

An Augustinian Notion of Time

Time is fundamental to the human condition. The passage of time, that movement from one moment to the next, allows change to take place. Yet for such a ubiquitous concept, defining it proves to be quite a slippery task. In Chapter eleven of Augustine's *Confessions*, he attempts to pin-down a definition of time, but even he admits that it is almost impossible to elucidate, "What then is time? Provided that no one asks me, I know. If I want to explain it to an inquirer, I do not know" (230). In order to approach this task, Augustine comes at the definition from multiple angles, first explaining the metaphysical properties of time and then examining it from the human perspective. Moreover, through both structural elements and direct statements in the *Confessions*, Augustine shows the effects of time on his own condition, which can be used to broaden his definition.

Augustine's view of time directly follows from his understanding of the difference between change and constancy. He associates constancy with the eternal and change with mortality. For Augustine, God is the maker of all – He is the maker of heaven, of earth, of humanity itself. Yet, for something to be made by God, it must have at one point not existed, and it is here that Augustine posits the separation between the maker and the made: "to be what once was not the case is to be subject to change and variation" (224). A created object is necessarily not continuous, its properties are not constant, and so it can never be truly lasting. It is in this variation that Augustine finds a basis for mortality, "a thing dies and comes into being inasmuch as it is not what it was and becomes what it was not" (226). This is a key

difference between the human and Godly spheres, for if something does not change then it cannot cease to exist. Humans have a start, which implies a future end, while for God there was no start, and therefore there will be no ending. Thus in Augustine's model, God has the capacity for continuity that is required for true immortality, and so he posits that "Lord, eternity is yours" (221).

Time is derivative from God and so it is necessarily subject to the variation inherent to the made. Moreover, as God is associated with the continuous, his actions cannot be subordinate to time, and thus God's actions are not performed in the same temporal sense as human action. God's estrangement from temporal action raises tricky metaphysical questions for Augustine, especially relating to the beginning, the creation of the world. Augustine states that God cannot predate this beginning because then "time and change would already exist, and there would not be a true eternity and true immortality" (226). Rather, Augustine believes that in the creation of the world, God simultaneously created this beginning with his "word" – God created everything, including time, before even time existed (225). The "word" of God cannot be thought of as a physical or temporally based speech act. The utterance could not have been, "words which sound and pass away" (225). The apparent difficulty of this contradiction is tied to the fact that humans are rooted in the mortal. God holds to a different model, his word is spoken continuously, "you say all that you say in simultaneity and eternity" (226). For God, time is continuous and immediate, while for humans it is discrete and unimaginably distant. Thus to attempt to define time, Augustine must first confront the fundamental difference in perspective that inhibits humans from ever fully comprehending the nature of the actions of God.

Yet humans still attempt to place God under the same temporal rules that they are subject to. This comes in the form of questions such as “What was god doing before he made heaven and earth?” (228). Augustine considers these questions incredibly naïve; to attempt to bring God down to the temporal plane is nothing more than a futile human effort to deny their own humanity in favor of something unattainable. “[humans] attempt to taste eternity when their heart is still flitting about in the realm where things change and have a past and a future” (228). Moreover, Augustine posits that trying to find lastingness in the temporal is similarly foolish. “In the eternal, nothing is transient, but the whole is present. But no time is ever wholly present” (228). Time has no stability, no continuity, as “all past is driven backwards by the future and all future time is a consequence of the past” (229). This movement implies change and variation, which as discussed earlier is the antithesis of immortality. Yet, this metaphysical construction of time is not useful for understanding the lived human experience; this God-centric view can only be thought of in the abstract as its very definition negates the principles of temporality which constitute common experience. Therefore Augustine not only focuses on the nature of time, but also presents a comprehensive examination of time from the human perspective.

Augustine states that humans typically conceptualize time in relation to the three tenses of time: the past, the present, and the future (231). These tenses are defined by change, “if nothing passes away, there is no past time, and if nothing arrives, there is no future time, and if nothing existed there would be no present time” (231). However, Augustine is concerned with whether or not the time defined in these tenses can really be said to exist. For the past and the future, he argues that “how can they ‘be’ when the past is not now present and the future is

not yet present” (231). For the present he says that if “in order to be time at all, the present is so made that it passes into the past, how can we say that this present also ‘is’” (231). In this model of time, Augustine finds contradiction, as the only part of time that humans can experience, the present, is defined by its fleeting nature. Therefore, if time only exists “in the sense that it tends towards non-existence”, how are humans able to comprehend time or rationalize about it at all (231).

