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ST. AUGUSTINE ON HUMAN TEMPORALITY AND DIVINE ETERNITY

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I. INTRODUCTION



AUGUSTINE'S RENOWNED ACCOUNT OF TIME IN BOOK 11 OF THE *CONFESSIONS* has often been viewed as an attempt to contrast man's temporal nature with the eternal nature of God.¹ One influential Augustine scholar has gone so far as to write that "[w]hatever he may hold in principle, Augustine does not behave very Platonically in practice in *Confessions* 11. His method is, rather, empirical: he considers time as a fact of everyday experience."² While it is true that Augustine deals with some empirical problems concerning time, it is certainly wrong to say that he employs an 'empirical method' and that his approach is not Platonic.³ In what follows I will argue that far from emphasizing a contrast between human temporality and divine eternity, Augustine, in fact, is attempting to develop an analogy between the two so as to explain the relationship between time and eternity. In order fully to understand what I mean by this, it is first necessary to examine the metaphysics of time in terms of the problems of motion and change with regard to the claim that it is only the present that exists. This will enable us to deal with the issues surrounding the reduction of time to the mind and the notion of the distension of the mind. We shall then be in a position to illustrate the analogy between the human experience of time and divine eternity in terms of the mystical ascent from man's temporal state to the timeless eternity of God.

II. THE METAPHYSICS OF TIME

A careful examination of Augustine's argument clearly shows that it is developed out of the Platonic discussion of time. Plato's metaphysics is, of course, founded upon the distinction between being and becoming, or that which always is and is never coming-into-being and that which is always coming-into-being but never is.⁴ Plato reconciles these two through his account of time. For him there is an ever-present instant the moving image of eternity-throughout the process of change in which the change actually takes place.⁵ Consequently, 'is' can only properly be attributed to the present time. He says in the *Timaeus*:

They are all parts of time, and the past and future are created species of time, which we unconsciously but wrongly transfer to eternal being, for we say that it 'was,' or 'is,' or 'will be,' but the truth is that 'is' alone is spoken of becoming in time.⁶

Augustine's primary argument for the non-existence of the past and future is much more simple than Plato's in that it does not rely upon this complex metaphysical framework. Augustine points out the simple fact that neither the past nor the future are. This is to say that the past is what has been and the future is what is yet to be. Thus,

neither of them really exist; it is only the present time which has existence.⁷ So Augustine writes:

*If future and past events exist, I want to know where they are. If I have not the strength to discover the answer, at least I know that wherever they are, they are not there as future or past, but as present. For if there also they are future, they will not yet be there. If there also they are past, they are no longer there. Therefore, wherever they are, whatever they are, they do not exist except in the present.*⁸

For Augustine then, as for Plato, the present is ontologically privileged in that it is the only time which is; therefore, the present is the only kind of temporality in which being is.

It must, however, be emphasized that for Augustine, as for Plato, the present is no mere part of time. Though it is common to speak of a year, day or hour as “the present,” Augustine notes that this is inaccurate. Any temporal duration which we take to be present can be divided into smaller units, where one precedes the other and neither are present, and this can be done ad infinitum.⁹ As a result, Augustine argues that the present instant, that aspect of time which truly is, is a durationless interval.¹⁰

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.’ And this time flies so quickly from future into past that it is an interval with no duration. If it has duration, it is divisible into past and future. But the present occupies no space.¹¹

It is evident, however, that we measure the duration of things through time, and if this is so, as in fact it is, time must amount to more than a durationless ever-present instant. Time must, it seems, have something to do with the ordering of successive events. In examining this aspect of time, Augustine critiques various accounts which attempt to identify time with physical movement. He maintains that time cannot be the movement of the heavenly bodies, for if the heavens were to stop, but another physical object such as a potter’s wheel were to

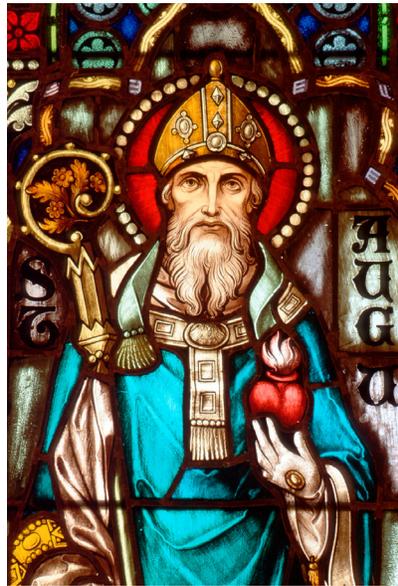
continue moving, it would be possible to show that some movements took longer and others less. So while the movements of the heavens can serve for signs and for times, they do not constitute time.¹² Yet Augustine is also unwilling to say that time is the movement of physical bodies. Rather, “a body’s movement is one thing, the period by which we measure is another.”¹³ The movement of physical bodies is what we measure by means of time; it is not what constitutes time.¹⁴

