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# **Eternal Life as an Exclusively Present Possession: Perspectives from Theology and the Philosophy of Time**

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**Abstract** Does it make sense to think of eternal life not as an unending continuation of life subsequent to death, but as fully actualized in one's present mortal and finite life? After outlining conceptual and moral reasons for being troubled by the notion of an endless life, this article draws upon the thought of major Christian theologians and philosophers of religion to expound the idea of eternal life as a possession exclusively of the life one is presently living. Supplementing the claims of religious thinkers with notions of four-dimensionalism and eternalism from theoretical physics and the philosophy of time, and considering important objections to the conception of eternal life in question, I argue for both the conception's intelligibility and its ethical and spiritual profundity.

**Keywords** Eternal life · Theology · Philosophy of time · Eternalism · Christianity

The concept of eternal life, despite its eminence in Christian life and faith, remains elusive and contested. Although eternal life is popularly assumed to consist in a life after the end of the present life, this assumption has been perceived as increasingly untenable by many

Christian thinkers, including many theologians and philosophers in the modern period.

Abandoning belief in a life subsequent to death need not, however, entail abandoning belief in eternal life. The Johannine writings, with the Gospel of John central among them, have long been recognized as offering a vision of eternal life as a ‘present possession’ or a ‘present reality’, a quality of existence that believers in Christ have ‘here and now’ (Hill 1967, p. 194; Guthrie 1981, pp. 614, 643; Dodd 1968, p. 149).<sup>1</sup>

The idea that eternal life is, or can be, presently possessed is not necessarily incompatible with its also being something future. Indeed, it might be thought that at least part of what it means to say that someone possesses eternal life in the present is that this person will go on to live forever, that the quality of the person’s present life is a ‘foretaste’ of what is to come (Baillie 1934, pp. 208, 246, 251). This contention, that eternal life in the Johannine works (and, correspondingly, the kingdom of God referred to in the Synoptic Gospels) is both present and future, has become widely accepted among New Testament scholars (see, e.g., Stevens 1894, p. 313; Forestell 1974, p. 119; Thompson 2006, p. 192). It is, however, a contention that refuses to come to grips with the difficulties involved in making sense of the idea of a future life, difficulties that are compounded by the aggressively secular milieu in which many Christians find themselves in the twenty-first century.

This article examines the prospects for a conception of eternal life as an exclusively present possession; that is, not as a form of life of which one can enjoy merely a proleptic foretaste in the present, but one that is fully actualized in, or as, the present life. The article proceeds along the following lines. First, in order to motivate the inquiry, I outline some reasons, both conceptual and moral, why many serious Christian thinkers have been troubled by the assumption that eternal life is a matter of living a life that never ends. Second, I draw upon the work of several significant theologians and philosophers to illustrate four principal

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<sup>1</sup> Relevant verses include: John 3:15–16; 5:24; 6:47; 1 John 5:13.

themes that are at least partially constitutive of the idea that eternal life is an exclusively present possession. Third, I point up some intriguing parallels between aspects of the proposed religious conception of eternal life on the one hand and certain implications of the theory known as eternalism in the philosophy of time on the other. Fourth, I canvass four representative objections to the conception of eternal life that emerges from the foregoing considerations, along with possible replies. While I do not presume that these replies resolve all the difficulties that attach to the conception in question, I argue that they assist in showing how this conception can be not only meaningful, but also ethically and spiritually profound.

### **Against Living Forever**

The pressures upon a belief that eternal life consists in living forever are many and varied. Here I shall highlight a selection of the most important, which have both conceptual and moral dimensions. One of the most significant problems is that any belief in life after death is widely assumed to be at odds with the kind of scientifically informed naturalistic worldview that prevails in many modern societies (cf. Walter 1996). Although Christians and other religious believers might aspire to reject certain aspects of that worldview, or to find ways of accommodating it within a broader religious perspective, pressure to forego beliefs that conflict with natural scientific theories remains strong. As Paul Badham remarks, ‘Many committed Christians suffer “cognitive dissonance” through awareness of how much their faith differs from the secular assumptions that dominate contemporary discussion’ (2013, p. 12). Accompanying the progress of science has been a ‘rebellion against Christian other-worldliness’ (Baillie 1934, p. 23), a rebellion that perceives it as being not only scientifically but also morally misguided to place one’s hope in ‘eternal joys’ beyond this life, which will allegedly reveal our current preoccupations to be mere ‘trifling toys’ (cf. Hymn 34, in Watts 1813, p. 168). Not only has it become impossible under the conditions of modernity to

derogate commitment to such things as social, medical and economic progress as trifling concerns, but those who affirm commitment to these causes are apt to portray a dwindling obsession with the ‘world to come’ as one of the preconditions for the causes’ rightful promotion (cf. Baillie 1934, p. 29).

An intensification of the idea that a fixation on the afterlife inhibits a thoroughgoing embrace of this-worldly—or ‘hither-worldly’ (cf. Baillie 1934, p. 45)—progress is the contention that it encourages complacency by diminishing the ‘significance and urgency’ that would otherwise be accorded to one’s decisions and actions (Jantzen 1984, p. 36).

