

Ecce Distentio est Uita Mea:

St. Augustine's philosophy of time in and beyond *Confessions XI*

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Introduction

What is time, according to St. Augustine? If we limit our discussion to this, the narrow question of definition, and if we derive our answer exclusively from selective contents of Book XI of the *Confessions*, we might yield a narrow answer — a familiar gloss which runs something like this: Augustine espouses a form of temporal presentism (only the present exists); after dismissing cosmological accounts (time is not a function of physical movement,) he arrives at a definition of time as *distentio animi* (“distension of the soul/mind”), thus offering what amounts to a purely psychological account (time — past, present and future, exists only in the present experience of the mind). However, as I will show in Part I of this paper, this standard gloss is representative of a highly problematic approach to Augustine’s philosophy of time, not only because of how reductive it is, but because the points to which it reduces are themselves questionable.

Interpreters of Book XI disagree, not only on what Augustine’s definition of time is, but on whether he even intended to and/or succeeded in providing one. While I will not enter deeply into this debate, I will linger on it enough to indicate the main points of contention. I will then show how the better approaches to Book XI are those which set the narrow question of definition aside — as does, I believe, Augustine. In the course of my discussion, I will show why such a gloss as given above is not merely insufficient, but also inaccurate. If we attend closely to Augustine’s line of thought in Book XI, we will find it misleading to say that he is a temporal presentist, and simply wrong to say that he defines time as *distentio animi*.

Augustine discusses the present not to assert its existence but to explicitly qualify it, to emphasize the temporal present’s gross ontological deficiency in comparison with the *true* present of eternity. And what he arrives at with his notion of *distentio* is not a definition of time but rather an

answer to the question of how we measure time and, furthermore, a purposive account of the soul's experience of time as a consequence of sin. While some solid arguments have been put forth for how Book XI can be read primarily as a philosophical treatise aimed at defining time, the more judicious interpretations are those which recognize it as a theological reflection on the mystery of creation and on the relationship between God's eternity and the temporal condition of the human soul.

It is the leading conception of this paper that Augustine's view of time and eternity can only be properly understood in its theological context of sin and salvation, and that a proper reading of Book XI is more fruitful insofar as it opens up considerations of how the temporal/eternal distinction is both dependent upon and fundamental to the broader context of Augustine's thought. Thus, clarifying what is at stake in Book XI will allow me to begin to widen the scope of the question concerning Augustine's view of time. This will in turn shed light on Augustine's conception of man, and of how man fits within a cosmic order in essence defined by the absolute contrast between the temporal realm and eternity.

We may, I believe, begin to discern within Book XI many of the major conceptual schemas and themes needed to approach Augustine's philosophy of time in the larger context of his thought: namely, those derivative of his metaphysical and theological frameworks. While I will, in Part I of my discussion, touch upon the broad contours of these, what will be most central to my analysis will be clarifying the meaning of his notion of *distentio animi* and determining what the overall aim of his discussion of time and eternity in Book XI is. Book XI is, as I will describe in greater detail, *purposive* insofar as it is concerned with the reorientation of the human soul away from its temporal attachments and towards the love of God and its hope for eternal salvation. I will discuss the manner in which such a reorientation is in turn meant to effect a complete transformation of the

meaning of and value placed upon the temporal realm, and how recognition of this is one way of opening unto a discussion of how Book XI is in continuity with the whole of the *Confessions*.

In Part II of this paper I will widen the scope of the question further by beginning to approach Augustine's view of time outside the narrow confines of Book XI. According to my reading, we may take the autobiographical books of the *Confessions* as being illustrative of basically the same theme which is restated in more philosophical terms in Book XI. To show this, I will provide a reading of Books I-IX which focuses on the ways in which they are illustrative of the meaning and possibilities involved with the existential condition of *distentio animi*. I will also discuss some of the ways in which I see the temporal/eternal distinction at work in Augustine's thought, focusing on the kind of rhetoric Augustine uses to affect the abovementioned reorientation of the human soul. To underscore how Augustine's philosophy of time and eternity transforms the meaning and value assigned to the temporal realm, I will focus on the example of how human relationships are transformed in light of the eternal context.

In its treatment of the subjective experience of time for the individual soul, the *Confessions* seems a consummately introspective work. However, it is meant to portray the generalizable experience of the fallen human soul on its spiritual journey towards conversion. As such, Augustine's view of what time is for the individual soul can serve as a starting place for reflection upon his view of what time is for mankind. Thus, to conclude I will widen the scope once again. The narrowest readings of Augustine's philosophy of time in Book XI are mistakenly prone to accuse him of holding an exclusively subjective account of time. In my discussion of the *Confessions* as a whole I will have touched piecemeal upon aspects of his view of shared time. However, to better understand Augustine's 'objective view of time' a fuller overview of his *theology of time* is in order. Drawing upon the *Enchiridion* and the *City of God*, I will give an overview of the full theological

narrative which is the foundation and main framework of his thought, from which his philosophy of time derives.

