

“Eternity and Eternal Life: Reflections on physics, eschatology and Pannenberg”

Robert John Russell

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This paper offers a brief condensation of some of the key themes in my recent publication, *Time in Eternity: Physics, Eschatology and Pannenberg in Creative Mutual Interaction* (University of Notre Dame, 2012). TIE represents the first book-length presentation of my method for relating theology and science, one which I call “creative mutual interaction” (CMI). Here theology is first reformulated in light of science, as reflected in the phrase “theology of nature” and as found throughout the theology/science literature. Uniquely, though, theology is then invited to offer suggestions for new directions in scientific research, including inspiring the construction of new scientific theories and offering criteria of theory choice between existing competing theories. Note: CMI is entirely compatible with methodological naturalism in science.

In this paper I propose that “eternity” stands for two interrelated concepts, the first more centered in philosophical theology, the second in systematic theology: 1) eternity in relation to our lived experience of time where the subjective experience of the present has temporal duration, including memory and anticipation, and 2) eternity as the time of the New Creation which impacts our lived experience as a continual series of “proleptic events” based on the resurrection of Jesus as the normative prolepsis in history. I will draw on the writings of Wolfhart Pannenberg to develop both 1) and 2).

1) Our lived experience of time is of a fleeting present moment with its unique past and future. I call this the “ppf” structure of ordinary time. Moreover time is “flowing”: the future becomes the present for an instant, then vanishes immediately into the past. Here the past of each present is irretrievable and the future of each present is inexperienceable, giving to the ppf structure of time its tragic quality (or what Whitehead so aptly called “perpetual perishing”). Nevertheless, following Pannenberg’s reading of Augustine, our subjective experience of time is richer than this: it is one of temporal duration, characterized by memory of the past and anticipation of the future. In addition, following Pannenberg’s reading of Plotinus and Boethius, our experience of duration, in which past and future seem to cohere in the present moment, is made possible by our participation in eternity (or what Barth referred to as our being ‘embedded’ in eternity). In essence, eternity provides the unity to all such subjective present moments while preserving their unique ppf structures. In eternity all of these present moments, with their temporal durations intact, will be simultaneous (to use the phrase of Boethius) and redeemed, cleansed of all brokenness and available to us for endless re-experiencing. Thus in eternity the tragic quality of temporality will be overcome while the true temporality of life, as found in its ppf structure, will remain. In a phrase, we will be able not just to remember the distant past but to re-experience it whole and healed in the present. Here I prefer to refer to the simultaneity of eternity as “co-presence” since, as

said above, each present, held together with all the others, retains its unique ppt structure. This point is not always stated in philosophical theology where eternity can seem to be a timeless now, an undifferentiated *nunc*. I then propose that our subjective experience of duration points to a form of duration in nature which can be found even at the elementary level of complexity studied by physics. (Whether Pannenberg makes the same claim is debatable.) This move will play a crucial role later when I search for research avenues in physics inspired by the theological concept of eternity.

2) The eternity just described lies not ‘above’ us, as one typically finds neo-orthodox theological systems, but in the eschatological future, as found in systematic theologies which understand the eschaton in terms of history. Thus following Moltmann, Peters and Pannenberg, the eternity of the New Creation is the “arrival of the future,” where the future is the eschatological *adventus* and not simply the scientific *futurum*. In this coming eschatological future, the New Creation will arise as a transformation of the present creation by God’s radical act of grace beginning with the resurrection of Jesus. It is *this* eternity, the eternity of the New Creation, which ‘reaches back’ as a prolepsis, manifesting itself in the event of Jesus’ resurrection. It is *this* eternity in which we participate in each moment of time (see 1 above), and our participation is grounded and made possible by the proleptic event of Christ in history. I then extend the normative Easter prolepsis to every event both in human life and in the lives of all sentient creatures across the multi-billion year history of the evolution of life. Thus in our encounter with death, Christ is proleptically present to us, taking us home forever. In turn, in the event of the deaths of all sentient creatures, Christ is proleptically present, taking them too into the New Creation.

I will reformulate these ideas in light of physics, especially Einstein’s special theory of relativity (SR), relating the divine attributes of eternity and omnipresence in terms of a relativistic spacetime framework which unites space and time in physics. This in turn requires that I defend our experience of flowing time against the challenge of the “block universe” interpretation of SR that predominates the literature in the philosophy of time. Finally I will suggest implications for research in physics based on this reformulated view of time and eternity, thereby showing the fruitful ways theology can interact with science by drawing on duration, co-presence and prolepsis. In addition, implications for the Christian life include: 1) new hope for an eternal life which is endlessly rich in true temporality without the tragic quality of time we now inevitably experience; 2) a vigorous eschatological response of multiple prolepses that addresses the problem of natural theodicy as raised by the history of suffering, disease, death and extinction throughout the evolution of life on earth, and 3) a striking basis for claim that theology includes cognitive truth claims by showing, perhaps for the first time, that theology can actually offer fruitful suggestions for new research directions in science.

TIE is dedicated to Wolfhart Pannenberg.