Notwithstanding the fact that many Christians would be among the first to insist that striving for moral and social improvements for the disadvantaged ought to be at the heart of the religious life, there remains for many critics—both within and outside the Christian fold—a suspicion that refusing to acknowledge the finality of death militates against this imperative. As Nicholas Lash observes, ‘Christian faith, far from functioning as a narcotic, should profoundly stimulate its adherents to take ... each moment, each relationship, each person, with utmost seriousness’ (1979a, p. 180). The worry is that in the absence of death’s impending limit, this requisite seriousness, or ‘precarious preciousness’ (Cottingham 2014, p. 139), is eroded, for it is the ‘hovering promise’ of death that spurs on our choices and decisions, our moral deliberations and commitments (Sherover 2003, p. 82); some would argue that, more than this, it ‘is a constitutive factor in all valuable things’ having for us the value that in fact they have’ (Nussbaum 1994, p. 226). If these things include our very lives, then the thought that immortality would be valuable harbours a self-confuting paradox.

A further problem with a belief in living forever is that, beyond fostering complacency, it may damage one’s moral character by offering self-interested incentives for what would otherwise be benevolent acts. Many people would agree, for example, that doing charitable work because one believes it to be the right thing to do is morally superior to doing it because

one expects to receive praise from society for doing so; in the latter case, the self-interested nature of the motivation detracts from the moral quality of the action. Similarly, behaving virtuously in the hope that one will be rewarded or avoid punishment after death is likely to be seen by many as morally inferior to behaving virtuously without seeking to gain anything for oneself thereby. Spinoza wrote that ‘Blessedness is not the reward of virtue, but virtue itself’ (1996 [1677], Part 5, prop. 42), and many Christians have concurred that this aptly expresses what is, or ought to be, the motto of Christian ethics (e.g., Main 2013, p. 89). Moreover, some would deny that the person who performs certain actions for the sake of possible reward is really acting morally at all; rather, she is behaving merely prudentially or, at best, with mixed motives.<sup>2</sup>

Even if it is admitted, however, that the promise of unending reward in heaven along with the threat of everlasting damnation in hell have the potential to distort our moral motivations, it might be supposed that the prospect of some after-death experience is necessary if an ostensibly unjust world is to be shown to be just after all—if, that is, a defence of faith is to be mounted against those who would indict God of impotence, dereliction of duty or downright non-existence in the face of the ‘problem of evil’.<sup>3</sup> But this supposition may itself be condemned as ushering in a ‘shocking theodicy’, analogous to the thought that beating or neglecting one’s dog is permissible as long as one gives her a bowl of her favourite food later on (Jantzen 1984, p. 40). Those who cannot, in good faith, bring themselves to attribute such callous calculations to a God of love are apt to insist that, whatever one ends up saying in response to human miseries, the contention that they will all be ‘made right’ after death cannot be the answer; and, moreover, perhaps one ought to say a lot less and instead do a lot more to alleviate them.

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<sup>2</sup> Kantian ethics draws an especially sharp line between properly moral and merely prudential motives; for discussion, see Sullivan (1989, pp. 31–43, 122–124).

<sup>3</sup> Well-known theodicies that rely on a conception of after-death experience include those offered in, for example, Hick (1977, esp. ch. 16) and Adams (1999, esp. ch. 8). See also Walls (2002, ch. 5).

## **Eternal Life as This Life Only**

Many attempts have been made to rebut concerns of the sort just outlined, and to do so while affirming the conception of eternal life as a life infinitely extended in time.<sup>4</sup> My aim here, however, is not to resolve the question of whether the rebuttals are sound; rather, it is to examine an alternative conception of eternal life, which avoids the need for such rebuttals by rejecting the assumption that eternal life must be either the continuation of life without dying or a new life that begins after death. This alternative conception's avoidance of the problems plaguing ideas of living forever contributes towards its philosophical attractiveness. More than that, however, it is a conception of eternal life that, though frequently neglected in philosophy of religion, has remarkable religious and ethical depth. One of the reasons for its neglect is, no doubt, the elusiveness of the forms of language in which it is often articulated, an elusiveness that is often hard to distinguish from indecision or even deliberate obfuscation on the part of exponents. Despite this elusiveness, a number of themes that constitute the conception are discernible in relevant literature. Below I discuss four of these themes in relation to ideas from key theologians and philosophers.

1. One day we shall only have been. The conception of eternal life in question involves an affirmation of the temporal finitude of human life. 'Man as such', writes Karl Barth, 'is finite and mortal. One day he will only have been, as once he was not' (1960, p. 632). Similarly, in a radio interview from 1980 Karl Rahner avers that 'with death it's all over. Life is past, and it won't come again. It won't be given one for a second time' (1986a, p. 238). From non-religious spokespeople, such assertions would appear banal; after all, that 'all men are mortal' is a platitude that has reverberated down through the history of western thought. But it should

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<sup>4</sup> For a response to Lash, for example, see Hebblethwaite (1979) and for one to Jantzen, see Taliaferro (1990). Attempts to vindicate theodicies—more or less shocking—are, of course, legion.

strike us as far from banal when a theologian declares that ‘Death for the Christian is the event in which his or her one and only life is completed’ (ibid.).