Part I. Interpretive Approaches to Confessions Book XI

The Narrow Definition of Time

To begin, let us consider Augustine's purported psychological definition of time. With his *Four Views of Time in Ancient Philosophy*, John F. Callahan contributed a great deal to this standard appellation. In sum, Callahan finds that Plato treats time metaphorically as the moving image of eternity, Aristotle treats it physically as the number or measure of motion, Plotinus treats it as the productive life of the soul, whereas St. Augustine treats it psychologically.¹ Proper attention to the nuances of Callahan's gloss reveals his correct recognition that it is the *measurement of time* which is explained psychologically by Augustine, not time itself. However, perhaps due to a widespread enthusiasm for superficial comparative analyses, the loudest resounding commonplace in the ensuing philosophical tradition is that Augustine arrives, with his notion of *distentio*, at a "full-fledged psychological view"² of time as opposed, primarily, to Aristotle's physical account, or to cosmological accounts in general. Taken to the extreme, such an assessment leads some to charge Augustine with an unequivocally and exclusively subjective account of time.

Granted, in Book XI Augustine does appear to eventually arrive (albeit quite hesitantly) at an answer to his question 'What then is Time?' Seemingly offering a definition of time as *distentio animi*:

I have come to think that time is simply a distension. But of what is it a distension? I do not know, but it would be surprising if it is not that of the mind itself.³

¹ John F. Callahan, *Four Views of Time in Ancient Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1948), 204.

² Callahan, *Four Views of Time*, 200.

³ Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, XI, xxvi (Henry Chadwick, trans., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

However, we most certainly should not accept a simplistic notion of Augustine's alleged definition of time as *distentio* as capturing and exhausting the sum and substance of his thought on the topic, as have notable commentators such as Bertrand Russell, who succinctly formulates a standard objection to Augustine's theory of time thus considered:

St. Augustine, whose absorption in the sense of sin led him to excessive subjectivity, was content to substitute subjective time for the time of history and physics. Memory, perception, and expectation, according to him, made up all that there is of time. But obviously this won't do.⁴

Clearly, on Russell's interpretation Augustine defines time as *distentio animi* simpliciter and, reasonably, Russell finds this ludicrous since it suggests that all there is of time is the private, psychological time experienced by discrete minds, with no public time 'of history and physics' — a position from which it follows, furthermore, that time would not have existed before the existence of human minds. Readings the likes of Russell's can be easily countered by pointing to explicit statements made elsewhere in Augustine's (both pre and post *Confessions*) works. However, even within Book XI itself Augustine implicitly indicates his view that the existence of time is essentially bound up with God's first act of creation, as seen in his response to the Manichean question concerning God's activity before the creation of heaven and earth:⁵

Since, therefore, you are the cause of all times, if any time existed before you made heaven and earth, how can anyone say that you abstained from working? You have made time itself. But if time did not exist before heaven and earth, why do people ask what you were then doing? There was no 'then' when there was no time.⁶

Thus, even within Book XI Augustine seems to hold both a subjective and an objective account. This leads some commentators to conclude that he was simply inconsistent, or that he

⁴ Bertrand Russell, *Human knowledge: its scope and limits* (London: Routledge, 2009), 187 – 188.

⁵ As noted by Roland J. Teske in his *Paradoxes of time in Saint Augustine* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette Univ. Press, 1998), 43.

⁶ *Confessions*, XI, xiii.

developed two different theories of time, privileging a psychological account in the *Confessions* and an objective account elsewhere.⁷ The extent to which such seeming inconsistency is a problem or not hinges on the extent to which we attribute to Augustine the intention of arriving at a single, self-consistent definition of time in Book XI in the first place, and also on whether we understand him to come to define time with the notion of *distentio* — both of which are points of contention in the literature.

What narrow, definition focused approaches (such as Russell's and Callahan's) to Augustine's philosophy of time seem to have in common — concomitant with a tendency to distort his thought by de-emphasizing or ignoring its theological and Neoplatonic aspects — is a tendency to assume that his account of time is explicated only in Book XI and, furthermore, that this only begins to be formulated around mid-way through that book, at chapter 17.⁸ In general, the better interpreters of Book XI conclude that Augustine neither intends to nor arrives at a definition of time as *distentio animi*. Although there are exceptions to this.

One notable example is Ronald J. Teske's interpretation. By carefully attending to the Plotinian antecedents of Augustine's thought, buttressed by a few key passages within Book XI and Augustine's larger oeuvre, Teske provides a subtle and perhaps the best argument that Augustine does indeed both set out to *and* succeeds in arriving at a consistent definition. While privileging the examination of psychological time in Book XI, according to Teske, Augustine also implicates the shared time of a 'world-soul,' a temporally distended entity somehow ontologically intermediate between God's eternity and the temporality of individual souls. Teske thus claims that Augustine

⁷ John Morrison, for example, thinks that Augustine held a subjective view of time in the earlier *Confessions*, but that he changed his position in *Civitas Dei* to the "more orthodox view held then and now by the Roman Catholic Church, that time existed before man was created; that is, that man was created *in* time, not *with* time." John L. Morrison, "Augustine's Two Theories of Time," *The New Scholasticism* 45 (1971), 600.

