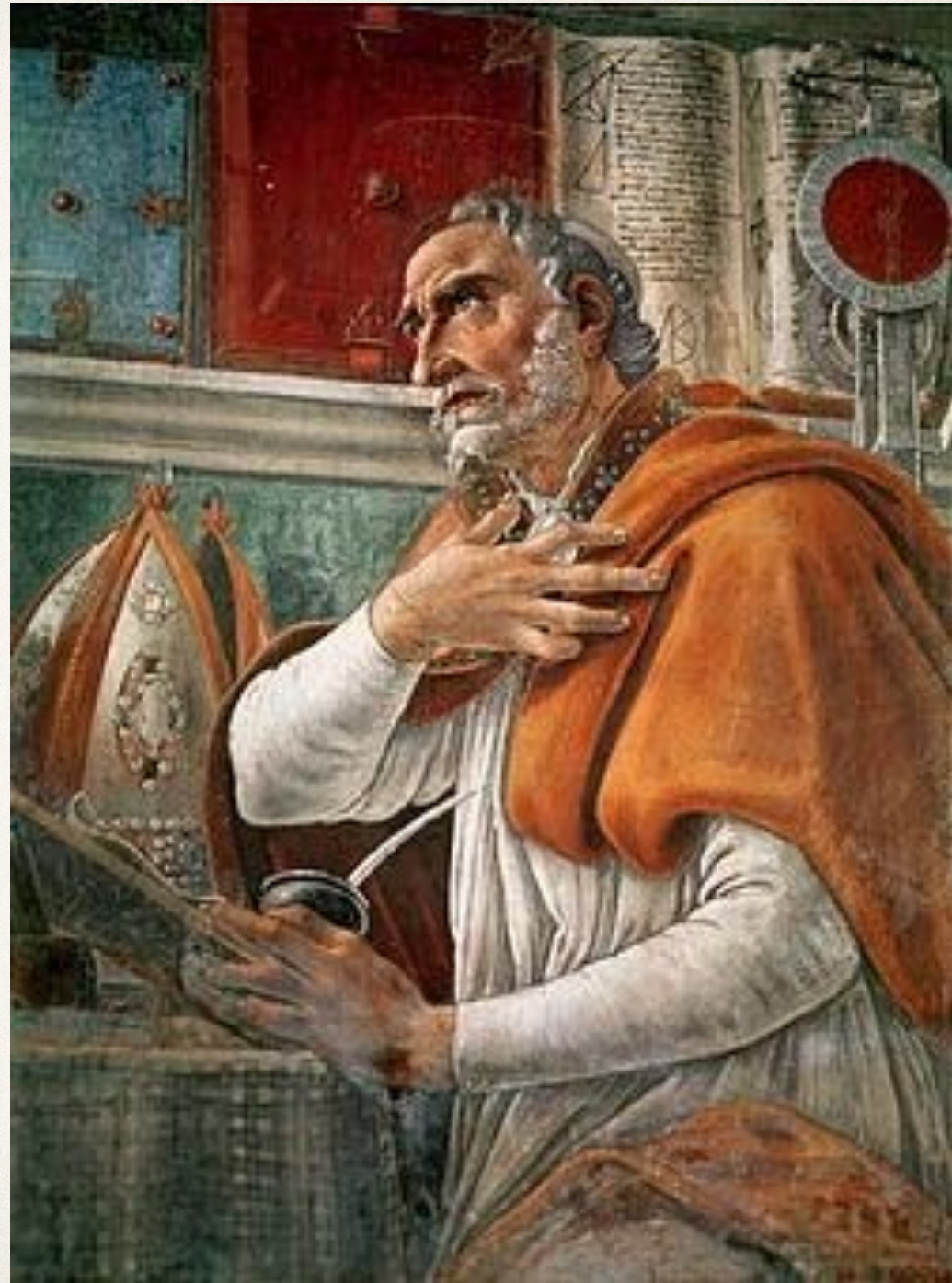


St. Augustine on the Mystery of Time

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Our First Course Topic:

Time and Change

Is time real? Is
time an illusion?

Does the world
change? Or is
change just an
appearance?