Augustine reconciles this problem by introducing the concept of memory to bridge the gap between time’s ephemeral nature and man’s ability to process the temporality of events. As it is clear that humans know past events and can think about the future, both future and past events must exist (233). However, as humans can only interpret an event as occurring in the present, there must be some way of recording past events to a continuing present. Memory fills this role as it “produces not the actual events which have passed away, but words conceived from images of them, which they fixed in the mind like imprints as they passed through the senses” (234). Similarly, for events in the future, “they can be predicted from present events which are already present and can be seen” (235). Thus for humans, it is incorrect to think of the tenses as past, present and future, but rather as “a present of thing past, a present of things present, and a present of things to come” (235). The human interpretation of these tenses is guided by memory, awareness and expectation respectively, and it is through these facets that humans are able to understand and conceptualize time (235). Memory also gives humans the ability to compare and measure amounts time. As humans can only experience the present, which “occupies no space”, without memory it would be impossible to compare temporal periods that have already drifted in the past (232). Thus

Augustine concludes that when he compares the length of two syllables, that it is “not the syllables that I am measuring but something in my memory which stays fixed there” (242). In this way, all of human knowledge is filtered through the lens of memory, which is only capturing the image of fleeting time as it passes by.

The definition of time that Augustine develops over the course of the *Confessions* poses existential problems for Augustine, as it makes him reconcile with his own mortality – humans and time are just creations of God and so the nature of time to tend towards non-existence mimics the “entire life of an individual person, where all actions are parts of a whole” (243). Augustine is not a happy man; he writes the confessions so he may “cease to be wretched in [himself] and may find happiness in [God]” (221). Throughout the *Confessions*, Augustine invokes God at seemingly arbitrary intervals. At many points of his argument, he breaks out of his philosophical discourse to “beg to” and “confess to” God, and he is constantly addressing his arguments towards God directly and asking God for clarity in his thoughts (240, 239). The effects of these apostrophes are twofold. First, by putting God in the foreground of the *Confessions*, Augustine is able to highlight the separation that he feels between himself and God; a separation of the eternal and continuous versus the mortal and discrete. In this way, these outbreaks can be seen as an appeal for salvation. In another sense, this pattern of temporal inconsistency, of fragmented and imperfect perception, perfectly mirrors Augustine’s own description of how humans understand events through the filter of time. So the form of Augustine’s argument displays its own described effects. In combination with this structural evidence, Augustine also directly addresses his feelings towards time, calling it a “distention ... of the mind itself” (240). Moreover, some of the language towards the end of the *Confessions*

also seems to point towards this conclusion, “I am scattered in times whose order I do not understand” and thus it is to God that he looks to “find stability and solidity” (240, 244). As a human entrenched in the temporal sphere, where all is ephemeral in the long run, Augustine can only find solace by surrendering himself to God and his eternity.

Augustine is also concerned with how this definition of time jeopardizes his project of creating the *Confessions*. From the *Confessions*, it is clear that he understands the inherent futility of expecting longevity in any temporal task, of which writing literature is one. However his goal in writing the *Confessions* is to “preach [God’s] word and dispense [God’s] sacrament” (221). Thus in creating his work, Augustine must come face to face with the hopelessness of trying to create mortal words that can support the eternal word of God. One episode where this is especially apparent is when he describes his wish to have Moses explain to him the story of creation (223). At first, he focuses on the human language that Moses would use, “if he spoke Hebrew, he would in vain make an impact on my sense of hearing, for the sounds would not touch my mind at all” (223). This is Augustine’s view on human literature, it is fragile and variable as it is subject to change. However, he also says that no matter what language Moses spoke that “there would speak a truth which is neither Hebrew nor Greek nor Latin nor any barbarian tongue and which uses neither mouth nor tongue as its instruments and utters no audible syllables” (224). This is the voice of God and it surpasses time and thus can hold eternal truths that no mortal object can. Importantly, by invoking Moses, Augustine places even scripture, which is directly derivative of God’s word, under the rule of time. Augustine later compares scripture to forests filled with deer who “recover their strength in [the forests] and restore themselves” (222). This very act connects scripture with change, with variation and it

places scripture in the realm of the temporal and out of the eternal. So in acknowledging this he must admit to himself that the very work of spreading God's word is a temporal act, even if the word behind the scripture is able to attain a level of immortality through God. Thus, Augustine concludes that time conditions and subsumes all human actions, even the temporal proliferation of God's word, and that it can only be overcome by God himself.

If we press Augustine for a concise definition of time, he would say that the task is impossible, "who can comprehend this even in thought as to articulate the answer in words?" (230). At a high level, we can say that there is a difference in the perception of time for God and man; God lives time all at once while man can only experience the present. Yet from Augustine's own reaction to his definition of time, we can extrapolate its effects on the lived experience of other humans. Principally, it raises existential questions concerning human achievement. Certainly for all non-Godly actions it calls into question their validity, as these actions are encased by time and have no way to escape from its mortal snares. Thus, if this definition leaves room for meaningful action, it must come through connection to God. However, on whether human action has the capacity to connect to God, the text is left purposefully opaque as Augustine grapples with this very question himself. And though this uncertainty does not dissuade Augustine from his task, he also does not affirm that his mission will be successful. Nevertheless, under such a philosophy, it is not surprising that when confronted with his own stark conception of the human condition, Augustine turns towards God to find meaning and to stop the distention that is time.

Works Cited:

Augustine. "11." *Confessions*. Trans. Henry Chadwick. Oxford UP, 1991. Print.