III. MEASUREMENT AND THE MIND

At this point Augustine shifts his focus. He leaves unanswered the question “what is time?” and asks instead “how is time measured by us?” Once again, we are thrown back on the problem of the non-existence of the past and future, for how can we measure the past or the future if they do not exist? Worse still, we cannot measure the present either because, as we discovered above, it is not extended.¹⁵ Moreover, as Augustine demonstrates, many of the conventions we use for judging and comparing lengths of time are arbitrary. The length of a poem is judged in terms of the number of lines, feet and syllables. Augustine notes, however, that the same poem may be recited faster or slower and subsequently may take two different lengths of time to recite. As a result of this reasoning, he maintains that time cannot be reduced to something external. Rather, time is a distension (distentio) of the mind. What is measured, therefore, is “time as it passes, but not time past.”¹⁶

Once Augustine takes the step of saying that time is measured as it passes, he clearly has no recourse but to explain our measurement of time through an appeal to the mind. One might try to avoid the whole problem by saying that it is not time that is measured but events or things which occur, persist or change through time. Gerard O’Daly sees as problematic Augustine’s conception of time as a flow of events. He writes,

Now if one thinks of events as a flow or sequence one gives them a history a past, a present, and a future. But events do not exist, whereas things stable or changing-do. To speak of the existence of persons or things makes sense; to speak of the existence of parts of time does not.¹⁷



That is to say, the standard of measurement is not the sort of thing that has real existence. O'Daly's objection is not, however, a fair criticism. To say that time is not the sort of thing that has existence is not to criticize Augustine's account, but to reject his entire ontology outright. For him it is precisely the standards of judgement and not the things we physically observe that most truly exist. Consequently, we must realize that eternity is the form, or exemplar, of time. In his own words, eternity, which is always present and "in which there is neither future nor past, stands still and dictates future and past times";¹⁸ or as he puts it in *De Musica*, "time imitates eternity."¹⁹ So Augustine says in the first book of the *Confessions*, "They would have no passing away unless You [i.e. God's eternity] set a limit to them."²⁰

But even if one is unwilling to accept Augustine's Platonism, he is certainly right to say that the mind will have an integral role to play in our understanding of the nature of time. In this account, what is measured is the interval between the beginning of the event and its end, and since we can only measure the event once it is gone, it is the image in the memory and not the event itself which is measured.²¹ Passing things impress themselves upon us as they pass, but remain in the memory as images even once they are gone. "That present consciousness is what I am measuring, not the stream of past events which have caused it. When I measure periods of time, that is what I am actually measuring."²² Yet it is unclear how the memory actually enables one to measure time. What is the difference between a long memory and a short memory, and how can this be quantified in some useful manner? Although Augustine does not deal with this problem in the *Confessions*, a passage in *De Musica* suggests a solution. There he notes that when a word of two syllables is sounded, both syllables cannot be heard at the same time, for the second cannot begin until the first ends. Consequently, memory is required if we are to hear (or experience) things in succession at all, in order that "we would also know and feel that we had heard." The whole word is not heard at once; therefore, memory is required if we are to comprehend the word as a whole. Similarly, we cannot view an object in its entirety all at once. If we are to have some idea of it as a whole, we must then have some ability to remember what we have seen from different perspectives so as not to be restricted to the immediately present view.²³ So although the Augustinian reduction of time to the mind may not provide a fully adequate account of how we measure time, it is insightful in so far as it recognizes that memory, and

hence the mind, have a central role to play in explaining how men experience and measure time.