2. *It is one’s life considered as a completed whole that is eternal.* If death is the event that completes one’s one and only life, then in what sense can that life be eternal? Not in the sense of ‘a rectilinear continuation of man’s empirical reality beyond death’ (Rahner 1966, p. 347; cf. Moltmann 2004, p. 152). But not in the sense of one’s persisting as a disembodied spirit either. Rather, it is, as Barth puts it (1960, p. 633), the ‘this-sided’ life—the finite and mortal earthly life located entirely this side of death—that is eternal. Given determinate shape, or ‘definitiveness’, by the temporal boundaries of birth and death, this historical and biographical existence is eternal in the sense that ‘all this’—the decisions and actions, the experiences and sufferings, that constitute the life—cannot be ‘erased and totally obliterated’ by death or by the passing of time (Rahner 1986b, p. 87).

To contemplate eternal life is thus to view one’s finite life as though ‘under the aspect of eternity’ (*sub specie aeternitatis*), to conceive of it as a completed whole with a determinate place in the history of the universe. For the Christian, this perspective on life brings with it a particular religious and ethical imperative, an imperative to acknowledge the infinite value of life and one’s infinite responsibility to live rightly—to live the life of faith and love that one discovers through encounter and fellowship with Christ (cf. Bultmann 1955, p. 38). It is in this sense that, in D. Z. Phillips’ words, ‘Eternity is not more life, but this life seen under certain moral and religious modes of thought’ (1970, p. 49).

As Phillips points out, however, there is an ambiguity in the notion of immortality or eternal life within contexts of Christian discourse, for the notion has a general and a more restricted sense. In the more general sense, speaking of someone as having eternal life indicates nothing about the nature or quality of the person’s relationship with God, whereas in the more restricted sense it indicates that the relationship is typified by certain moral and



spiritual qualities, such as ‘attention, love, striving’ (ibid., p. 55). In the Gospel of John, Jesus’ declaration that ‘he who hears my word and believes him who sent me, has eternal life’ (John 5:24)<sup>5</sup> evidently utilizes the more restricted sense, for it is characterizing eternal life as the life of the believer, the life of faith in God. If, however, conceptual space is to be made for notions such as that of ‘eternal sin’ (Mark 3:29)—the kind of sin that risks incinerating the goodness of one’s life in ‘eternal fire’ (Matthew 18:8)—then the more general sense of ‘eternal life’ is required. This allows that, while everyone’s life is eternal inasmuch as it occupies a stretch of time in the history of the world, not everyone accepts that history as standing in a relation of dependence upon God.

A similar distinction to the one made by Phillips is that between ‘passive’ and ‘active’ immortality. Paraphrasing Spinoza, George Santayana asserts that ‘immortality belongs passively to everything; but to the intellectual part of man it belongs actively also’ (Santayana 1920, p. 107). Passive immortality, or eternity, is possessed by all things merely by virtue of their existing at all, whereas active eternity comes with self-awareness of that condition.

*3. Possession of eternal life is participation in God’s eternity.* In the Second Epistle of Peter, the author declares that through the ‘precious and very great promises’ that have been granted by Christ, we ‘may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of passion, and become partakers of the divine nature’ (2 Peter 1:4).<sup>6</sup> This motif of partaking of or participating in the divine nature, and hence of participating in God’s eternity, has been picked up by many theologians and Christian thinkers, not least by those looking to explicate the sense in which our mortal lives can ‘put on immortality’ (1 Corinthians 15:53), that we ‘may have eternal life’ (John 3:15). ‘To say that life, in Christ, is eternal,’ writes Lash, ‘is not to say that it has no beginning and no end but that even in its finitude and particularity it is, as

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<sup>5</sup> All biblical quotations are from the Revised Standard Version unless otherwise stated.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. the rendering of this verse in the New International Version: ‘... you may participate in the divine nature.’

finite and particular, eternally an expression of God, a participation in his eternity' (1979a, pp. 178–179). Participation, in this sense, is closely connected with the idea of the divinity of love—that insofar as one acts from love, one expresses that which is of God: 'God abides in us and ... we abide in him' (1John 4:12–13).

When commentators describe eternal life as a 'quality of existence' (Soards 1991, p. 265), it is typically this transformed relationship with God through a participation in God's loving nature that they have in mind.<sup>7</sup> Although the Johannine texts frequently speak of knowing God, the form of knowledge at issue is knowledge by acquaintance—the kind of knowledge that consists in intimate relationship—as opposed to mere 'intellectual apprehension' (Guthrie 1981, p. 878 fn.276), just as faith in God, and in Christ, is more than emotional feeling or speculative assent; 'It is self-renouncing trust, repose of the soul in Jesus Christ' (Stevens 2005, p. 239). The qualitative shift that takes place is a transformation from 'natural life'—what in the writings attributed to John is termed 'soul' (*psuchē*)—to 'eternal life' (*zoē aiōnios*). This involves a reconfiguration of values, moving from a life that seeks the good in the satisfaction of self-oriented desires and in the praise of the world to one that seeks to serve the good through self-sacrificing love.

Evidently, the characterization of eternal life in terms of participation in the life of God is one that emphasizes the active and restricted, as opposed to the passive and general, sense of the term. It is also one that, while stressing the importance of mutually indwelling relationship, does not underplay the difference between God and God's creatures: our 'participatory eternity' remains always relative and subordinate, dependent upon God, whereas God's life is eternal in itself (Moltmann 2004, p. 157).

