

St. Augustine on Time

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Abstract

In Book XI of the Confessions (397), St. Augustine explores the nature of time. John L. Morrison argues that in Book XI of the Confessions, St. Augustine puts forth a subjective account of time. On this view, time exists within the human mind. I am in considerable agreement with Morrison's interpretation of the Confession XI. However, I will argue that in On Genesis (388-389), Augustine develops an objective account of time. This means that time is a creature of God and so exists before human consciousness. It seems that Augustine has two accounts of time, one objective and the other subjective.

Key Words: Time, God, Augustine, Creation, Phenomenon of Human Consciousness.

Introduction

In *On Genesis* (389) and in Book XI of *The Confessions* (397), St. Augustine explores the nature of time. Augustine writes, "What then is time? If no one asks me, I know; if I want to explain it to a questioner, I do not know" (Augustine 2006, p. 242). Time is a concept that we appear to understand, but once we endeavor to explain time itself, it gives rise to paradoxes. Augustine's exploration of time is part of his larger reflections on God's creation of the universe¹. Augustine examines time in the context of scriptural interpretation of Genesis and other books of the Old Testament. Consequently, Augustine's account of time is influenced by the Bible. This paper will analyze Augustine's theory of time. I will argue that Augustine develops two accounts of time.

1. Time is a creature of God.
2. Time is a phenomenon of human consciousness.

The first account of time, that is to say, time seen as a creature of God has three characteristics. First, time is not eternal. Second, time is objective in the sense that time does not depend upon human consciousness. Third, time is related but not completely identical to the motions of the heavenly objects. Augustine's second account of time, that is to say, time seen as a phenomenon of human consciousness, suggests that time is present in the human mind. In order to support my argument, I will use textual evidence from Augustine's *The Confessions* and *On Genesis*. In *On Genesis*, written eight years before the *Confessions*, Augustine views time as a creature of God. However, in the *Confessions*, Augustine views time not only as a creation of God but also as a phenomenon of human consciousness.

Section 1: Time is a Creature of God

First, I will argue that Augustine views time as a creation of God. God is the cause of time. In the *Confessions*, Augustine writes, "What time could there be that you had not created? Or how could ages pass, if they never were? Thus, since You are the Maker of all times [...] If there was time, You made it, for time could not pass before You made time" (Augustine 2006, pp. 241-242). Time is part of God's creation.

Time exists because God made time. Without God there would be no time. Augustine had a similar view when he wrote *On Genesis*. In *On Genesis*, Augustine refers to time as a creature that was created by God. Augustine writes, "Nor should the statement that time begins from the creation be taken to imply that time is not a creature"

¹ Before discussing the notion of time in the *Confessions*, Augustine asks some questions concerning Genesis. For example, Augustine asks, "what is meant by *In the beginning You [God] made heaven and earth?*" (Augustine 2006, p. 236).

(Augustine 2002, p. 282). God brought the creature of time into existence. Thus, in the *Confessions* and in *On Genesis*, God creates time.

However, in the *Confessions*, Augustine elaborates on the creature of time. Time is not eternal. Augustine states, “For time itself You made. And no time is co-eternal with You,” (Augustine 2006, p. 242). Creatures have a beginning. Prior to the creation of time, time did not exist. Since time had a beginning, the question, “What was God doing before He made heaven and earth?” is meaningless (Augustine 2006, pp. 241-242). The question itself is meaningless because there was no time. Augustine states, “if before heaven and earth were made there was no time, then what is meant by the question, ‘What were You doing *then*? If there was not any time, there was not any ‘then,’” (Augustine 2006, p. 242). The question involves a category mistake. The term “before” and “after” signify relations between occurrences in time. If there is no time, then it would be pointless to talk about what happened before a certain event. We can only talk about “before” and “after” once time has begun. This suggests that time, as a creation of God, had a beginning.

The creature of time began to exist prior to human beings. In other words, the creature of time is objective in the sense that time does not depend on human consciousness. In *On Genesis*, Augustine writes, “God, to be sure, made the world, and thus times began with the very creation that God made” (Augustine 2002, p. 41). Time has a beginning. The beginning of time was when God began to create the universe. When God began to create the universe, there were no human beings. Therefore, time existed before there were humans. Augustine writes, “it is time that begins from the creation [of the universe] rather than the creation from time, while both are from God [...] Nor should the statement that time begins from the creation be taken to imply that time is not a creature” (Augustine 2002, p. 282). In other words, time is a creature distinct from human beings. Time is distinct from human beings because time began to exist prior to the existence of human beings. Augustine’s argument can be formulated in the following manner:

1. God created time.
2. Time is not eternal.
3. Time began when God created the universe *ex nihilo*.
4. When God created the universe, humans were still not created; humans were created some “days” after the universe was created.
5. Therefore, time is a creature of God that existed prior to human consciousness.
6. Thus, time is independent of human consciousness.