⁸ Callahan begins at chapter 14.

succeeds in defining time as *distentio animi* in a manner that would escape the implications of Russell's objection — although to do so he suggests a rather abstruse, twofold interpretation of the meaning of *distentio* — one pertaining to the distention of the subjective, psychological time of individual souls and one to the distention of a shared, objective temporality, of which the former partakes.⁹ While the general thrust of Teske's thesis is persuasive and seems based on sound scholarship, his success lies more in pinpointing an idea which certainly influenced Augustine but about which, as Teske admits,¹⁰ he held serious reservations. The notion of a world-soul seems more of a muted suggestion lurking tentatively within Augustine's discussion of time, rather than a clear-cut and intentional component of a rigorous definition. Teske's analysis of Augustine's thought in Book XI is (unlike interpretations along the lines of our initial gloss or, e.g., Russell's) profound and, due to his sensitivity both to its scriptural and Neoplatonic bases, well-founded. Furthermore Teske is, I believe, correct in his insistence that Book XI should not be read *merely* as a work of piety, but also as a serious philosophical engagement with intellectual problems and an earnest attempt at offering solutions to traditional paradoxes concerning time, some of which Augustine does believe he can solve.¹¹ However, in his concern with convincing us that Augustine provides philosophically sound resolutions to all of the major problems posed therein Teske somewhat overemphasizes the philosophical over the theological nature of the book.

Time and Eternity: The Theological Dimensions

Albeit that Book XI is perhaps the most philosophical chapter of the *Confessions*, the temptation to read it as either principally a systematic treatise on the nature of time, or at least as definitively yielding suchlike results is, I believe, symptomatic of an anachronistic approach to

⁹ Teske, *Paradoxes of Time in Saint Augustine*, 39-57.

¹⁰ Teske, *Paradoxes of Time in Saint Augustine*, 51.

¹¹ Teske, *Paradoxes of Time in Saint Augustine*, 4-7.

Augustine, and the concomitant emphasis on definition is ultimately a red herring. The best interpretations are provided by those who recognize that answering the narrow question of definition is neither the principal aim nor outcome of the book. Henry Chadwick, for instance, is right to remind the reader that Augustine's question and answer regarding time is ultimately "characteristically less philosophical than religious." It is philosophical, for Chadwick, insofar as it is "remarkable for its affinity with the Skeptical or 'Academic' position that for the human mind the question is unanswerable." Or at least, he adds, "Augustine does not answer it."¹²

One of the reasons St. Augustine has for centuries, and continues to provide the fodder for an exceedingly heterogeneous array of scholarly reflections is due to the fundamental entanglement in his work of, on the one hand, the different conceptual matrices afforded by his constant engagement with his main intellectual influences: namely, the scriptural/theological, Neoplatonic, and classical Latin literary and philosophical traditions; and, on the other hand, of what we now consider fundamentally different modes of discourse: namely, the religious, the rigorous philosophical, and (what I will here lump together as) the phenomenological, psychological, and existential. Doing justice to every relevant aspect of Augustine's thought in any single study would of course present immense challenges, and approaching Augustine by privileging any single one of these angles can and often does yield meaningful insights. That said, however, when trying to understand him on his own terms, the most judicious commentators are those who always bear in mind that Augustine was first and foremost a theologian whose basic principles and commitments are always based on his readings of scripture and who, in the final analysis, insist upon the priority of the theological aspects of Augustine's thought over all others.

¹² Chadwick, *Confessions*, footnote 19, 230-231.

Christopher J. Thomson for example, unlike many commentators who miss the broader context of the discussion of time, provides a faithful theological reading of the whole of Book XI, the likes of which probably best captures Augustine's own intentions. Augustine's primary concern in Book XI, on Thomson's reading, is certainly not to develop a psychological view of time, it is rather to "situate the doctrine of creation and the created order within the doctrine of the Word, and to maintain this primacy of the Word in spite of our 'fallen' tendencies to do otherwise."¹³ As with other interpretations which approach Book XI as a whole, and as primarily a work of exegesis (namely, as an extended reflection on the first verse of Genesis: *In the beginning God made heaven and earth*), Thompson finds the locus of Augustine's concern to be in the early chapters of Book XI, in his initial discussion of God's eternity and act of creation. The discussion of time is then seen as largely a byproduct of the discussion of eternity — brought up by Augustine because of his need to address the troublesome notion of creation "in time."¹⁴

Attending to the whole of Book XI, we do note that the discussion of time is bracketed by the problem posed by the Manichean question as to what God was doing "before" the creation of the world, underscoring the importance of this question to Augustine. Indeed, the skeptical question does pose several serious problems for his conception of God and of God's act of creation. First of all, it conjures up an anthropomorphic picture of a God who spent untold ages doing nothing, then decides apropos of nothing to set to work for six days before returning to a state of rest on the seventh. This is a proposition which would, furthermore, contradict one of Augustine's most fundamental beliefs, namely: the absolute immutability of God.¹⁵ This is a presupposition of Augustine's which is worth highlighting here at the outset, since this and its implications are for all

¹³ Christopher J. Thompson, "The Theological Dimension of Time in *Confessiones* XI," in *Collectanea Augustiniana II: Presbyter Factus Sum*, ed. Joseph T. Lienhard, S.J. et al. (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 187.

