also includes an assertion about a time *proper to revelation*. If stated with reference to this, it is equivalent to the statement, "God has time for us." The time God has for us is just this time of His revelation, the time that is real in His revelation, revelation time. Moreover in the interpretation of the concept of this time, which is now our task, we shall not have to take as a basis any time concept gained independently of revelation itself.[43]

Barth's criticisms of Augustine[44] are thus strictly concerned with one very specific theological question: whether Augustine's concept of humanity's experience of time is theologically helpful and appropriate for understanding another kind of time, which Barth calls "revelation time," that is, God's time for us. "If we are to understand the time of God's revelation, then our possession of time must be made comprehensible as God's possession of it for us, overcoming the difficulties of our possession of it."[45] Indeed, Barth finds Augustine's understanding of time as experienced by the human subject quite an acceptable way of understanding one particular kind of time, namely,

42. Oblau does not appear to recognize this important distinction.
43. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley et al. (Edingburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956–69), I/2, 45; *Die kirchliche Dogmatik* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1932, and Zurich: EVZ, 1938–65), I/2, 50. Emphasis added.
44. And Heidegger, whom he considers with Augustine.
45. *CD* I/2, 46; *KD* I/2, 51.

what he calls, with intentional irony, "our" time, which might be described as fallen time or (as he calls it later) lost time.

> The time we think we know and possess, "our" time, is by no means the time God created. Between our time and God-created time as between our existence and the existence created by God there lies the Fall. "Our" time, as Augustine and Heidegger in their own ways quite correctly inform us, is the time produced by us, that is by the fallen human being.[46]

We see more of Barth's limited acceptance of Augustine's understanding of time in *CD* III/2, in the subsection titled "Given Time." Here he gives expression to the problematic aspect of human temporality, the *in extremis* aspect of humanly experienced temporality.

> That man is in time means at its simplest that he always is now, i.e., that he is always crossing the frontier between past and future which one moment is just ahead and the next just behind, only to be ahead again, to have to be recrossed, and again to be behind. If man really is in his time, if he really has time, it is always now, in the crossing of this frontier. Every conception of human being, life and activity (even when ostensibly concerned with the past or future) has to do concretely with this step from the past to the future.[47]

And again:

> It is true, of course, that nothing is more impressive and palpable than our being in the present. How many sceptics have thought they could take refuge in the boast, "I am"! And what structures of assurance have been erected on the foundation of this boast! But what does this boast mean on the lips of man and as an expression of his conviction that he really exists in the present and therefore in time? The insecurity of our being in the present is no less impressive and palpable. For the present is merely the frontier between past and future, and our being in it is

46. *CD* I/2, 47; *KD* I/2, 52. Trans. revised.
47. *CD* III/2, 527.

> merely the crossing of this frontier. *The present is without duration or extension*. What then do we mean by being in the present?[48]

That Barth points to the terror to be found in time understood in this way is not to be taken as a criticism of this concept of time in and of itself. For we recall that Augustine's description of time as experienced is a description of a *problem*, a problem whose solution is found only in God. Although their solutions are different, Barth too uses this Augustinian motif, by way of contrast, to point to God. "Primarily . . . it is not we who are now but God who is now."[49] Humanly experienced time, *for Barth as well as for Augustine*, is problematic, not only existentially, but also religiously.

Not only does Barth pick up elements of Augustine's understanding of time, but the same is also true for Augustine's understanding of eternity. It is true, of course, that there are great differences. The Platonic contrast between the unchanging God and changing creatures is a theme for which Barth has little use. And although Barth accepted Augustine's negative contrast between time and eternity,[50] he felt that this was not enough.[51] Yet at this stage we must insist that there were points of agreement. For even as he insisted that the antithesis between time and eternity must not be the final word, he did agree that this word must indeed be spoken. At particular stages in his argument, furthermore, his description of eternity sounds very Augustinian. Eternity "is the simultaneity and coinherence of past, present and future. Thus eternity is the dimension of God's own life, the life in which He is self-positing, self-existent and self-sufficient as Father, Son and Holy Ghost. It is

