

ANALYSIS OF SAINT AUGUSTINE’S NOTION OF TIME

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Abstract

This paper investigates Augustine’s notion of time as it is presented in Book XI of the Confessions. The argument offers issues that have not yet been conclusively solved and anticipate many more contemporary philosophical concerns regarding the nature of time, its movement, measurability, and objectivity. Augustine is perplexed and confused by the question despite the fact that he is aware of how frequently the word ‘time’ appears in everyday conversation and that we appear to comprehend it when we or others use it. So, he famously asks, what time is it? If no one inquires, I am aware; if a questioner requests an explanation, I am unaware. According to Augustine, time is subjective, not in the sense that it is a personal experience, but rather in the sense that the mind—any human mind—contributes temporal order to the vast array of impressions it receives. The mind puts chronological order on experience through the operations of memory, attention, and anticipating. Time is an extension of the mind, thus when we measure time, we are actually measuring the mind. Since neither the past nor the future exists independently of the mind, a long past is simply a long memory and a long future is simply a long expectation. It is not the present, a dimensionless point, that endures, but rather our attention, which causes the future to shrink while joining an ever-larger past.

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INTRODUCTION

It is common to think of human consciousness as being temporally organized; through memory, the past becomes ‘alive in the present’, and through conscious actions of anticipating, the future is somehow felt as real. Furthermore, the common metaphors associated with different stages of experience make the temporality of consciousness evident in a variety of ways. For example, it's usual to talk about happy experiences as ‘time flying’ and painful ones as ‘time standing still’; we sense the rightness of something by saying ‘it’s just the right moment’ or feel hope by saying ‘time heals all wounds’. Being conscious often entails experiencing *time* in specific ways, such as ephemeral, slow-moving, instant, lengthy, etc. Insofar as a unified life is given, or represented, through recollection and anticipation, such metaphors allow us to recognize that the fundamental conception of ourselves is essentially a product of such a temporal consciousness.

While a metaphorical view of time in consciousness like this serves as the foundation for the type of autobiographical storytelling that makes up the majority of Saint Augustine’s *Confessions*, specifically Book XI of that work takes a completely different route.¹ He then departs from the rhetoric of autobiography and treats the nature of time in a manner that is more discursive and philosophical; he makes an effort to comprehend time as distinct from eternity and as a characteristic of the created universe. He seems to be left with the potential of having to claim that time is a myth after raising some questions about how it can be measured and divided as a type of physical phenomena. Dissatisfied with this result, he claims that time exists, but only as a result of consciousness; in this case, however, the assertion is made as the conclusion to a lengthy philosophical argument and is not merely the rhetorical premise of an autobiographical and confessional tale.²

Saint Augustine’s notion of Time

Augustine’s perplexity starts when attempting to define the essence of time and eternity because eternity and temporality are in direct antagonism to one another. There is no *past*, *present*, or *future* in eternity; neither there is *before nor after*. Eternity is tenseless, unchangeable, and indivisible. Time must have been formed, just like all other things liable to change, because it appears to be a dynamic aspect of the physical universe associated with

¹ Westphal, Jonathan, and Carl Avren Levenson, eds. *Time*. Hackett Publishing, 1993. vii.

² Doody, John, Sean Hannan, and Kim Paffenroth, eds. *Augustine and Time*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2021. 21.

successive mental states (remembering the past, attending to the present, and anticipating the future).

Eternity is timelessness, not indefinitely long time. In some of his writings, Augustine makes the claim that the eternal can be thought of as a kind of eternal *present*, but even this would not be sufficient to define eternity; at best, given the limitations of human language and imagination, the experience of the *present* would serve as a ‘metaphorical base for the leap that carries the contemplative mind towards the eternal’.³ Augustine presents his case on the nature of time within the broad context of this idea of eternity. With this contrast in mind, Augustine starts his defense by pointing out that it would be absurd to think that time was created before time. He contends that it is absurd to speculate on God’s activities prior to the creation of the universe. Since the word ‘before’ is tense, it can only have meaning in relation to time; there is neither *before nor after* in eternity. It is impossible for there to have been a time when God created time since that would suggest the contradiction that there was a time before time. God created everything, including time, from the perspective of a tenseless and changeless eternity.⁴

There could never be a moment ‘when there was no time’, according to Augustine. Then, what is time? Augustine is perplexed and confused by the question despite the fact that he is aware of how frequently the word ‘time’ appears in everyday conversation and that we appear to comprehend it when we or others use it. He is perplexed because he wants to remove the phrase from everyday speech and interpret the query as being about the definition or nature of time. So, he famously asks, what time is it? If no one inquires, I am aware; if a questioner requests an explanation, I am unaware.⁵ He is posing the question of what sort of object or thing time is with this. His belief that time, like all things, was created by God seems to have inevitably led to the question. What characteristics then distinguish this type of manufactured thing?