¹⁴ Thompson, "The Theological Dimension of Time, 187-188.

¹⁵ For more on the importance of the Manichean question in Book XI see Teske, "Paradoxes of Time," 7-22.

his thought, including his philosophy of time, profoundly influential. We find this belief formulated at the beginning of Book VII:

I a mere man, and a man with profound defects, was trying to think of you the supreme, sole and true God. With all my heart I believed you to be incorruptible, immune from injury, and unchangeable. Although I did not know why and how, it was clear to me and certain that what is corruptible is inferior to that which cannot be corrupted; what is immune from injury I unhesitatingly put above that which is not immune; what suffers no change is better than that which can change.¹⁶

Moreover, and this is the focus of Thompson's discussion, the Manichean question suggests the possibility of the existence of time as a primordial category, a notion that Augustine needs to undercut in order to preserve the primacy of the Word in the creation and sustenance of all things.¹⁷ Augustine answers the skeptical question, as we've seen, by insisting that the Word exists 'above' time, it is itself the creator of time, and there therefore was no "before" prior to creation. The discussion of time is then, as Thompson notes, entered into largely as an extended reflection on the absolute contrast between the successive nature of temporal utterances and the creative Word which is uttered simultaneously once and forever and thus, unlike all things temporal, has neither beginning nor end and is not subject to variation.¹⁸

Proper attention to the early chapters of Book XI is what enables Thompson to correctly read the line of argument set forth in the ensuing discussion of time, whereas interpretations which ignore these initial reflections are prone to determine that Augustine comes to define time as *distentio animi* because they make the mistake of reading the discussion of time 'upside-down,' taking Augustine's opening thesis as his antithesis and vice-versa.¹⁹ Augustine famously begins his discussion of time: "What then is time? Provided no one asks me I know. If I want to explain it to

¹⁶ *Confessions*, VII, i.

¹⁷ Thompson, "The Theological Dimension of Time, 188.

¹⁸ Thompson, "The Theological Dimension of Time, 187-189.

¹⁹ Thompson, "The Theological Dimension of Time, 190-191.

an inquirer, I do not know.”²⁰ However, there are a few things he can ‘confidently affirm’ to himself to know about time, which he proceeds to list, namely:

...that 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. Take the two tenses, past and future. How can they ‘be’ when the past is not now present and the future is not yet present? Yet if the present were always present, it would not pass into the past: it would not be time but eternity. If then, 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’? The cause of its being is that it will cease to be. So indeed we cannot truly say that time exists except in the sense that it tends towards nonexistence.²¹

There are two ways of reading this passage, either as a kind of preface, a posing of the problem associated with the opening question: ‘What then is time?’ A problem which Augustine will proceed to solve with his notion of *distentio*. Or, as an assertion which is as conclusive as it is prefatory, i.e., as Augustine’s answer to the question. Narrow, definition focused interpreters tend to read it as the former, whereas Thompson, as do I, reads it as the latter. That, for Augustine, there is something about *what time is* that ultimately defies explanation; but that time is in some sense derivative of the coming and going of existent things; that neither the past nor the future exist as extra-mental entities; and that time can only be said to exist in the present, while we cannot *truly* say that the present exists except insofar as it tends towards nonexistence is, I believe, the closest thing to a definition of time itself that Augustine gives us in Book XI.

On Thompson’s reading the discussion of the non (or at least deficient) existence of time is continuous with Augustine’s primary aim of undercutting the notion that time could exist as a primordial ontological entity in which events unfold. It is thus to be understood as an opening thesis from which Augustine never really departs. When Augustine shifts, directly following the passage

²⁰ *Confessions*, XI, xiv.

²¹ *Ibid.*

cited above, to discuss the measurement of time it is not (as an upside-down reading would have it) because he thinks that, *despite* the seeming paradox of the unreality of time, there must be something there to measure. It is rather that he wishes to embark on an examination of the way that ordinary experience, as articulated by language, is the source of the confusion which distorts for us the more profound character of the eternal creative Word.²²

The shift leading up to the discussion of *distentio*, according to Thompson, marks a shift in perspective: going from a discussion of the character of time from the perspective of the creative Word, from which time is found to be a created tendency towards non-being, to a discussion of the character of time from the perspective of fallen man, from which time is misleadingly experienced as existing in three tenses. With the theological context established, Thompson finds that the deep purpose of Book XI is to show how fallen man's habitual manner of experiencing and conceptualizing time distorts his understanding of the primacy and eternal character of the Word²³ (which, I would add, is what leads us to ask questions such as what God was doing 'before' he created the world.) With the notion of *distentio*, on Thompson's reading, we are given an answer to the question of how it is that we measure time, but the deeper question being answered is: "How is it that we speak of measuring 'lengths' of time, when we know that time is not in the order of a first principle, when we know that time is not some primordial container in which events unfold, when we know that the created order is sustained in the Word?"²⁴

We can take Thompson's reading as one example of the way in which approaches which are sensitive to the theological aspects of Book XI will find misleading the claim that what Augustine provides therein is a philosophical treatise, the outcome of which is a psychological definition of

²² Thompson, "The Theological Dimension of Time, 190-191.