4. Eternal life comes not after, but in or through, death. Anyone who wishes to affirm that interpreting 'eternal life' to mean an exclusively present possession is an exegetically

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<sup>7</sup> 'Eternal life is ... a matter of a new quality of life in God' (Tanner 2005, p. 49).

robust and non-heretical way of reading New Testament sources is obliged to give some account of why many scriptural passages appear to look forward to a future time, such as ‘the age to come’ (e.g., Matthew 12:32; Mark 10:30; Luke 18:30) or ‘the last day’, when those who believe in God will be raised up (John 6:39–40, 44, 54). Moreover, such interpreters need to volunteer an explanation of how the Easter hope, that the raising of Jesus from the dead prefigures a more general resurrection, can remain intelligible when the expectation of a life after death is abandoned.

A strategy deployed by Rudolf Bultmann in his reading of the Johannine gospel and epistles is to blame ecclesiastical redactors for interpolating phrases redolent of a ‘futuristic eschatology’ when the original texts had maintained categorically that it is Jesus’ life and ministry alone, with his death as its end, that constitute ‘the decisive salvation-event’ (1955, pp. 39, 52). It could be argued, however, that Bultmann is in this instance being unduly narrow in his appreciation of interpretive possibilities. A suggestion from Phillips reminds us that talk of a ‘last judgement’ (or of ‘the last day’) can be construed as offering a means of reflecting on the meaning of one’s life as a completed whole. Considered in this light, use of future-tense expressions becomes unsurprising, for one’s own death remains always in the future from the subject’s point of view (Phillips 1976, p. 144).<sup>8</sup> Additionally, a comparison can be made with commonplace phrases such as ‘at the end of the day’ and ‘when all is said and done’, which in everyday speech do not refer to any specific point in time; rather, they signal a comprehensive verdict on the matter at hand.

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Phillips (2004, p. 250): ‘The special place occupied by the Last Judgement is due to the fact that it is a judgement about a human life when it is over. It is the judgement of eternity. ... It is not a prediction about future events, but an eternal reality.’ Putting it in these terms does not, of course, exclude the possibility that some—indeed, perhaps many or most—Christians do think of the Last Judgement as an event that is predicted to occur in the future. Phillips might say that such a thought is confused. It would be fair to say that it is a thought that is rarely well reflected upon. My own point here, however, is merely that Phillips offers a viable way of understanding the doctrine.

Perhaps motivated by a thought analogous to that of Phillips is an approach exhibited by theologians who recommend prepositions such as ‘in’ and ‘through’ to replace talk of life after death. As Rahner puts it, ‘We must say: through death—not after it—there is (not: begins to take place) the achieved definitiveness of the freely matured existence of man’ (1966, p. 348; cf. 1975, p. 176). Lash, similarly, contends that it is more worthwhile to ask what happens in death than what happens after it (1979a, p. 174). These terminological and grammatical stipulations—the transition from future to present tense and from talk of ‘after’ to talk of ‘in’ or ‘through’—attempt to capture the depth grammar of the doctrine that our present life alone is the locus of eschatological hope while also doing justice to the momentousness of death, a momentousness so starkly epitomized in Jesus’ crucifixion.

What, then, is to be said about the death and resurrection of Jesus from the perspective of an exclusively this-sided, hither-worldly, conception of eternal life? Bultmann, again with John’s Gospel as a principal reference point, maintains that Jesus’ resurrection is ‘one and the same event’ as his return (*parousía*) and the descent of the Spirit at Pentecost, and that this single event is internal to the life of the believer: it is the arising of ‘a faith which recognizes in Jesus the Revelation of God’ (1955, p. 57). Lash, too, conceptualizes resurrection in terms of a kind of cognitive discovery or revelation, but supposes the discovery itself to be first instantiated by Jesus, who, ‘in dying ... discovers that his whole history ... far from slipping away ... stands, eternally ... with the transfigured reality and significance which belong to it from the standpoint of God’s eternal light’ (1979a, p. 178).

Although Lash’s attribution to Jesus on the cross of the recognition of the eternal reality of his life dramatizes that recognition in poignant terms, there is no obvious reason for delimiting the dawning of awareness to the final moments of life. We might recall again Phillips’ emphasis on the contemplation of one’s life as a completed whole, combining this with Rahner’s insistence that death gives a ‘definitiveness’ to life ‘from which you cannot run

away' (1986b, p. 88). One cannot, on this view, evade one's responsibility for one's decisions—and death, far from enabling one's life to fade away, as it were, into nothingness, fixes it with a determinate reality that, in Lash's evocative phrase, 'stands, eternally'.

### **Conceptual Augmentation from the Philosophy of Time**

By integrating ideas from several theologians and philosophers, the above exposition has given some indication of the conceptual richness of the contention that eternal life is an exclusively present possession. However, notwithstanding talk of contemplating one's life as a completed whole, of participating in God's eternity, and of death's crucial role in supplying life with a determinate reality, many readers, both non-Christian and indeed Christian, are liable to remain bemused by these phrases—hearing in them, perhaps, some semblance of edifying poetry, yet wondering whether they really amount to a conception of eternal life at all. I shall come to some specifically theological and philosophical objections to the conception at issue in the next section. Here, however, I want to suggest that resources for augmenting this conception—for amplifying an aspect of what makes it intelligible as a conception of eternal life—can be found in debates in the philosophy of time, especially in those theories that envisage the universe as a four-dimensional continuum or spacetime manifold.