IV. HUMAN TEMPORALITY AND DIVINE ETERNITY

As we have seen, the human mind, for Augustine, is extended in time. A man exists and attends to the present, but his existence is a distension (*distentio*) through time. In classical authors the term *distentio* was often used in a medical context to mean a convulsion or nervous spasm, while Christian authors extended its usage to refer to tension more generally, though still retaining something of its earlier sense. Hence, Jerome says of *distentio*, "*eo quod in uariis sollicitudines mens hominis distenta lanietur.*"²⁴ The medical use of *distentio* is instructive in interpreting Augustine. In the conclusion to Book 11 of the *Confessions*, clearly what he is referring to when he uses *distentio* is the temporal condition of the human mind itself rather than a definition of time per se. As he tells us, since the human mind is temporal, its "life is a distension in several directions."²⁵

This view must be contrasted with God's eternity in order to be understood fully. While we are distended through time, God is the same and "His years do not fail,"²⁶ and neither, as Augustine points out, "do they come or go." Similarly, God's day is not any and every day but Today. Consequently, Augustine writes, "Your Today is eternity,"²⁷ and in eternity "there is nothing past as if it has already transpired, nor anything future as if it does not yet exist, but whatever is simply is."²⁸ Whereas for us the future is yet to happen and the past is already gone, God knows all time without tension in his act of knowing.²⁹ So in discussing God's knowledge in *Eighty-Three Different Questions*, Augustine says, "In God's sight, [nothing exists] as past or future, but everything is now. This is further explained in the *City of God*: "God comprehends all these in a stable and eternal present... Nor is there any difference between His present, past, and future knowledge. His knowledge is not like ours which has three tenses... God's knowledge has no change or variation."³⁰ God therefore holds past, present and future before himself at once in the self-same eternal present.

While this clearly distinguishes human nature from the divine, it also points the way to a useful analogy between man and God, given Augustine's account of the human experience of time. As we have seen, it is only the present which is really before man; past and future do not exist, but are a result of human memory and expectation. Consequently, man holds past and future, to which he is subjected, within himself in the present. This human experience of time in terms of the present may be likened to God's ever-present awareness of eternity. In order to explain the human experience of time, Augustine considers the man who has memorized an entire psalm. In singing it, none of the past verses are hidden, nor are any of the future verses which remain to be sung.³¹ While there is an analogy to be drawn between man's experience of temporality and the eternity of God, Augustine says:

A person singing or listening to a song he knows well suffers a distension or stretching in feeling and in sense perception from the expectation of future sounds and the memory of past sound. With you it is otherwise. You are unchangeably eternal, that is the truly eternal Creator of minds.³²

Consequently, in *De Trinitate*, Augustine writes, "Insofar as we are changeable, to that extent do we fall short of eternity."³³ It is for this reason that he says of God and His eternity, "It fills me with terror and burning love: with terror inasmuch as I am utterly other than it, with burning love in that I am akin to it,"³⁴ So the analogy is not completely sufficient, since God is wholly perfect and outside of time.

Yet keeping in mind the medical connotations of the term *distentio*, the very fact that we suffer distension while God is eternal points the way to that which has the power to cure us, namely, God himself. This approach was pioneered by Plotinus, whom Augustine had certainly read. As Plotinus had written, "Surely one would be oneself on the move towards eternity and never falling away from it at all, that one might be like it and eternal, contemplating eternity and the eternal by the eternal in oneself."³⁵ Thus, while Augustine was reflecting with Monica on the life of eternal contemplation enjoyed by the saints, their "minds were lifted up by an ardent affection towards eternal being itself"³⁶ So it is possible for the human mind to be gathered together to some degree in the contemplation of God, for the more the mind "reaches out toward what is eternal, the more it is formed thereby to the image of God."³⁷ Similarly, the angels, although they transcend time, are not co-eternal

with God but enjoy a continuous vision of His beauty. The angels do not suffer time; yet because of the movements of their own contemplation they cannot be co-eternal with God.³⁸ Even men, however, who are far beneath the angels, can approach the divine through contemplation and love of Him. As Augustine puts it, "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."³⁹ Once more the medical images of *distentio* and of being "torn to pieces" reappear, pointing to a truth which is fundamental to the proper understanding of the human condition. Man, being caught up in the flow of time, is bound to a process which he cannot understand. Due to this fact, he wanders through this mortal life separated from, and searching for, God. This existence, stretched through time, "tears to pieces" his soul; yet in moving towards the end that he is seeking—that is to say, in being reconciled to his Creator—all the wounds of his soul are healed. Although "life is a distension in several directions," by "apprehending Him in whom also I am apprehended," each of us can be healed of the tension that threatens to rip us apart, a tension which is brought on by the fact that our own *existence (esse)* is stretched through time. In seeking God in the present instant we are "gathered to follow the One, 'forgetting the past' and moving not towards those future things which are transitory but to 'the things which are before' me, not stretched out in distraction but extended in reach, not by being pulled apart but by concentration."⁴⁰

V. CONCLUSION

St. Augustine's discussion of time is thus parallel to Plato's attempt to reconcile being and becoming through an appeal to the present instant. For him, as for Plato, the present is "the moving image of eternity." In Augustine's view, neither the past nor the future exist, as the past is what has been and the future is what is yet to be.