²³ Thompson, "The Theological Dimension of Time, 191.

²⁴ Ibid.

time. On Thompson's reading *distentio* is not found to be Augustine's definition of time, it is rather found to be an element of his *theology of time*. *Distentio*, on such a reading, is to be understood as a consequence of the fall, a perverting prism through which the fallen creature experiences time, and which distorts the soul's more profound apprehension of time from the perspective of the eternal Word.²⁵

Thompson is correct in his assessment that the Augustinian analysis of time in Book XI is more properly a *theological* than a psychological analysis.²⁶ It is important to note however that while much evidence is given within it, Book XI alone does not fully explicate Augustine's *theology of time*, nor should *distentio* be understood as the only prism through which mankind may experience creation. First, one important point which Thompson overlooks is Augustine's 'objective' view of time. As mentioned, Augustine's theological 'cosmological' account of time (that time began with the first act of creation) although implied in Book XI, is more fully treated elsewhere. This is discussed, for example, in *Confessions* Book XII,²⁷ and in *City of God* Augustine is unequivocal: "The beginning of the world and the beginning of time are the same."²⁸ Time, on his account in *Confessions* XII and in the *City of God*, depends on the motion and change brought about by the act of creation, and thus "Time existed when there was no human beings."²⁹

Furthermore, Thompson does not discuss how, while *distentio* is to be understood as the inherent existential condition of fallen man, it is also not the only possible 'psychological' experience for earth bound souls. Within Book XI itself it is indicated how even in the earthly realm the painful condition of *distentio* may be greatly ameliorated by the faithful, a recognition which, as I will discuss

²⁵ Thompson, "The Theological Dimension of Time, 192.

²⁶ Thompson, "The Theological Dimension of Time, 187.

²⁷ *Confessions*, XIII, xii-xvii.

²⁸ Augustine, *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans*, XI, vi. (Henry Bettenson, trans., (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984.))

²⁹ *City of God*, XII, xvi.

in greater detail below, may indeed be seen as one of the main points of Augustine's discussion of time. Finally, as Thompson signals (though he does not elaborate,) the condition of *distentio* can indeed be entirely overcome by created, and thus temporally bound souls. Indeed, as we learn in *Confessions* XII, it is precisely a freedom from *distentio* which the citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem enjoy upon salvation:

Again you said to me, in a loud voice to my inner ear, that not even that created realm, the 'heaven of heaven', is coeternal with you. Its delight is exclusively in you. In an unfailing purity it satiates its thirst in you. It never at any point betrays its mutability. You are always present to it, and it concentrates all its affection on you. *It has no future to expect. It suffers no variation and experiences no distending in the successiveness of time...* There your delight is contemplated without any failure or wandering away to something else. The pure heart enjoys absolute concord and unity in the unshakeable peace of holy spirits, the citizens of your city in the heavens above the visible heavens.³⁰

Time and Eternity: "Ascent"

Returning to Book XI, it seems fair to say that the main thing which all the better approaches to Augustine's notion of *distentio* have in common is an understanding of it not as his definition of time, but rather as his account of the *experience* or *awareness* of time for fallen man. "Augustine," as John C. Cavadini puts it, "is much more interested in analyzing our awareness of time as itself a phenomenon worthy of investigation, rather than in settling questions about time itself in a definitive way."³¹ Cavadini provides another good approach to reading Book XI which is, like Thompson's, sensitive to some of its theological aspects but which also, unlike Thompson's, both recognizes some of its Neoplatonic underpinnings and examines in greater detail its existential implications for the fallen soul. As does Thompson, Cavadini takes Augustine's opening consideration of time as a tendency towards non-being to be his answer to the question of what time

³⁰ *Confessions*, XII, xi. (emphasis added).

³¹ John C. Cavadini, "Time and Ascent in *Confessions* XI," in *Collectanea Augustiniana II: Presbyter Factus Sum*, ed. by Joseph T. Lienhard, S.J., et al. (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), footnote 8, 179.

is, and the ensuing shift to the discussion of measurement and *distentio* to represent a shift in perspective to a consideration of the soul's *awareness* of time.

However, whereas Thompson focuses on Augustine's project of maintaining the primacy of the Word, and on the discussion of *distentio* as an account of how the fallen soul's experience distorts its apprehension of the Word, Cavadini focuses more on the rhetorical aim of Book XI, and on elaborating upon the existential implications of *distentio*. The kind of questions that Augustine sets out to answer in Book XI are, on Cavadini's reading: What does it mean for *us* that time only exists insofar as it tends to non-being? And, what does it mean for *us* that our awareness of time is always anchored upon our awareness of its *passing*?³² According to Cavadini, as with Thompson, Book XI is not in principle aimed at providing an intellectual explanation of what time is. However, whereas Thompson reads it as primarily a work of exegesis, Cavadini reads it as primarily a form of 'ascent,' an intellectual exercise aimed at bringing the reader to a spiritual self-awareness and critical understanding of the meaning of their condition as created beings.