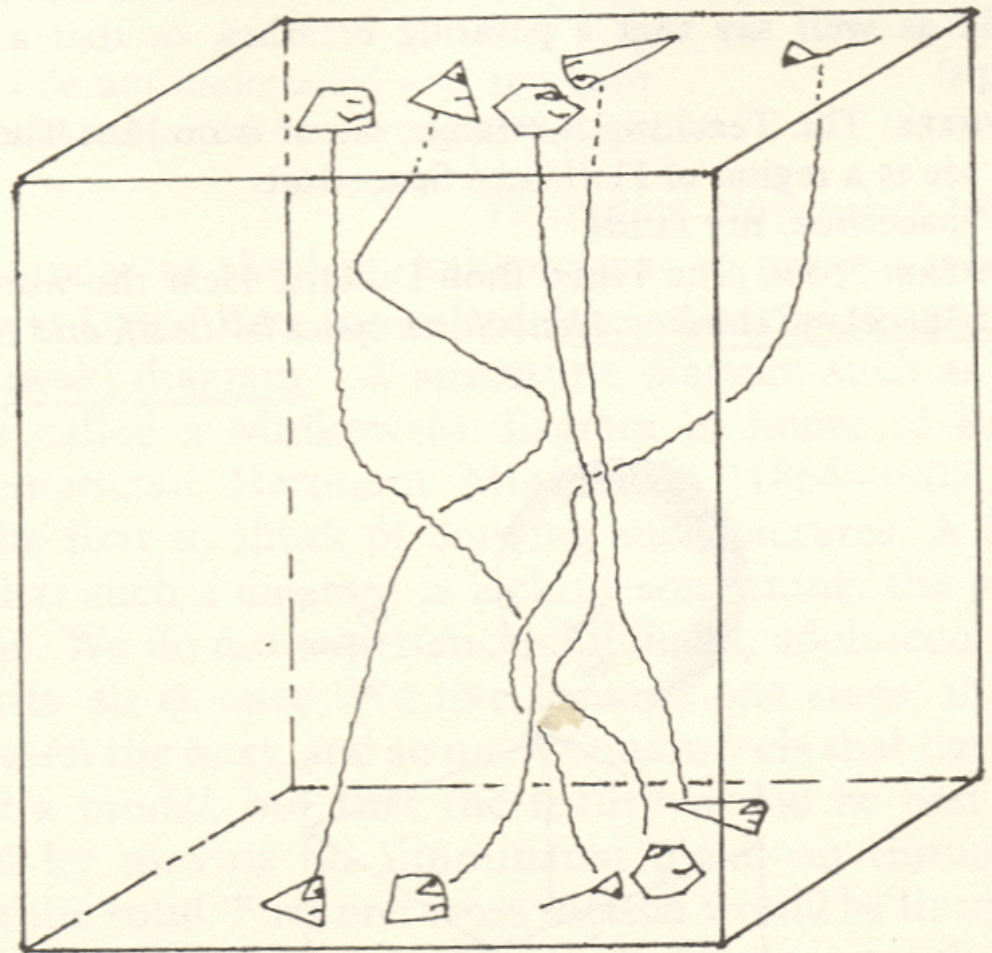