Some commentators see modern debates over the metaphysics of time prefigured in Presocratic philosophy, with Heraclitus representing the view that, as Plato summarizes it in the *Cratylus*, everything flows and 'nothing stands fast' (Plato 1997, 401d) and Parmenides typifying the contrasting view that, in truth, everything constitutes an immutable unity and nothing really comes into or goes out of existence (Hoy 2013; Peterson and Silberstein 2010, p. 210). In modern parlance, the Parmenidean model, or some analogue of it, has come to be known variously as four-dimensionalism, the block universe, or eternalism, and the opposing

model, which may or may not have much in common with the thought of Heraclitus, is termed presentism. Typically, presentism is defined as the view that ‘only present things exist’ (Crisp 2007, p. 90) or ‘only the present is real’ (Noonan 2013, p. 219), whereas eternalism is defined as the view that all times, including those that would normally be designated past and future as well as that which is present, are ‘equally real’ (ibid.). A third view, known as possibilism or the growing block theory, maintains that the past and present are real but the future comprises bare possibilities that are yet to be realized (Callender 2012, p. 73). My purpose here is not to enter into the tangled debate concerning which, if any, of these theories is nearest the truth. Rather, I want to focus solely on the eternalist model and to explore how it can add conceptual content to the suggestion that our lives, though finite in duration, are nevertheless eternally real.

Contemporary eternalism draws inspiration both from a strand in John McTaggart’s work in the philosophy of time and from Hermann Minkowski’s model of spacetime in mathematical physics. McTaggart (1908; 1927, ch. 33) distinguishes between two ways of conceptualizing positions in time, which he names the A series and B series respectively. The first of these identifies the positions as forming a series running from past to present to future, whereas the second regards them as standing in relations of ‘earlier than’, ‘simultaneous with’ and ‘later than’ (Le Poidevin 1991, p. 1). McTaggart himself argues that both series are necessary components of time and yet the A-series is internally inconsistent. It is inconsistent because events that are future become present and then past, even though future, present and past are mutually incompatible positions. Meanwhile, the B-series, though not internally inconsistent, cannot suffice for time to exist; and hence McTaggart concludes that time is unreal.<sup>9</sup> Philosophers who term themselves B-theorists concur with McTaggart about the inconsistency of the A-series, but maintain that the B-series alone is sufficient for the reality

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<sup>9</sup> For more sustained exposition of McTaggart’s argument than I can provide here, see Dummett (1960) and Dyke (2002).

of time. Picturing the temporal sequence as nothing more than the totality of things and events spread out in an ‘ordered extension’ (Williams 1951, p. 463), B-theorists affirm that everything within the sequence is ‘equally real’; it is this view that is also known as eternalism. B-theorists further contend that the ‘flow’ of time—the becoming present of events followed by their fading into the past—is not an objective feature of reality but is a mere appearance produced by our own perspective within the continuum. Most eternalists would accept this latter view as well, though there are a few who propose that the equal reality of all times need not preclude the existence of an objective ‘now’ that moves along the continuum like a spotlight (Skow 2009; cf. Broad 1923, p. 59).

Minkowski’s model of the universe as a four-dimensional manifold of spacetime coordinates, which takes as its starting point Albert Einstein’s theory of special relativity, has much in common with McTaggart’s B-series, for it too represents ‘all events in the history of the universe’ within a single picture while privileging none of them as ‘present’ (Dieks 2014, pp. 99, 103). Beyond merely attaching the dimension of time to the three dimensions of space, Minkowski claims that the new model reduces ‘space-in-itself and time-in-itself’ to mere ‘shadows’, with ‘only a sort of union of the two’—spacetime—‘retain[ing] an independent existence’ (Minkowski 1918, p. 288). This vision of reality has been seen as highly conducive to the purposes of those eternalists who, among other things, wish to treat the temporal indexical ‘now’ in the same way as the spatial indexical ‘here’, each term identifying merely the location of the subject within the spacetime continuum rather than picking out an objective feature of the universe as a whole.

One might wonder why ‘eternalism’ has become a popular name for the theory, especially given that the term has an alternative use in philosophical theology to denote the view that God is not in time (see, e.g., Helm 2014). Although most proponents of eternalism, as it occurs in the metaphysics of time, emphasize the equal reality of all times, the notion of

eternal reality is generally implicit and sometimes becomes explicit. Michael Lockwood, for instance, invokes ‘the idea that all events are eternally real’ (2005, p. 69) and Robin Le Poidevin remarks that if temporal passage is merely apparent, then all ‘things are eternally real’, including ‘everything we value’ (1996, pp. 145–146). The central thought at work in these claims is something like the following. Once the universe is defined as a four-dimensional whole with time as an intrinsic structural component, the idea that time is something the universe exists in, or persists through, falls away. If, then, the kind of reality possessed by the universe is to be characterized at all, one option is to say that it is eternal—not in the sense that it exists forever, for that would be to imply that it exists temporally (albeit without ever reaching an endpoint), but rather in the sense that it, the universe itself, is the timeless reality, the very context, in which time exists.