Augustine declares at the outset that time moves and that this movement is a sure sign that time is subject to change. If this were not the case, there would be no past or future time, only an ‘eternal’ present, which would not be time but eternity. Time moves from the present to the past and from the present toward the future. The important insight here is that time exists

³ McEvoy, James. "St. Augustine's Account of Time and Wittgenstein's Criticisms." *The Review of Metaphysics* (1984), 554.

⁴ Brown, Peter, and Michael P. Foley. *Confessions*. Hackett Publishing, (2006). 241-242.

⁵ *Ibid.*

only to the extent that it ‘tends not to be’, putting aside the notion that eternity may be defined as an eternal *present*. Since the past is gone and the future has not yet happened, neither the past nor the future can be considered to exist. It is also challenging to say whether the *present* exists because it immediately follows the past.⁶

Augustine is further confused by the situation. We are prone to refer to the past and future in durational terms despite the challenges we face when seeking to assert the presence of the past, present, and future. We use the phrases a long/short time ago or a long/short time ahead to describe the past or future, respectively. But how can we assign them any durational length if the past is gone and the future hasn’t happened yet? Both the past and the future are not present in the present, so neither can be said to have any duration. Only anything which is *present* can be considered to have a duration. Therefore, it stands to reason that we should be able to estimate the duration of the *present*. How long, though, could the present last?

He draws the conclusion that only an indivisible ‘instant’ may be thought of as the *present*, but it would be so transitory as to have no durational extent at all by taking into consideration various ‘lengths of time’ - a hundred years, a year, a month, a day, an hour, a minute, and so on. If the *present* is anything, it must be a temporally dimensionless point since it cannot be divided into the past or the future. If the *present* were a complex of moments, it could not be just the *present*.⁷

The Augustinian riddle currently takes the form that: since neither the past nor the future exists, they cannot be measured; since the present exists but is an irreducible component of time, it also cannot be measured; and since time is made up of the past, present, and future, it appears that time itself cannot be measured. Nevertheless, Augustine argues, ‘we are conscious of temporal intervals, and we gauge how much one is longer than another’.⁸

Given the ontological issue surrounding the existence or duration of the components of time, how is it possible to measure time? Our ability to gauge time passing but not time that has passed is Augustine’s initial and somewhat perplexing response. The significance of this statement is related to the idea that time is a created object that travels. While time’s passage

⁶ Ibid, 242-243.

⁷ Ibid, 244.

⁸ Ibid, 245.

is visible and hence quantifiable, Augustine ultimately concludes that time's movement is not a type of motion in the physical universe.⁹

Augustine considers the possibility that the future and the past may exist in 'secret' locations; it is possible that 'time comes forth from some secret place when future becomes present and departs into some secret place when from present it becomes past'.¹⁰ This is likely a final attempt to support common intuitions about time. However, Augustine contends that if the past and the present are real, then knowing their locations should be conceivable, specifically as future and past, but he does not know their locations. However, they are present in the present through memory and anticipation, no matter where or what they are. When we recall prior experiences, it is not as though those experiences are still present; rather, the past is remembered through mental images that are *present* in the *now*. The same is true for events that will happen in the future; for example, we expect the sun to rise tomorrow, yet these occurrences do not yet exist. The causes and indications of the future as they are presented to the conscious mind already exist.

Augustine comes to the skeptical conclusion that it is impossible to declare the existence of the past and future based on his argument up to this point. Although it is technically inaccurate to say that time is made up of the past, the present, and the future, he continues:

Saying that there are three times - a present of things past, a present of things present, and a present of things future - might be more accurate. Because these three - the present of things past is memory, the present of things present is sight, and the present of things future is an expectation - exist only in the mind, I can locate them nowhere else. If we are allowed to speak in this manner, I recognize and acknowledge that there are in fact three times.¹¹

In this approach, linguistic idealism takes the place of the skeptical conclusion regarding the ontological status of the past and future. Metaphysically speaking, the past and future are not conceivably the present, but they can be grammatically construed as the past present, and the future present. It is possible to create complicated phrases that express these times in an

⁹ Doody, John, Sean Hannan, and Kim Paffenroth, eds. *Augustine and Time*. Rowman & Littlefield, (2021). 24.

¹⁰ Brown, Peter, and Michael P. Foley. *Confessions*. (2006), 245.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 246 -247.

idealized language, as noted by A. N. Prior, by adding the words ‘It was the case that’ or ‘It will be the case that’ before a statement in the present tense to create the past present or future present, respectively.¹²

Despite the fact that these are unusual locutions, Prior notes that they may disclose the truth underlying Augustine’s proposal of the ‘secret location’ where past and future times ‘exist’, as well as his insistence that wherever they are, they are not there as past or future but as ‘present’.¹³ Then, Augustine says, ‘we may continue to state that there are three times, past, present, and future; though it is false, custom permits it’. In the same way that grammar permits it, custom also permits it. However, Augustine acknowledges that when we assert this, we run afoul of the limitations of language. Few things, he writes, ‘are phrased properly; most things are phrased badly’.¹⁴

Augustine continues to examine the idea of measurement as it relates to time after stating that it is impossible to measure past and future time but it is possible to measure time passing. He acknowledges that humans actually measure time as it passes and that it is conceivable to empirically compare durational durations and estimate proportions between them. This is strange because no time has yet been identified which has any duration though. Again, Augustine uses everyday language and acknowledges how frequently we employ temporal terms in everyday speech. Such formulations need to make sense in an understandable sense of how we measure time periods.