48. *CD* III/2, 528. Emphasis added.
49. *CD* III/2, 529.
50. *CD* II/1, 608.
51. *CD* II/1 610.

this in contrast to time as the dimension of our life—the dimension in which past, present and future follow in succession."[52]

There is much in this passage that begs to be unpacked. This task must wait until later. Let me simply flag the following points. 1) Here Barth not only brings in the Augustinian (and, as we will see, Boëthian) notion of *simultaneity*, he also adds specificity to it with the term *coinherence*, thus implying a relationship between divine eternality and the doctrine of the Trinity. 2) Barth insists that time and eternity are contrasted, yet also that eternity is not timeless. His reasons for this reflect his belief that God and God's attributes are not rightly described either by negating human attributes or raising them to the infinite degree.[53]

We could raise up for scrutiny more points of contrast and convergence between Augustine and Barth on the subjects of time and eternity. We have, however, done enough to describe Augustine's ideas of time and eternity, correct some misunderstandings of Augustine on these topics, and illustrate some points of agreement between Augustine and Barth. To do more would be to get ahead of ourselves. By way of summary, I now reiterate the following key aspects of Augustine's understanding of time and eternity. First, eternity is strictly contrasted with time, in precise parallel with the Christian theological distinction between Creator and creation and with the Platonic distinction between permanence and change. Second, God's eternity is conceived of as a "simultaneity," for which all "moments" of God's experience are equally present; in other words, God's present is infinite and one. Third, time is significantly problematic for Augustine, both existentially and religiously. Fourth, the radical separation between eternity and time, and the very problematic nature of time when

52. *CD* III/2, 526.
53. Such an understanding of analogical predication came out of Barth's struggle over Feuerbach.

viewed phenomenologically, is overcome only by Christ, the Word of God.

Boëthius

The next figure of significance in the history of Christian thought on the problem of divine eternity is Boëthius (c. 480–524). His influence on subsequent figures who considered the concept of eternity may well be equal to that of Augustine, in great part because their reflections on the subject stood alone in the early Middle Ages. Brian Leftow describes the historical importance suggestively.

> The history of philosophical theology has the shape of an hourglass. The subject flourished in the academies of late antiquity. With the rest of the humanities, it was caught up in the collapse of Roman civilization and dribbled down to the Middle Ages through comparatively few sources. Later, the field was reborn from these sources and flourished anew. Where the concept of eternity is concerned, Augustine and Boëthius were the hourglass's neck. The study of Augustine as anthologized in Peter Lombard's *Sentences* was the meat of theological education well into the 1300s, and most treatments of eternity for long after that included discussion of Boëthius' definition of the concept.[54]

Such discussion of Boëthius's definition continued indeed long after Lombard, for we find echoes of it in Heinrich Heppe's summary of post-Reformation Reformed theology, *Reformierte Dogmatik*.[55] Much more useful for our purposes, however, is Barth's frequent use of Boëthius's definition. For all these reasons, then, it is essential that we understand Boëthius's conception of divine eternality, as this is

54. Brian Leftow, *Time and Eternity* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991),112.
55. Heinrich Heppe, *Die Dogmatik der evangelisch-reformierten Kirche, dargestellt und aus den Quellen belegt von Heinrich Heppe*, ed. Ernst Bizer (Neukirchen: K. Moer, 1935); English translation: Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics Set Out and Illustrated from the Sources*, ed. Ernst Bizer, trans. G. T. Thompson (London: Allen & Unwin, 1950).

reflected in the definition he gives it in book 5 of *The Consolation of Philosophy*.[56]

Exposition: *The Consolation of Philosophy*

Boëthius's *Consolation* is cast as a conversation between a distraught Boëthius, imprisoned and facing death, and the comforting Lady Philosophy. Thus the Consolation is a very different text from Augustine's *Confessions*, and the locus of Boëthius's definition, the fifth and final book of this philosophic conversation, draws together the themes of chance, free will, determinism, and providence. As book 5 begins, Boëthius asks Lady Philosophy whether there is such a thing as chance. There is not, responds Lady Philosophy, if by "chance" one means "an event produced by random motion and not by any chain of causes."[57] Indeed, there is a chain of causes, which is ultimately appointed by God, for "God constrains all things into his order."[58] But if by "chance" one means "the unexpected event of concurring causes among things done for some purpose," then Philosophy admits that chance does exist.[59] For such chance is not the occurrence of events outside the chain of causes, but rather of events within the chain of causes unexpected by some of their actors.