Time, seen as a creature, began when the universe began². As such, it is meaningful to talk about what happened before or after the second “day” of creation, because God had already made time in the first “day” of creation. It is meaningful to discuss what happened before or after the second “day” of creation, even though there were no human beings because time already existed. On the other hand, there was no time prior to creation. Therefore, Augustine views time as something that God made which existed prior to human consciousness (Augustine 2002, pp. 278-283).

In the *Confessions*, Augustine elaborates on time. Although time existed prior to human consciousness, time is not completely identical to the motions of the heavenly bodies. The scholar, Henry Chadwick, claims that Augustine did not want to define time in astronomical forms nor as the movement of any physical object. I think that Augustine suggests that time is related to motion, although not completely identical to motion. In order to support this claim, Augustine uses biblical passages as evidence that time is not completely identical to heavenly, that is to say, physical bodies.

The Book of Joshua says, “So the sun stood still, and the moon stopped, till the nation avenged itself on its enemies” (Joshua 10:12-13). This illustrates to Augustine that time can continue even though the physical heavenly bodies have stopped moving. Augustine’s reasoning can be formulated as follows:

1. Time would still exist if only one object in the heavens would continue to move.
2. It is meaningful to speak of the sun changing its speed. That is to say, it is meaningful to speak of the sun moving lesser or greater distances in a given time.

² In *The City of God* (413-426), Augustine also suggests that time existed before humans were created. However, I will not discuss Augustine’s *The City of God* because my main focus is to discuss Augustine’s views on time which he presents in the *Confessions* and in *On Genesis*. Thanks to Dr. Hattab for her comments.

3. If the sun stood still, then time would still elapse. Time would still pass by as it did at the prayer of Joshua.
4. Therefore, the movement of the heavenly bodies is not time (Augustine 2006 pp. 247- 250).

The above argument suggests that Augustine's account of time is influenced by the Bible. Augustine is trying to make his account of time conform to the Bible. According to the Book of Joshua, time appears to be distinct from motion, although related to motion. In the Book of Joshua, time appears to be distinct from motion because when the heavenly bodies stood still, the Israelites had more time to defeat the Amalekites. To sum up, time is part of God's creation. Time is not eternal. Time existed prior to the creation of human beings. Time is objective in the sense that time is independent of human consciousness. That is, time does not depend on human consciousness. Time passes by even when there are no humans.

Section 2: Time is a Phenomenon of Human Consciousness

Now I will argue that Augustine also develops a subjective or psychological account of time. However, before I argue for Augustine's psychological account of time, I will briefly mention what Augustine claims about the past, present and future because it will help explain his psychological account of time. Augustine makes the following claims regarding the past, present and future:

1. The past is no longer, it was.
2. The future is not yet, but it will be.
3. The present is, but cannot last because if the present would last, then it would be eternity and not the present.
4. The present's being as time depends on its perpetual flowing or passing away.
5. Thus, the being of time depends on its non-being (Augustine 2006, pp. 242-243).

As Augustine meditates on time in the *Confessions*, he becomes aware that time has three parts. The three parts of time appear to be moving. The past used to exist, the present cannot last forever, and the future will become the present and then the past. The present moment, which alone appears to have a claim to being disappears or vanishes to a point without dimensions. What is not yet real becomes what is no longer real, and the present cannot have any duration, that is, "the present has no space" (Augustine 2006, pp. 243-244)³.

Moreover, the past and future implies current non-existence. That is to say, the past does not exist now and does not have any dimensions. The future does not exist now. The three stages of time lead Augustine to ask certain questions concerning time. For example, how can the past time exist, since the past is no longer? Or how can there be a future time, if the future is not yet? Or how are the past or future measured, if they do not have real existence? (Augustine 2006, p. 242). These questions lead Augustine to develop a psychological account of time.