Having pictured the universe as an ‘eternal manifold’ (Williams 1951, p. 470), a further conceptual step is to think of all the contributory elements of the universe’s history as partaking of its eternality. Although, following Spinoza, one might hold that it is the universal whole alone that ‘is eternal in its own right’ (Hallett 1930, p. 132, original emphasis), this need not preclude its constituent parts possessing a dependent eternity by virtue of their participating, as it were, in the flourishing of the whole. Those constituent parts include our own lives.

Remarkably, it is not unheard of for theoretical physicists as well as metaphysicians to cite the four-dimensional conception of the universe as being decisive in shaping their attitude towards mortality. Einstein in particular, upon hearing of the death of his lifelong friend Michele Besso, wrote to Besso’s family that one’s ‘departure from this strange world’ has no significance for ‘believing [or “faithful”: gläubige] physicists’, as ‘the distinction between past, present and future amounts to a mere, though obstinate, illusion’ (21 March



1955, in Speziali 1972, p. 538, my trans.).<sup>10</sup> Einstein, who himself died less than a month later, is generally interpreted to have meant that death, far from eradicating a person's life, 'is an event, merely, that marks the outer limit of that person's extension' in one direction of spacetime (Lockwood 2005, pp. 53–54).<sup>11</sup>

Needless to say, the thought that a human life has a determinate place in the eternal manifold is unlikely to be found consoling by someone who craves to have her deceased beloved with her again or who yearns for an indefinite prolongation of her own life. What it affords instead is an opportunity to adopt an alternative perspective on one's life, or indeed upon the lives of others, a perspective that considers the life as precisely the kind of finite whole that Phillips speaks of or as the 'unity of temporal man', which Rahner describes as being 'given its definitiveness' by, or through, death (1966, p. 352; 1986b, p. 86). This unity, says Rahner, may be thought of as the 'resurrection of the dead', not because it is a further life that takes place after the earthly one, but because it is this very earthly life contemplated in its concrete bodiliness (Rahner 1986a, p. 240). The original life and the resurrected life are not two stages along a single trajectory, as though we merely switched horses and journeyed on (Rahner 1966, p. 347; cf. Feuerbach 1980, p. 19); they are the life as lived in time and the life—the same life—as a determinate stretch of the eternal history of the universe. Ultimately one could say that it is neither two stages nor two distinct lives, one mortal and one eternal, that are at issue: it is two perspectives on the same life. As was suggested in the previous section, there is no reason why a transition from one perspective to the other—from the temporal to the eternal—must engender ethical and spiritual revision; but the transition makes possible such revision by prompting reflection upon the values embodied in one's life as a

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<sup>10</sup> See also Einstein's earlier letter of condolence, dated 12 February 1950, to Robert Marcus, whose son had recently died of polio, in which Einstein remarks that human beings are merely limited parts of the whole, which we call 'Universe' (Calaprice 2005, p. 206).

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Le Poidevin (1996, p. 146): 'And death is no longer the passage into oblivion: it is simply one of the temporal limits of our lives.'

whole, and hence upon one's way of living here and now. The Christian is apt to say that if one is prompted, inspired, to surrender one's life to Christ, then the determinate stretch of history that is one's life will be not merely eternally real, but raised in glory, whereas if it abides in wickedness, it condemns itself.

### **Objections and Replies**

Much more could be written on the significance for conceptions of eternal life of the sort of metaphysical eternalism discussed in the preceding section. One could note, for example, the prevalence of something resembling the four-dimensional model of the universe in theological depictions of God's perspective on the world and on our lives; in contrast with us in our ordinary creaturely position in time, it is said that God views everything as 'simply "there" in eternity' (Rogers 2008, p. 181; cf. Helm 2010, pp. 257–259). I want, however, to leave room for consideration of some objections to the central contention of this article, which is that there is a conception of eternal life as an exclusively present possession that is both intelligible and ethically and spiritually profound. Here I shall adduce four poignant objections and offer at least the outline of a possible reply to each in turn.

1. Watering down Christianity. The philosopher H. H. Price, commenting on the proposal that 'Eternal life is just life of the highest possible quality' and 'has no temporal implications at all', has suggested that this is merely 'a watered-down version of Christianity' (1972, pp. 92–93, 94), which is recommended only by those who make the 'psychological mistake' of assuming 'that it is easier to accept a simple creed than a complex one' (p. 94). There are two points to be addressed here, one concerning dilution and the other concerning ease of acceptance. With regard to the first, the idea that eternal life is, or can be, a quality of one's finite and mortal life amounts to a dilution or watering down of the Christian message only if one overlooks the ethical, psychological and existential depth that the idea evinces. The

quality of existence that believers are enjoined to take on is a life-transforming one, a reorientation of values away from self-gratification and towards love of neighbour and of enemy alike. It is a quality of existence so demanding that believers admit to being unable to carry it through without the grace of God, and yet the rewards internal to that quality of existence are such that believers speak of the victory over death—freedom from the shadow that death casts—coming from the relinquishing of self-serving goals. If the injunction to transform one's life in this way constitutes a mere dilution of the gospel, then it is unclear what would count as the gospel's consolidation.