This reduction of time to the present leads Augustine to claim that time is the distension of the mind. It is the mind's ability to remember the past and anticipate the future as it is subjected to the variations of the external world that constitute its temporal condition. While Augustine's claim that the measurement of time can be reduced to the measurement of memory or expectation is insufficient to account for this phenomenon, it is important to note that memory is a necessary condition of

such measurement.

Finally, it is simply not the case that St. Augustine's primary concern in Book 11 of the *Confessions* is to sketch an empirical account of time and measurement. Rather, those considerations are brought into the discussion in order to introduce and illumine the more substantial issue of the human *experience* of time and the relation of this experience to divine eternity. In terms of this problem, St. Augustine's claim that although the mind suffers distension through time, only the present exists, and his theory that the mind holds both the past, in the form of the images of memory, and the future, in the form of expectations within itself, appears more plausible. Thus, it is possible to draw an analogy between man's temporal condition and the

eternity of God where past, present and future are always before Him in the self-same eternal present. Setting out this analogy is, I would argue, the primary purpose of the treatment of time in Book 11. Moreover, I think that it may be seen as an early account of the detailed analogy between the activities of the human mind and God which he was to develop further in *De Trinitate*. There memory, understanding and will-the mind's activities concerning past, present and future are shown to be analogous to the three persons of the Holy Trinity-the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The power of St. Augustine's treatment of time lies in illustrating that by pursuing God through our contemplation and love of Him, we can emerge from the region of dissimilarity where our mind suffers distension through time so as to attain the peace which is His.


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NOTES

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2Gerard O'Daly, *Augustine's Philosophy of Mind* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 152.

3For a discussion of Augustine's treatment of the empirical issues about time see Hugh M. Lacey, "Empiricism and Augustine's Problems about Time," *Augustine: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. R.A. Markus (New York: Anchor Books, 1972), 280-301.

4*Timaeus*, 27d; *Philebus*, 54d; and *Republic*, 527b, in Plato, *Collected Dialogues*, eds. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963).

5*Parmenides*, 156c ff., and *Sophist*, 250b.

6*Timaeus*, 38a.

7Aristotle raises this point as a paradox in *Physics*, IV, 10. One might object that time is not the sort of thing that has existence, but is rather a measure of existing things in terms of successive events. See Aristotle, *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, 2 Vols., ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

8*Confessions*, XI, xviii, 23. All translations from the *Confessions* are from St. Augustine, *Confessions*, tr. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

9St. Augustine, *De Musica*, VI, 17, 21. All translations from *De Musica* are from *The Fathers of the Church*, Vol. 4, tr. R.C. Toliaferro (N.Y.: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1947). Cf. S. Augustini, *De Vera Religione*, CSEL, ed. W.M. Green (Vienna: Hoelder, Pichler, Tempsky, 1961), 77, 80.

10*Conf.*, XI, xv, 20. Gerard O'Daly maintains that Augustine fails to realize that one cannot arrive at an indivisible period of time through a process of dividing time (Augustine's *Philosophy of Mind*, 155). Here O'Daly agrees with John Locke: "Every part of duration is duration too, and every part of extension is extension, both of them capable of addition or division in infinitum." John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter Nidditch, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 2.15.9. I think that this fails to recognize the significance of the present; it is not a part of time at all, but rather an instant which is ever-present with time. Aristotle has a useful analogy to explain this. The 'now' is to time as a point is to a line. While there is a point at any given place on the line, the line itself is not made up of points. So too time is not a succession of individual 'nows' which are the parts of time, but two periods of time (Physics, 220a15-20).

11*Conf.*, XI, xv, 19.

12*Conf.*, XI, xxiii, 29. Genesis 1:14. There are two points to note here: (1) Augustine agrees with Plotinus (cf. *Enneads*, III, 7,8 and 111 7, 12, trans. A.H. Armstrong [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967]), on this point against St. Basil and possibly Plato in *Timaeus* 37cd. There are further citations to this effect from Eratosthenes and Hestiaeus of Perinthus. Cf. Stobaeus, *Ecl. Phys.*, I, 8, 40. (2) Augustine provides strong Scriptural evidence against the view that time is to be identified with the movement of heavenly bodies by citing the book of Joshua, where we are told that in answer to a man's prayer the sun stood still though time went on so that there would be sufficient time to complete a battle (Joshua 10:12).