Augustine suggests that time is present in, and measured by, the mind. The past and future are in the mind. In our consciousness the past and the future have a being of sorts. The past and future have a sort of being in so far as the past is remembered and the future is anticipated. The past is not real in itself. The past is only real in so far as it is present to the mind. The past lives on, so to speak, only in so far as we remember it. We carry within our minds the past. Memory, thus, plays an important role in Augustine's psychological account of time.

In Book X, Augustine writes, "And in my memory too I meet myself –I recall myself, what I have done, when and where and in what state of mind I was when I did it [...] I can meditate as if they were present" (Augustine 2006, p. 196). In other words, memory is the storage of the past⁴. Past events are present to the memory. Without memory, Augustine would not be able to speak about his past because his past is not present to his senses. Augustine's past events, such as the event of him stealing a pear or the event of him being in the midst of lust, are images present in his mind. The past is an image present to the mind.

Augustine states, "For I mention a stone or the sun, when the things themselves are not present to my senses, yet images of the things are present in my memory" (Augustine 2006, p. 201). In other words, the past is not present to the senses, but only to the mind. This means that my past is also present only in my memories. The past and future are real only in so far as they are present to the mind, in memory or in expectation (Augustine 2006,

³ I think Augustine was probably influenced by Aristotle. Aristotle's definition of "now" is a point of time that has no extension and that has a before and after.

⁴ Augustine calls memory a faculty of the soul which belongs to his nature, see Augustine 2006, p. 197.

pp.246-251). Time is connected to human consciousness⁵. Thus, Augustine writes: there are three times, a present of things past, a present of things present, a present of things future. For these three exist in the mind, and I find them nowhere else: the present of things past is memory, the present of things present is sight, and the present of things future is expectation. [Augustine2006, p. 246]

Time is relative to human consciousness. The past and future depends upon a person's consciousness. For example, my mind at this present moment can remember what I did five years ago. However, another person such as Beatrice can also remember, at this moment, what she did five years ago. My past is different from Beatrice's past. Likewise, my mind, at this present moment, can anticipate future events. Beatrice, at this moment, can also anticipate future events that are different than my future events. As such, the past and future which are present to the mind at this moment depend upon a person's point of consciousness. Moreover, the past and future do not have a reality independent of human consciousness. The present of things past and the present of things future do not have a reality of sort outside of the mind (Augustine 2006, p.246). My past or future does not lie somewhere out there in physical reality. Rather, it lies within my mind. Time is located within a person's mind.

Next, I will put forth the interpretation of Book XI set forth by Morrison. Morrison argues that Augustine in the *Confessions* develops a subjective account of time. Morrison writes, "In Augustine's *The Confessions* (397-401), one of his earlier works, he apparently viewed time as subjective in nature, that is, time was bound up in the soul of man, and being thus bound, time could not exist apart from presence of the soul" (Morrison 1971, p. 600). Time is subjective in the sense that time depends on the human mind or soul. If there were no humans, then there would be no time because human consciousness plays a role in time. Morrison suggests that memory plays a role in time. Memory is what allows us to measure time (Morrison 1971, p. 602). Morrison notes that Augustine says, "It is not then [past events] themselves, which now are not, that I measure, but something in my memory, which there remains fixed" (Augustine 2006, p. 249). This illustrates that when Augustine measures the past, he is measuring something in his memory. As such, the past is within the human mind. Likewise, the future lies also in the mind. The present of things past, and the present of things future are within the human mind. Consequently, Morrison and I both have argued that Augustine in the *Confession* develops a subjective or psychological account of time.

Section 3: Conclusion

In *On Genesis* and in the *Confessions*, Augustine explores the nature of time. I have argued that Augustine develops two accounts of time. In the *Confessions* and in *On Genesis*, time is a creature of God. This account of time is independent of human consciousness. Time existed before there were any human beings. As such, time is objective. However, Augustine also develops a second account of time. In the *Confessions*, Augustine develops a psychological or subjective account of time.

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⁵ Augustine refers to the psychological account of time as distension. Time is a stretching of the soul (Augustine 2006 p. 250). Time stretches the mind into non-being. The mind extends to what does not exist in physical reality. For example, the present mind can extend to the future, which is not yet. Augustine states, "behold my life is but a scattering [Distentio] [...] and Thou, O Lord, my eternal Father, art my only solace; but I am divided up in time, whose order I do not know, and my thoughts and the deepest places of my soul are torn with every kind of tumult" (Augustine 2006, p. 255). The psychological account of time has the ability to divide up the human consciousness into being and non-being.