With regard to whether 'it is easier to accept a simple creed than a complex one', it is obvious neither that conceiving of eternal life as a present possession is 'a simple creed' nor that Christianity has much to do with ease of acceptance in any case. The idea that eternal life, rather than being an unendingly prolonged life beyond death, is the present life qualitatively transformed is likely to be viewed as simple only if the severe demandingness of the qualitative transformation is ignored. Moreover, while the principle that one must change one's life might be relatively easy to accept, the change itself may well be infinitely difficult to achieve, which is why faith is frequently recognized to be more than a merely intellectual assent to a doctrinal claim; it is, as Søren Kierkegaard among many others has insisted, never a completed act, but 'a passion that must be constantly renewed' (McDonald 2014, p. 69; cf. Kierkegaard 1992, p. 204).

2. We drop out of the picture. Responding to ideas from Nicholas Lash in particular, Brian Hebblethwaite has argued that Lash advocates a vision of eternal life in which we—human individuals—'slip out' or 'drop out of the picture', leaving not us with an eternal life at all, but only our ordinary lives experienced, as Lash puts it, 'from the standpoint of God' (Hebblethwaite 1979, p. 60; cf. Lash 1979a, p. 178). A similar complaint was made earlier by

John Baillie against those who conceive of immortality as a reabsorption ‘into the divine life’ as opposed to individual continuation. ‘Of course,’ writes Baillie (1934, p. 189),

if what is meant is simply that I cease to be, whereas God remains, no strain at all is then put upon my powers of believing, because there is really nothing regarding myself that I am asked to believe. But if more than this is implied, to what exactly does it amount?

Replying to Hebblethwaite’s objection, Lash contends that if it were the case that we had slipped ‘out of the picture’, then ‘God’s timeless life would have been deprived of contingent, temporal expression’ (1979b, p. 63), Lash’s point being that viewing one’s present, historically embedded, life as the one that is eternal insofar as it expresses the glory of God is hardly to eliminate human beings from the picture. What has been eliminated is the possibility of our undergoing fresh experiences subsequent to death, for this has been replaced by a renewed emphasis on our participation in God’s eternity here and now. Against those who suppose that a vision of this kind is comparable to the one that Baillie dismisses as presenting nothing in which to believe regarding oneself, it could be observed that coming to accept the life of Jesus as the revelation of God’s reality, a reality that demands of us an ongoing commitment to self-sacrificing love, is far indeed from nothing.<sup>12</sup>

3. Eternal life must be more than a perspective. A further objection might pick up on the perspectival theme—the idea that eternal life is not more life but one’s present life viewed under a different aspect—and maintain that receiving eternal life has to amount to more than a mere change of perspective: it must involve a change in one’s life itself. An objection of

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<sup>12</sup> As a reviewer for this journal pertinently observes, a full account of how a human life can be said to be finite in duration and yet also to express, and thereby indwell, the eternal life of God would require more detailed discussion of the concept of God than I have had space to provide here. Such discussion would have to address, in particular, the question of what it means for God to be love and for a human being’s loving activity to participate in God’s reality. I make some suggestions relevant to these issues in Burley (2014, pp. 322–324), though I admit that further explicatory work is needed.

this sort might be linked with the criticism—often made of D. Z. Phillips, for example—that what is being offered is a ‘non-realist’ account, an account concerning only human attitudes to life and having little bearing upon any ‘facts’ that exist independently of the forms of religious discourse in which the attitudes are expressed.<sup>13</sup> A reply to this objection could begin by questioning the supposed distinction between a transformed perspective or attitude on the one hand and a transformed life on the other. A change in the way one sees and thinks about one’s life, it might be noted, is itself a change in one’s life. In other words, to come to notice something about one’s life of which one had previously been unaware is not for one’s life to remain unchanged: it is, precisely, to be changed with respect to one’s self-conception, which can, in certain instances, be the greatest transformation anyone can undergo. It can, indeed, be nothing less than a conversion, revealing not only one’s life, but also the world, anew (cf. Lonergan 1973, pp. 130–131).

The considerations from theoretical physics and the philosophy of time facilitate a further reply, which is that there is indeed a sense in which the eternity of our lives consists in more than a change of perspective; the change of perspective identifies an independently real characteristic of our lives, the fact that their reality does not diminish with the passing of time. What the Christian viewpoint infuses into this picture is an emphasis on its being specifically the ethical reality of one’s life that cannot be diminished and a vision of what ethical life ought to be.

4. Facing up to evil. Finally, the most powerful of the objections that I shall consider here is one that accuses the conception of eternal life under discussion of not merely failing to address the problem of evil, but of compounding that problem by envisaging eternity as a static condition in which all human acts and experiences, including the most heinous crimes and most pitiable sufferings, remain fixed and unalterable. Physical and metaphysical

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<sup>13</sup> For criticism of Phillips along these lines, see Haldane (2008; 2010, ch. 12). For further discussion, see Burley (2012, ch. 5).

theories of time of the sort discussed in this article have been known to encourage the thought that the universe, and everything that composes it, is immutable by describing it as a block that is, in effect, 'static'. As several commentators have pointed out, the latter notion 'is rather misleading ... as it suggests that there is a time frame in which the four-dimensional block universe stays the same' (Huw Price 1996, p. 13); yet expositions of the four-dimensional view frequently rely on images such as that of a 'frozen river' (Greene 2005, ch. 5) or 'sea of ice' (Le Poidevin 1996, p. 138) to represent, albeit metaphorically, 'the whole of history at once, in one picture' (Dieks 2014, p. 103).