Before elaborating on Cavadini's approach, however, it is necessary to briefly recount Augustine's general line of argument leading up to the discussion of *distentio*:

To start, and as we've seen, in Book XI Augustine determines that neither the future nor the past have any ontological existence. In other words, they do not exist in the sense that "...when the present emerges from the future, time comes out of some secret store, and then recedes into some secret place when the past comes out of the present."³³ Yet we are able to narrate history, and prophets are able to foresee future events, and "nothing can be seen if it does not exist."³⁴ Thus, it

³² Cavadini, "Time and Ascent," 171-172.

³³ *Confessions*, XI, xvii.

³⁴ *Confessions*, XI, xviii.

would seem that both future and past *events* exist, but they cannot exist *there* in a nonexistent past or future, “Therefore, wherever they are, whatever they are, they do not exist except in the present.”³⁵

In the present, past and future events ‘exist’ in the awareness of the mind. Past events exist as the present awareness of memories, but “the memory produces not the actual events which have passed away but words conceived of images of them, which they fixed in the mind like imprints as they passed through the senses.”³⁶ Similarly, future events exist in our present awareness in the form of pre-meditations, but it is not actual future events which are present to our minds, but imaginings of them — expectations of events based, perhaps, on “their causes or signs which already exist.”³⁷ Although we ordinarily speak of there *being* three times, this is an inexact use of language. If we are to speak of three times it would be more precise to speak of three aspects of present time: a present of things past, a present of things present, and a present of things to come — all of which Augustine concludes could not exist anywhere else but in the mind.³⁸

Augustine goes on to consider how it is that we measure time. If time only exists in the present, and if upon examination the present is found to reduce to an inconceivably minute, always rapidly vanishing, extensionless ‘point’ of transition between the non-existent past and future, how is it that we speak of a ‘long’ time past or a ‘long’ time to come? Measuring must involve, Augustine continues, some form of extension, but extension of what? It cannot be of the future or of the past because we cannot measure what does not exist, nor can it be of the present, since the present is indivisible and thus lacks extension,³⁹ nor can it be the extension of physical objects into motion,⁴⁰ or of something like the articulation of the voice into speech.⁴¹ Augustine settles upon the notion of

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ *Confessions*, XI, xx.

³⁹ *Confessions*, XI, xx-xxii.

⁴⁰ *Confessions*, XI, xxii-xxiv.

⁴¹ *Confessions*, XI, xxvii.

distentio: we measure time as it is passing, but the extension which we measure would, again, seem only to be in our present awareness, in what seems to him to be a distension of the mind.⁴² Having arrived at this insight, and before proceeding to further explicate what he means by *distentio animi*, Augustine interjects:

Stand firm, my mind, concentrate with resolution. ‘God is our help, he has made us and not we ourselves.’ (Ps. 61: 9; 99: 3). Concentrate on the point where truth is beginning to dawn. For example, a physical voice begins to sound. It sounds. It continues to sound, and then ceases. Silence has now come, and the voice is past. There is now no sound. Before it sounded it lay in the future. It could not be measured because it has ceased to be. At the time when it was sounding, it was possible because at that time it existed to be measured. Yet even then it had no permanence. It came and went.⁴³

Augustine then goes on to explain how *distentio animi* is the solution to the enigma of how it is that we can measure time. We can measure time because “the mind expects and attends and remembers, so that what it expects passes through what has its attention to what it remembers.”⁴⁴ Although the past and the future do not exist and the present lacks extension, attention perdures. When we speak of a long future and a long past it is a long expectation of a future and a long memory of a past of which we speak. And it is through the perdurance of attention that what will be present progresses towards being absent. Every temporal whole passes in parts from expectation to memory: just as the parts of the voicing of a single syllable of a word passes through the present from expectation to memory, so does the uttering of a verse of a psalm, the parts of which are its words, and so does the psalm as a whole, the parts of which are its verses, and so does the life of a man, the parts of which are his actions and, finally, so does the sum of human history, of which individual lives are the parts.⁴⁵

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ *Confessions*, XI, xxviii.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

Now, to return to Cavadini's approach, let us recall Augustine's interjection during his discussion of *distentio*:

Stand firm, my mind, concentrate with resolution. 'God is our help, he has made us and not we ourselves.' Concentrate on the point where truth is beginning to dawn.⁴⁶

While some commentators tend to dismiss invocations such as this as mere rhetorical flourishes, it is precisely here that Cavadini would have us take pause and consider. Why does the notion of *distentio* remind Augustine that we are not self-creators, but that we are created by God? And what, following this insight, is the truth which is beginning to dawn? On Cavadini's reading, the truth which dawns is precisely the main point that Augustine intends to drive home in Book XI, namely: "...the difficult truth of what time ultimately is: an awareness of our own ephemerality, an awareness that 'we' in fact 'did not make ourselves,' that God made us, and that we have no control over our passing away. Our awareness of time is ultimately a species of *self-awareness*, and as such is an awareness (...) that 'God is the Creator of all.'"⁴⁷