Augustine addresses the notion that time is merely the movement of celestial bodies in his early exploration of how we measure time and what exactly is measured by the measuring process. He doesn’t like this notion for the following reasons:

First, as opposed to taking into account the movement of all bodies, why should we restrict the measurement of time to the motion of the celestial bodies? Thus, even though the turning of the potter’s wheel would obviously not signal the seasons, days, or years, it is not that it involves no time at all. For instance, if the light of heaven were to go out but the potter’s wheel continued to turn, we would still have to say that the wheel turned faster or slower or at equal intervals.

¹² Le Poidevin, Robin, and Murray MacBeath. "The philosophy of time." (1993). 41.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Brown, Peter, and Michael P. Foley. *Confessions*. (2006), 247.

Second, what if the sun traveled at varying speeds, for example, traveling from east to west in half the time it usually does? Augustine ponders whether the movement itself would be the definition of a day or if it would only be the period of time it takes for the sun to complete its round.

Third, other regularly occurring events would have a measurable length even if the sun were to remain stationary. Augustine comes to the precise conclusion that time is not the movement of celestial bodies as a result of such logical possibilities.¹⁵

But is time in any way related to the movement of bodies? Nobody moves except in time, but since we can measure how long any given body is in motion or how long it takes for a body to travel a distance between two locations in space, this movement could not be classified as time. Additionally, we can gauge how long a body spends at rest and calculate ratios between its stationary and moving states. As a result, Augustine draws the broad conclusion that time is not at all the movement of bodies. It is clear that Augustine rejects the notion that time is a dimension of the physical cosmos in the end by making such claims. He does not define time in his statement that it is not a bodily motion. He continues his analysis by enquiring as to what it is that he employs to measure time, remaining steadfast in his belief that time can be measured. Is it the same as measuring a beam in terms of cubits that we measure a longer time by a shorter time? ¹⁶

Augustine specifically proposes that we measure a poem's length metrically in terms of lines, feet, and syllables in the context of its being spoken rather than in terms of pages because doing so would be to measure space. Augustine warns that this is not a precise measurement of time because a poem and its individual lines, feet, and syllables can be read at varying speeds, such that spoken quickly, shorter lines may take longer to say than longer lines. ¹⁷

The description almost perfectly explains why time cannot be measured in a manner that even remotely resembles the measurement of physical objects in space. Instead, time is measured more in accordance with poetic or even musical rhythm, cadence, and tempo; in other words, it is not just the sound that matters, but the 'way the sound moves'. Additionally, the aural picture illustrates the aesthetic (mainly in the sense of instantaneous) character of the sound, which refers to the drastic separation of time from space.

¹⁵ Ibid, 248-249.

¹⁶ Ibid, 250.

¹⁷ Ibid, 252.

Conclusion

The initial inference Augustine makes from the aforementioned observations is that time is the extendedness of the mind. Only what comes before or after a sound can be used to gauge how long it lasts. Upon completion, each distinct sound or syllable leaves an impression on the mind and is retained in memory. While the present cannot be measured since it is passing and cannot be compared to other times i.e., past, future, and present, these all no longer exist and cannot be measured, Augustine claims that humans nonetheless measure time. Time is length, but it must also be a length of the mind. Moments that have passed are remembered, and only then can relationships be established. Time would be infinite if it were a continuous stream of moments without any breaks in between.

The mind puts chronological order on experience through the operations of memory, attention, and anticipating. Time is an extension of the mind, thus when we measure time, we are actually measuring the mind. Since neither the past nor the future exists independently of the mind, a long past is simply a long memory and a long future is simply a long expectation. It is not the present, a dimensionless point, that endures, but rather our attention, which causes the future to shrink while joining an ever-larger past. Time therefore moves or has direction, but only for beings with minds. While measuring the past, present, and future as physical objects are impossible, it is feasible to measure time in the sense of using mental operations to analyze the relationships between the impressions that are generated by experience.

Augustine's thesis represents a turning point in the history of time philosophy by rejecting the more traditional understanding of time as a dimension of or movement in the physical world and by recognizing that time is of the essence of the mind itself. In many ways, Augustine predates Kant's idea that time is the manifestation of inner sensitivity, not a characteristic of things in and of itself but rather an 'intuition of ourselves' and a prerequisite for the possibility of sequential ordering of subjective events in consciousness. According to Augustine, time is subjective, not in the sense that it is a personal experience, but rather in the sense that the mind contributes temporal order to the vast array of impressions it receives. It is through this process that we both perceive the outside world and believe ourselves to be moving through time.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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