Theologians, including those who deny that eternal life involves continued existence subsequent to death, have acknowledged the problems associated with the image of a static eternity. Rahner, for example, recognizes how dreadful it would be to think of our lives, replete with all their 'banalities and questionable aspects'—and, we might add, their traumas and humiliations—'frozen in a final and definitive state' (1975, p. 174). Worst of all would be to imagine the most wretched of lives, the lives of abused children, for instance, who have no opportunity to flourish, permanently etched into the structure of the cosmos (cf. Moltmann 1996, p. 70). What room does such an image leave for salvific hope; has death, in these cases, not been the decisive victor? Rahner's own response is hardly pellucid, including as it does the contention that, in eternity, the only achievable development for a life 'is to lose itself in a loving immediacy to the ultimate Mystery of existence called God, and thereby discover its own fulness' (1975, p. 175). Understandably, not all theologians or philosophers have found this kind of answer convincing, and yet it is far from clear whether any attempt to address the problem of evil in purely theoretical terms can succeed in doing anything other than a gross injustice to the afflicted. For this reason, Lash, for example, seeks to shift the emphasis away from theoretical explanation and towards practical action: while there is not much that can be said to account for 'the meaninglessness that is an irreducible component of all suffering ...

there is not a little that, in the Easter hope, we may discover the courage to do' (1979a, p. 182).

Anyone looking for robust theoretical justifications of God in the face of evil will find the turn to practical action evasive. What the devisers of theodicies typically seek is a means of showing that things turn out all right in the end, that suffering is always vindicated; and those who invoke the promise of an afterlife frequently do so to illustrate how God may compensate even the victims of the worst atrocities for the pain they have endured. The reality of tragedy is undoubtedly the most powerful of motivations for the hope of something beyond death, a second chance for those whose earthly lives have been stunted or destroyed. The conception of eternal life as an exclusively present possession offers no second chance, but maintains that it is the tragic lives themselves that are eternally real; the tragedy cannot be assuaged, still less 'defeated', by any 'incommensurate Good' granted after death.<sup>14</sup> As Grace Jantzen observes, when Jesus says that even the sparrows that fall to the ground do not go unnoticed by God, he 'never denies that sparrows do fall' (1984, p. 42; cf. Matthew 10:29). Humans, too, fall, and are sometimes crushed by the world. Understanding those lives in the light of the doctrine that God is love cannot undo their suffering. But it might, for some believers, open up the possibility of seeing how, in their eternal reality, even—or perhaps especially—the lives of the most downtrodden are 'raised on high' (Phillips 2004, p. 273).

### **Concluding Remarks**

I have argued in this article for the intelligibility of a conception of eternal life according to which it is the finite life that one presently possesses—and not some future existence—which is, in a certain sense, eternal. I have also proposed that, beyond mere intelligibility, the conception of eternal life at issue has ethical and spiritual depth. This latter proposal is not

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<sup>14</sup> For discussion of 'incommensurate goodness' and the 'defeat' of 'even horrendous evils', see Adams (1999, pp. 4, 82–85, 162–163 et passim).

intended as the claim that anyone ought to become a believer in eternal life in the sense concerned; nor is it a confession of faith on my own part. Rather, it is the contention that the conception under discussion deserves to be taken seriously as a religious possibility, instead of being written off as somehow falling short of genuine religion or as lacking metaphysical or ethical significance.

I have not argued, and nor would I wish to argue, that conceiving of eternal life as an exclusively present possession is the only or the most hermeneutically sound interpretation to draw from relevant biblical sources. My view on this matter is that the Bible in general and the New Testament in particular are amenable to multiple interpretations, which can be taken up and embodied in various forms of religious life. There are, undoubtedly, constraints on what can and what cannot be construed as faithfully Christian, but these constraints are not themselves beyond contestation. While some Christians may question whether an exclusively ‘this-sided’ conception of eternal life is capable of sustaining a vigorous Christian faith, others will insist that it is only a conception of this kind that is able to avoid the conceptual and moral difficulties associated with belief in a life subsequent to the present one.

The observation of intriguing parallels between models of the universe in theoretical physics and the philosophy of time on the one hand and in theology on the other is far from unique to me. Several commentators have pointed out resemblances between the theological depictions of the world as God apprehends it and philosophical and scientific theories of space and time as a unified continuum comprising the entire history of the universe (e.g., Helm 2010, ch. 14; Chase 2014). Although there remains considerable scope for further exploration of these resemblances, I hope to have advanced the discussion by focusing particular attention upon the theme of the eternal reality of our finite and mortal lives.

It is often assumed that rejecting the idea of eternal life as an other-worldly existence must be part of a secularizing strategy, which seeks to ‘confine’ the significance of religion to



‘this world’ alone (Badham 1989, p. 27). This assumption underestimates how variegated are the ways in which ‘this world’, and the lives that we live in it, can themselves be comprehended in religious terms. Understanding eternal life as an exclusively present possession, in the sense, or senses, explored in this article, is not a matter of relinquishing a religious view of the world in favour of one denuded of religious meaning. It is, on the contrary, to view one’s one-and-only life under the aspect of eternity, to perceive it as an inestimably precious gift, the opportunity to participate in the world as an expression of the eternal life of God.

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