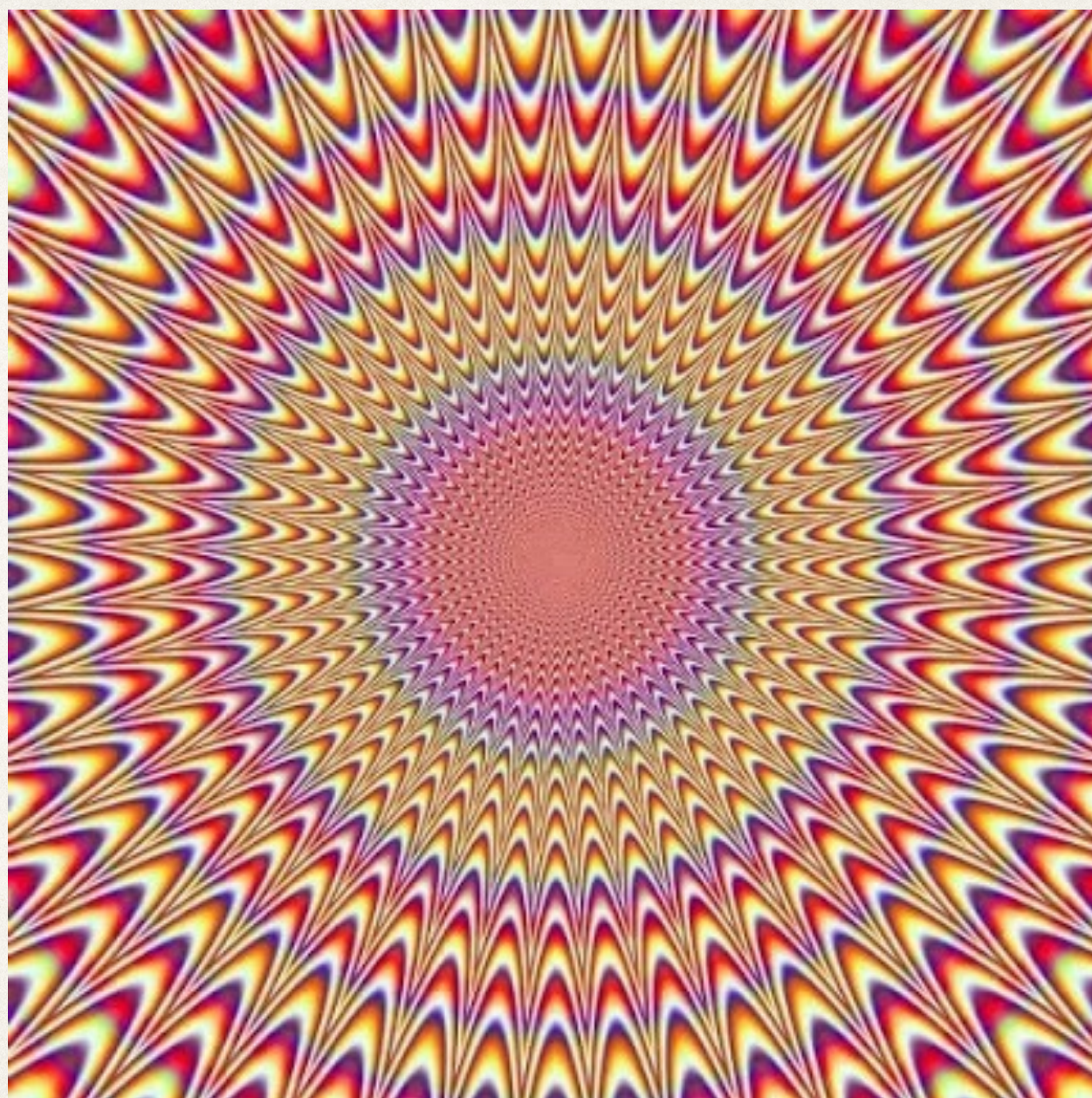