Boëthius then asks Philosophy whether such a conception of a chain of causes allows for free will.[60] Philosophy's answer is that God foreknows the free decisions rational beings will make. "That regard of providence which looks forth on all things from eternity, sees this

56. The translation used here is from Boethius, *The Theological Tractates & The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. S. J. Tester, H. F. Stewart, and E. K. Rand (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973). Hereafter referred to as *Cons. Ph.*
57. *Cons. Ph.* 5, prose 1, 18–20.
58. Ibid., 23–24.
59. Ibid., 53–55.
60. Ibid., prose 2.

and disposes all that is predestined to each according to his deserts."[61] The picture drawn for us in verse is quite vivid:

> That Phoebus shining with pure light "Sees all and all things hears," So Homer sings, he of the honeyed voice; Yet even he, with the light of his rays, too weak, Cannot burst through To the inmost depths of earth or ocean. Not thus the Maker of this great universe: Him, viewing all things from his height, no mass of earth obstructs, no night with black cloud thwarts. What is, what has been, and what is to come, In one swift mental stab he sees; Him, since he only all things sees, The true sun could you call.[62]

Boëthius then asks Philosophy how human freedom is possible if God foreknows all things, for foreknowledge seems to make the free acts of human beings necessary: if God foreknows them, they necessarily must occur.[63] Philosophy's response, beginning in book 5, chapter 4, covers the rest of the *Consolation.* First of all, she says, the objects of knowledge are known according to the power of the knower.[64] Thus there is not just one kind of knowing, determined by the object, but a hierarchy of knowing, depending upon the faculty of knowing that is used. Thus a rose may be "known" through the sense of smell, or the sense of sight or of touch or even taste, or it may be known through the reason, which may take into account and understand all that the other senses are able to discern of the flower. "So it is that that kind of knowledge is better than the rest which of its own nature knows

61. Ibid., 27–29.
62. Ibid., poem 2. Clearly, this picture of God emphasizes God's transcendence to such a degree that it implies an unfortunate remoteness. For that reason I believe that Boëthius's help is limited. Nonetheless, as is demonstrated by my exposition, I believe that in spite of this shortcoming Boëthius's *Consolation* is helpful for developing a modern constructive doctrine of God's eternity. Boëthius's picture of a remote God does make somewhat ironic Barth's affirmative use of Boethius's definition of eternity, which we will describe shortly.
63. Ibid., 3. We see the same question, with a different answer, addressed by Anselm in his *de Concordia.*
64. Ibid., prose 4, 75–77.

not only its own object but the subjects of other kinds of knowledge also."[65]

Having established that, Philosophy then insists we should not make judgments about the divine foreknowledge of contingent events according to standards of human reason. Continuing the analogy, she asks, "What, then, if sense and imagination gainsay reasoning, saying that that universal which reason thinks she perceives, is nothing at all?. . . It is similar when human reason thinks that the divine intelligence does not see future things except in the same manner as she herself knows them."[66]

Rather, Philosophy insists that we must not think of these matters in the manner to which we are accustomed. "Wherefore let us be raised up, if we can, to the height of that highest intelligence; for there reason will see . . . in what way even those things which have no certain occurrence a certain and definite foreknowledge yet does see, [which] neither is that opinion, but rather the simplicity . . . of the highest knowledge."[67] Any clue, then, to the problem of human free will and divine foreknowledge must first recognize how different God's knowledge of events is when compared to human knowledge of events.

How, then, is God's knowledge different? How does God know events? In short, the way God knows things is from eternity. And what is eternity? The passage deserves to be quoted completely and in context.