The main point of Augustine's discussion of time, of the nonexistence of the past and future and of the present as a tendency towards nonexistence is, on Cavadini's reading, a drive towards the recognition that though our actions, our words, and our lives may seem to us to be in a sense extended, they are not extended "in time," in the sense that they do not come from or return into some existent realm, some 'secret storehouse' of the future or the past. The extension of our lives exists only in our minds, in our present awareness of our expectations and memories. Augustine calls upon God to help him face this because the implication of there not being an ontological temporal realm wherein our future and past 'parts' exist is that we can maintain neither the "comfortable illusion" that we have some kind of anchor on something like eternity, or at least a lasting existence

⁴⁶ *Confessions*, XI, xxvii.

⁴⁷ Cavadini, "Time and Ascent," 173.

within time, nor may we deny what is again the main recognition that Augustine is trying to impart, that “God created us, we did not create ourselves.”⁴⁸

According to Cavadini, the primary insight of Book XI begins to be formulated in the early chapters, well before the discussion of time, with the initial consideration of the first verse of Genesis (“May I hear and understand, how *In the Beginning* you *made heaven and earth*,”⁴⁹ and goes on to take the form, not of a philosophical treatise, but of an introspective “ascent” of the soul, whereby contemplation of created things leads the soul to contemplation of God.⁵⁰ Augustine begins Book XI not in a treatise-like manner but (after an initial invocation to God) by considering creation itself: “See, heaven and earth exist, they cry aloud that they are made, for they suffer change and variation.”⁵¹ They furthermore proclaim that they did not make themselves, and:

...the voice with which they speak is self-evidence. You, Lord, who are beautiful, made them for they are beautiful. You are good, for they are good. You are, for they are. Yet they are not beautiful or good or possessed of being in the sense that you their maker are. In comparison with you they are deficient in beauty and goodness and being. Thanks to you, we know this; and yet our knowledge is ignorance in comparison with yours.⁵²

Augustine continues, on Cavadini’s reading, by ‘turning inwards,’ insofar as he considers the nature of God’s eternal Word in comparison with the temporal, and thus ephemeral character of our own. Finally, the ascent reaches its height when Augustine describes his experience following upon his attempt to comprehend the “Beginning:”⁵³

What is the light which shines right through me and strikes my heart without hurting? 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. Wisdom, wisdom it is which shines right through me, cutting a path through the cloudiness which returns to cover me as

⁴⁸ Cavadini, “Time and Ascent,” 173-174.

⁴⁹ *Confessions*, XI, iii.

⁵⁰ Cavadini, “Time and Ascent,” 174.

⁵¹ *Confessions*, XI, iv.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Cavadini, “Time and Ascent,” 174-175.

I fall away under the darkness and the load of my punishments (...) so that I cannot maintain my goodness until you, Lord, who 'have become merciful to all my iniquities, also heal all my sickness'⁵⁴

Mentioning, though not explicating the similarity between this ascent and the visions in Book VII and at Ostia, Cavadini stresses how the mere glimpse of “light,” coincident with Augustine’s recognition of his own unlikeness to it, fills him with “terror” and causes him to “fall away” again, back to the darkness and the load of his punishments, leaving him not with a sense of fulfillment, but of longing for that time when he can ‘maintain his goodness’ in God’s eternity. In the meantime, what Augustine is left with is the painful awareness, heightened by the glimpse of eternity, of the nature of his own existence within time, which is ultimately an awareness of his own tendency towards non-existence, and of his scatteredness unto illusory temporal realms, an awareness that he — that *we* — resist.⁵⁵

We resist this awareness because we would prefer to think of eternity as everlasting, as time without end rather than as *timeless*. We prefer to think of God’s eternity thus because it would make us more like him, and him more like us — which is why, again, we ask questions like “What was God doing before he created the world?” Thus Cavadini sees the purpose of Augustine’s discussion of *distentio* as being to “seize” the mind and “hold” it for a while upon the awareness of our own unlikeness to God.⁵⁶ An awareness which we resist because it reveals to us the nature of distension, which leads us, as Cavadini nicely puts it “...to see and say with Augustine, *ecce distentio est uita mea* (...) I am continually attempting to “stretch” myself out into an eternity by displacing my awareness of time — in the first instance an awareness of self — onto an illusory realm of past, present, and

⁵⁴ *Confessions*, XI, ix.

⁵⁵ Cavadini, “Time and Ascent,” 175-176.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

future in which, once it is established as objective, I may then take some scant assurance of a claim about my own immortality. The very structure of my consciousness is infected by pride!”⁵⁷

Thus, the self-awareness we arrive at with the notion of *distentio* is an awareness of our own nature as fallen, an awareness that the very structure of our consciousness is infected by what is for Augustine at the root of all sin. One wishes Cavadini had elaborated somewhat more upon this, the point of pride. On his account, the distended consciousness is infected by pride insofar as it believes it may escape its own ephemerality by imagining for itself a lasting existence within time, “...we ‘fall’ by trying to escape time into eternity, by claiming that time is more than our own remembering, attending and expecting...”⁵⁸ However, there are, I believe, further implications here.