13*Conf.*, XI, xxiv, 31.

14One important point which I have not dealt with here is Augustine's discussion of time in relation to creation. Of particular importance to his theology is the response to the Manichean question, "What was God doing before he created the world?" On this point he consistently responds that God created time with the world and for this reason it does not make sense to ask what happened before creation, for time did not exist "before" the world was created. So while time cannot be identified with material bodies or change, these are necessary conditions of there being time at all. See *Conf.*, XI, xii, 14; *De Civitate Dei*, XI, 6; and St. Augustine, *De Genesi ad Litteram Libri*, 2 vols., tr. J.H. Taylor (N.Y.: The Newman Press, 1982), V, 5, 12-16. See also Etienne Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of St. Augustine*, trans. L.E.M. Lynch (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1961), 191-196.

15See *Conf.* XI, xxvi, 33: "That I am measuring time I know. But I am not measuring the future which does not yet exist, nor the present which has no extension, nor the past which is no longer in being."

16Ibid. Plotinus also speaks of time as a distension of the soul, its passing from one state to another (*Enneads*, 111,7,11). However, as Richard Sorabji has pointed out, it is quite clear that Plotinus is speaking of the world soul and not the soul of an individual agent. See Richard Sorabji, *Time, Creation, and the Continuum* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), 166, fn. 85.

17Augustine's *Philosophy of Mind*, 155. O'Daly's view, however, sweeps aside the ontological fact that things only have being in the present instant and not in the past or future.

18 *Conf.*, XI, xi, 13.

19 *De Musica*, VI, xi, 29.

20 *Conf.*, I, vi, 10.

21 *Conf.*, XI, xxvii, 35.

22 *Conf.*, XI, xxvii, 36.

23*De Musica*, VI, viii, 21. The transformation of the experience into an image in the memory is instantaneous (see *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, XII, xvi, 33). See also St. Augustine, *De Trinitate* XIV, 11, 14, trans. Edmund Hill, O.P. (New York: New City Press, 1991).

24 St. Jerome, *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, 1, 13. An excellent account of the use of this term and its meaning for Augustine may be found in Gerard O'Daly, "Time as Distentio and St. Augustine's Exegesis of Philippians 3:12-14," *Revue des Etudes Augustiniennes*, 23 (1977): 265-271.

25*Conf.*, XI, xxix, 39.

26Psalms 104: 4.

27 *Conf.*, XI, xiii, 16.

28 Augustine, *Eighty-Three Different Questions*, trans. David L. Mosher (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1982), q. 19.

29 *Conf.*, XI, xxxi, 41.

30 *De Civitate Dei*, XI, 21, emp. added. See also *Eighty-Three Different Questions*, q. 17. It is important to note that it was Boethius' definition of eternity ("the simultaneously-whole and perfect possession of interminable life") and not Augustine's treatment which was the focal point of discussion throughout the Middle Ages.

31 *Conf.*, XI, xxxi, 41.

32 *Ibid.*

33 *De Trinitate*, IV, 24.

34 XI, IX, 11.

35 *Enneads*, III, 7, 5.

36 *Conf.*, IX, x, 24.

37 *De Trinitate*, XII, 10. So we are told in Philippians 3:13-14: "I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth (*distentio*) into those things which are before, I press toward the mark of the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus."

38 *De Civitate Dei*, XII, 17.

39 *Conf.*, XI, xxix, 39, emp. added. "And I found myself far from you 'in the region of dissimilarity', and heard as it were your voice from on high: 'I am the food of the fully grown; grow and you will feed on me. And you will not change me into you like the food your flesh eats, but you will be changed into me'" (*Conf.*, VII, x, 16). See also *Conf.*, VII, xvii, 23. As Sorabji notes, this appears to be the strongest statement that Augustine makes regarding the transformation undergone by man through mystical experience. As we have noted above, he generally views this as the contemplation of God's eternal truth. Hence, it is an intellectual process in contrast to Plotinus, who maintains that in the mystical vision there is no thinking and that man actually becomes a timeless being (cf. *Time, Creation and the Continuum*, 167).

40 *Ibid.* Cf. Philippians 3:12-14 and *De Trinitate*, IX, 1.