> Eternity, then, is the whole, simultaneous and perfect possession of boundless life [*Aeternitas igitur est interminabilis vitae tota simul et perfecta possessio*], which becomes clearer by comparison with temporal things. For whatever lives in time proceeds in the present from the past into the future, and there is nothing established in time which can embrace the

65. Ibid., prose 5, 19–21.
66. Ibid. 21–24, 39–41.
67. Ibid., 50–56.

> whole space of its life equally, but tomorrow surely it does not yet grasp, while yesterday it has already lost. And in this day to day life you live no more than in that moving and transitory moment.[68]

We see here some echoes of themes we noticed in Augustine, yet now they are stated with greater precision. We also see some new themes emerging. For now the theme of simultaneity that we saw in Augustine is linked up with the notion of boundless life. Such a linkage (particularly in the definition "whole, simultaneous and perfect possession of boundless life") points to a peculiar form of existence proper only to God. Unlike that of temporal beings, whose past is no longer and whose future is not yet, God's life is entirely present to and grasped by God, a boundless duration of simultaneity. Even if time had no bounds, no beginning nor end, but was infinite, that would not make it eternal. "For it is one thing to be drawn out through a life without bounds . . . but it is a different thing to have embraced at once the whole presence of boundless life, which it is clear is the property of the divine mind."[69]

Thus what is truly eternal is not simply everlasting, enduring moment by moment throughout time.[70] Rather, it is "whole, simultaneous, and perfect." Nor does the truly eternal exist in such a way that its entire life is present to it, but only in an instantaneous unit, the barest momentary flash; rather, true eternity, for Boëthius, is "boundless life." The eternality that characterizes the divine life, then, is neither the infinity of temporally successive moments, nor the flash of a durationless instant. It is, as some have put it, a kind of duration, but a duration that is not really temporal.[71] "Whatever . . . comprehends and possesses at once the whole fullness of boundless

68. Ibid., 6, 9–18.
69. Ibid., 35–38.
70. To exist in such a way would be to exist, as some call it, "sempiternally," rather than "eternally."
71. Such an affirmation is characterissitic of the work found in Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, and Stump and Kretzmann, "Eternity," *Journal of Philosophy* 78 (1981): 429–58.

life, and is such that neither is anything future lacking from it, nor has anything past flowed away, that is rightly held to be eternal, and that must necessarily both always be present to itself, possessing itself in the present, and hold as present the infinity of moving time."[72]

But what sense does it make to talk about a duration that is not temporal? Does not the very meaning of the word *duration* necessarily include *temporality*? Is Boëthius confused? Or does he not rather have an important point to make, when he combines duration with atemporality? This problem has been the focus of numerous critics of Boëthius, who have pointed out the inconsistency of this combination.[73] More recently, however, others have attempted to defend Boëthius and his definition of God's eternity as being far from merely confused. Most significant among these are Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, and Brian Leftow.[74] All three of them have argued that Boëthius is not simply confused or inconsistent when he speaks of eternity as if it were a duration and yet also as if it were instantaneous. "When Boëthius seems to waffle between talk of a durationless now and talk of everlasting duration, he is actually trying to communicate a single thesis, that eternity is 'atemporal duration.'"[75]

They have different solutions to the problem, and our discussion of them will have to wait until the next chapter, since with that topic we move into recent philosophical developments, and the debate in

72. *Cons. Ph.* 5, 6, 25–31.

73. See, e.g., M. Kneale, "Eternity and Sempiternity," 227f. Similarly, W. Kneale focuses his criticism on the combination of timelessness and life: W. Kneale, "Time and Eternity in Theology," 99–100. A similar question might be asked about Augustine, who, as noted above, combined *simul* and *sempiterne* in his understanding of eternity. It seems reasonable to suggest that Augustine's combination of these two concepts serves a function similar to Boëthius's combination of *interminabilis vitae* and *tota simul*. That is, both, in effect, serve to define eternity in such a way that a *form* of duration, yet one lacking successiveness, is in view.

74. Stump and Kretzmann, "Eternity," and "Atemporal Duration: A Reply to Fitzgerald," *Journal of Philosophy* 84 (1987): 214–219; Leftow, *Time and Eternity*.

75. Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, 113.

philosophy and theology that has taken place, in at least two phases, in the last third of the twentieth century.

For now, we note Leftow's suggestion that

> perhaps one must use both point and extension models in thinking about Boëthian eternity. . . . If this is so, it is because eternity is (inter alia) a kind of life that could be enjoyed by a metaphysically simple being. As eternity is a kind of life, it may require us to model it as a way of enduring, or a sort of duration. As eternity is the life of a simple being, it may require us to model it as lacking parts and so pointlike.[76]

Let us now return to the context of Boëthius's definition of eternity. That definition was proposed as a solution to, and in turn has profound implications for, the problem at issue in book 5 of the *Consolation*, the problem of divine (fore-) knowledge and human freedom. Now human beings, as knowers, know things temporally, since they are temporal creatures. Their fundamental temporality determines, to some extent, how we know something. God, on the other hand, is eternal. So, says Boëthius, how would God eternally know something? "Since . . . God has an always eternal and present nature, then his knowledge too, surpassing all movement of time, is permanent in the simplicity of his present, and embracing all the infinite spaces of the future and the past, considers them in his simple act of knowledge as though they were now going on."[77] Thus God's foreknowledge is "not foreknowledge as it were of the future but knowledge of a never-passing instant."[78]

So God's foreknowledge of our free acts takes place within God's present, and so is not really *fore*-knowledge at all; and just as in the case of human beings, for whom knowledge of something in that person's present does not make that event absolutely necessary, so

76. Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, 149.
77. *Cons. Ph.* 5, 6, 59, 61–66.
78. Ibid., 67–69.

in God's case, God's knowledge of a free act in the divine present does not make that act necessary. On the contrary, God is able to distinguish between those events that occur out of necessity and those events that occur from the action of freely willing agents.[79] So just as when we observe something happening we can say, "It is necessarily the case that x is occurring simply because it *is* occurring" without hindering the freedom of the freely acting agents who brought about x, so too does God's foreknowledge of free acts, as observations of God's eternal present, make those acts, as it were, only "noetically" necessary.[80]

Barth's Use of Boethius's Concept of Eternity

Let us now summarize Boëthius's concept of eternity. Eternity, for Boëthius, is first of all a quality of the divine life.[81] That is, eternity is not simply a place in which God exists, or some "thing" other than God. It is a form or mode of existence peculiar to God, and thus different from the form or mode of existence that human beings have, which is temporal. Second, Boëthian eternity combines the two concepts of simultaneity and duration.[82] so that God is a being who exists timelessly (unlike sempiternal beings) and yet encompasses all of time (unlike a quantum or speck of time).

These particular aspects of eternity—life and boundless simultaneous duration—are the very ones picked up by Barth:

> In God actual years and days are enumerated before numbers existed

79. Ibid., 72–91.
80. Ibid., 115–20. We will see a similar argument at work in Anselm's *de Concordia*, which we will consider below.
81. I do not wish to imply that this or what follows are unique contributions of Boëthius, particularly with regard to Augustine. Rather, I see much of what Boëthius says as implicit in Augustine, only stated in Boëthius with greater clarity, and in a different context.
82. Again, we seem to have here a point on which Boëthius and Augustine are very close.

> and when He did not need them. Years and days could not exist if this were not the case, if, without being bound to them, God were not their beginning, succession and end, and did not possess them in Himself. This positive quality of eternity is finely expressed in the definition of Boëthius which is classic for the whole Middle Ages: *aeternitatis est interminabilis vitae tota simul et perfecta possessio*.[83]