Fig. 140. A tangled tale.



We will read closely book 11 of Augustine's *Confession*

Augustine's Life

He was born in Tagaste
(now in current Algeria)
in 354

In young age, he had a
hedonist and dissolute
life

He taught rhetoric
(roughly, public speaking
and speech writing) in
North Africa and Italy

He *converted to*
Christianity in 386 and
was baptized in 387

He was ordained priest
in 391 and became bishop
of Hippo in 395 Hippo

He died in Hippo (now in
current Algeria) in 430

Ideas to Keep in Mind While Reading Book 11 of the *Confessions*

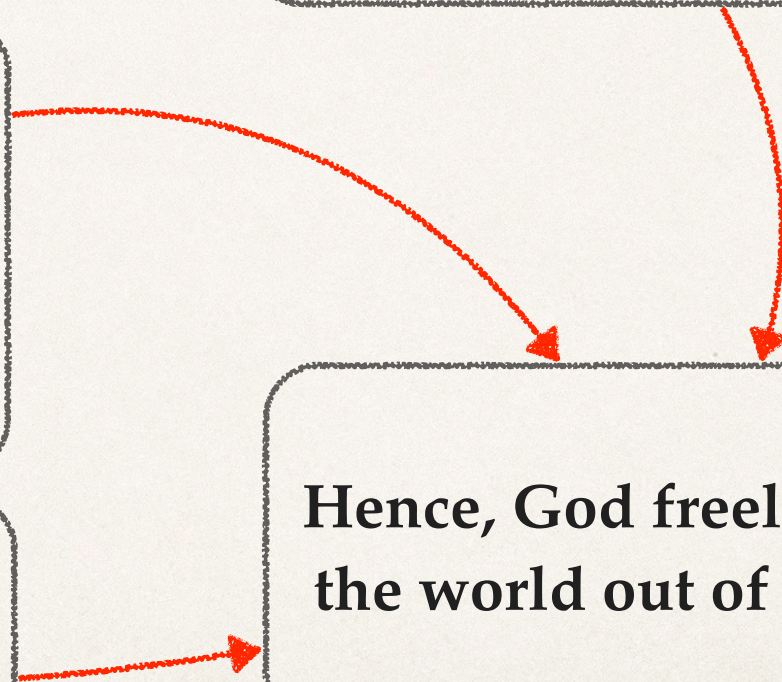
According to
Christian faith

God created the world
through an act of free will

The world is not God. God
and the world are entirely
different. God transcends
the created world.

Before the creation of
the world, the world did
not exist. The world was
nothing before creation.

Hence, God freely created
the world out of nothing.



Theological Context

Keep in mind that although Augustine's reflections on the nature of time are **philosophical**, Augustine's motivation for thinking about time is **theological** (i.e. it has to do with God and God's creation of the world)

The Challenge (roughly p. 121)

What was God doing before He made heaven and earth?

For if (say they) He were unemployed and wrought not, why does He not also henceforth, and for ever, as He did heretofore?

For did any new motion arise in God, and a new will to make a creature, which He had never before made, how then would that be a true eternity, where there ariseth a will, which was not?

For the will of God is not a creature, but before the creature; seeing nothing could be created, unless the will of the Creator had preceded. The will of God then belongeth to His very Substance. And if aught have arisen in God's Substance, which before was not, that Substance cannot be truly called eternal.

But if the will of God has been from eternity that the creature should be, why was not the creature also from eternity?"

Augustine's Answer

Seeing then Thou art the Creator of all times, if any time was before Thou madest heaven and earth, why say they that Thou didst forego working? For that very time didst Thou make, nor could times pass by, before Thou madest those times.

But if before heaven and earth there was no time, why is it demanded, what Thou then didst? For there was no “then,” when there was no time.

Nor dost Thou by time, precede time: else shouldst Thou not precede all times.

Challenge and Answer

❖ Challenge:

If God created the world *at some point*, a change must have occurred in him at some point. A new will or motion must have occurred in him to make creation possible. But a God that changes is not a God because God is unchanging.

If, on the other hand, the will to create the world has always been within God, the created world would have existed for ever. But the created world is not eternal; it has a beginning and an end.

❖ Augustine's answer:

God created time itself. It makes no sense to talk about time before God created the world. There was no time "then".

A New Challenge — What Is Time?

For what is time?

Who can readily and briefly explain this? Who can even in thought comprehend it, so as to utter a word about it?

But what in discourse do we mention more familiarly and knowingly, than time?

And, we understand, when we speak of it; we understand also, when we hear it spoken of by another.

What then is time? If no one asks me, I know: if I wish to explain it to one that asketh, I know not.

The Flow of Time Seems Obvious

*I say boldly that I know, that if nothing passed away, time **past** were not; and if nothing were coming, a **time to come** were not; and if nothing were, time **present** were not.*

How Can Past and Future Exist If They Don't Exist Now?

Those two times then, past and to come, how are they, seeing the past now is not, and that to come is not yet?

The Flow or Passage of Time

We typically think of **time** as consisting of the **past**, **present**, and **future**. We think of the **flow of time** in terms of a passage from the future, through the present and finally into the past.

Note the **asymmetry with space**. While “here” can co-exist with “there”, the present “now” cannot co-exists with the past or the future. We can only experience the present, but we can experience the “here” and “there”.

Why cannot we experience the past or the future?

A plausible answer is that the past and the future do not exist, otherwise we would be able to experience them.

But does the present exist, after all?

Can The Present Exist If It Tends to Non-Existence?

But the present, should it always be present, and never pass into time past, verily it should not be time, but eternity.

If time present (if it is to be time) only cometh into existence, because it passeth into time past, how can we say that either this is, whose cause of being is, that it shall not be; so, namely, that we cannot truly say that time is, but because it is tending not to be?

The Puzzle About the Flow of Time

- ❖ The past does not exist: it does not exist anymore
- ❖ The future does not exist: it does not exist yet
- ❖ The present does not exist: it tends to non-existence

*How can we experience the flow of time if
past, present and future do not exist? Of what do we
experience the flow?*