What is "this positive quality" that Barth sees in Boëthius's definition? I suggest that it is the conjunction (*simul*) of interminability (*interminabilis*) and life (*vitae*), with the result that God encompasses time, and is the source or ground of all times. In short, Barth sees in Boëthius's definition something quite other than a negative diastasis of time and eternity. God is not merely opposed to time, but comprehends in one *interminabilis vita* all that exists, and does so *tota simul et perfecta*. It is these two together, the *interminabilis* and the *vita,* that are important for Barth, at times with more of an emphasis on *vita*, particularly when Barth turns to a critique of other theologians' views of eternity. Hunsinger may be right in highlighting "interminability" as "strikingly new" from the standpoint of how the definition may connect the notion of eternity with the doctrine of the Trinity.[84] Yet from the standpoint of Barth's argument in the context of his use of Boëthius's definition, it appears that something else is significant. It is not just because God's eternity is interminable that "the definition of eternity does not depend on the negation of time."[85] Rather, it is the concomitant appearance of "life" in the definition that, for Barth, suggests something other than the negation of time. Such an emphasis Barth approvingly finds in Boëthius, even as with regret he finds it lacking in other theologians.

83. *CD* II/1, 610.
84. "From this standpoint, the one strikingly new element in the definition is 'interminability.'" George Hunsinger, "*Mysterium Trinitatis*: Karl Barth's Conception of Eternity," in *Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 199.
85. Hunsinger, "*Mysterium Trinitatis*," 200.

So also in Barth's treatment of time under the doctrine of creation, we find this especially Boëthian phrasing:

> Even the eternal God does not live without time. He is supremely temporal. For his eternity is authentic temporality, and therefore the source of all time. But in his eternity, in the uncreated self-subsistent time which is one of the perfections of His divine nature, present, past and future, yesterday, to-day and to-morrow, are not successive, but simultaneous.[86]

Barth derives another point from Boëthius, namely that eternity is an attribute of *God*: "'Whole, simultaneous and perfect possession of boundless life', this is indeed eternity, provided it is not at all the eternity of being, but the eternity of *God* prior to and after, above and under all being."[87]

Such an emphasis must be understood against the background of and in contrast to idealistic philosophy, particularly Hegel, whom we will discuss in greater detail later in this chapter. The point here, however, is simply that eternity was sometimes defined as a concept of being. In such a view, "eternity" was a characteristic of the world, the flip side, as it were, of our awareness of the permanence of being in general, the permanence collectively behind the impermanence of all individual things. Barth is not disputing that such a definition of "eternity" may in fact correspond to the actual constitution of the world; he is simply denying that such an understanding of "eternity" applies to God. What Barth means by eternity is this very point he sees in Boëthius: that it is an attribute of God.

86. *CD* III/2, 437.
87. *KD* II/1, 688–89.; *CD* II/1, 611. Revised translation.

Anselm

We turn now to Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109), in whose understanding of eternity we find much that echoes Augustine and, even more, Boëthius. In what follows, we will explore the contours of Anselm's theology of eternity and note its similarities to and differences from Boëthius' own view.

Exposition: *Monologium, Prosologion, de Concordia*

As an example of such Boëthian resonance, we can do no better than to turn to the primary locus of Anselm's view of eternity in his *Monologium*. "Hence, if this Being is said to exist always; since, for it, it is the same to exist and to live, no better sense can be attached to this statement, than that it exists or lives eternally, that is, it possesses interminable life, as a perfect whole at once. For its eternity apparently is an interminable life, existing at once as a perfect whole."[88]

Throughout the *Monologium*, Anselm is pursuing a formal logical argument concerning some Being that may rightly be the highest of all beings, and who alone may be called this. Because of this context of medieval formal logic, Anselm frequently uses the third person neuter pronoun *it* in referring to this object of his argument.[89]

The Boëthian language is quite clear in this passage, particularly in the phrase "it possesses interminable life, as a perfect whole at once."

88. *Monologium*, 24. The translation is from Anselm, *Saint Anselm: Basic Writings—Proslogium, Monologium, Gaunilon's On Behalf of the Fool, Cur Deus Homo*, trans. Sidney Norton Deane (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1962), 83. Further citations from the *Monologium* will be from this translation, and will have the page numbers of that translation in parentheses following the chapter number.

89. Incidentally, Anselm's *Proslogium* instead takes the form of an extended prayer, and God is there consistently addressed and referred to in the second person singular. It thus stands, as it were, between Augustine's *Confessions* and Anselm's *Monologium* in style and method.