The pride of *distentio* involves not only the illusion of attaining a kind of *lastingness* within time, it also involves the illusion of the soul attaining to its own completion within time. The distended soul may consider itself as being, in a sense, a self-creator — such that only through its own memories, attention and expectations it could ground itself enough to construct a coherent and meaningful narrative of its existence. It may for example, and in keeping with the pagan Roman ideals of Augustine’s contemporaries, take as its end the attainment its own *happiness* — perhaps in the form of wealth, glory, or power; or perhaps in the form of its own self-perfection by means of the perfection of its virtues. This is an idea that Augustine needs to undercut because the notion that a life could form a meaningful whole within time, grounded on its own activities, runs counter to the theological narrative. As Augustine discusses in Book XI, nothing forms a whole until it has reached its’ end:

⁵⁷ Cavadini, “Time and Ascent,” 176.

⁵⁸ Cavadini, “Time and Ascent,” 177.

What we measure is the actual interval from the beginning to the end. That is why a sound which has not yet ended cannot be measured: one cannot say how long or short it is, nor that it is equal to some other length of time...⁵⁹

But of course, for Augustine the *end* for the human life lies outside of time. The soul is fallen, cut off from its only true ground which is in God, the source to which it cannot return through its own efforts, but only through salvation. Thus, out of pride we also ‘fall’ by trying to define ourselves within time. The illusion of self-creation and self-sufficiency, the illusion that we might productively define our own values and attain to our own *ends* is, for Augustine, the height of pride.

Cavadini’s approach is excellent insofar as it helps us to see the polemical thrust of Book XI, how it culminates in a confession of sin, and how Augustine utilizes what Cavadini considers an ascent, and what I would describe as a rhetorical method highly reminiscent of an ascent. While it might be somewhat imprecise to describe Book XI as an ascent, doing so is what allows Cavadini to further enter into some important reflections on some of the theological dimensions of the book. According to Cavadini’s reading, part of what Augustine means to convey with his use of ‘ascents’ is that although perhaps successful in leading the soul into a recognition of its fallen condition, ascents ultimately “fail.” They ultimately fail as a means of bridging the gap between the soul and God’s eternity, and they fail as a means of ‘healing the sickness’ of the distended soul. According to Cavadini, such philosophical ascents are to be seen, similarly to the condition of *distentio*, as an ineffectual way of trying to escape time into eternity. Though it might catch a glimpse of the “light,” the soul inevitably falls back immediately into time. Insofar as it is filled with terror, the recalcitrant soul might grow even more resistant to facing its own ephemerality, more likely to attempt to construct itself as a self-creator in time.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ *Confessions*, XI, xxvii.

⁶⁰ Cavadini, “Time and Ascent,” 175-178.

Perhaps because he focuses on the ‘ascent’ he finds in Book XI, without considering in any detail the ascents of Book VII and at Ostia, Cavadini’s analysis overemphasizes the notion of the “failure” of ascents in Augustine. We certainly do not find in the descriptions surrounding the ascents in the autobiographical chapters any evidence of the soul falling back into time *more resistant* to facing its own ephemerality. What we do see is the soul made more aware of its own ephemerality, but the outcome of this is a strengthening of the love of God and a weakening of the soul’s temporal attachments. Thus it seems off the mark to say that Augustine uses ascents to show how they fail, as ascents are shown by him to be highly successful, at least in his own spiritual development. Cavadini is correct however, to emphasize how it is not, for Augustine, by means of engaging in Neoplatonic ascents that the soul *ultimately* escapes the terror and longing of its temporal condition. Though the soul may “in the flash of a trembling glance attain to that which is,” it does “not possess the strength to keep (its) vision fixed.”⁶¹ The gap is not finally bridged, nor is the distended soul finally healed by engaging in philosophical activities or mystical practices. Near the end of Book XI Augustine writes:

‘Because your mercy is more than lives’ (Ps. 62: 4), see how my life is a distension in several directions. ‘Your right hand upheld me’ (Ps. 17: 36; 62: 9) in my Lord, the Son of man who is mediator between you the One and us the many, who live in a multiplicity of distractions by many things; so I might apprehend him in whom also I am apprehended’ (Phil. 3: 12-14), and leaving behind the old days I might be 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. So I ‘pursue the prize of the high calling’ where I ‘may hear the voice of praise’ and ‘contemplate your delight’ (Ps. 25: 7; 26: 4) which neither comes nor goes.⁶²

That which truly bridges the gap between time and eternity for Augustine is, of course, the ‘Son of man who is mediator between you the One and us the many,’ Christ. And the only means of truly

⁶¹ *Confessions*, XI, xxix.

⁶² *Ibid.*

alleviating the terror of the soul's awareness of its own ephemerality in time is, as he puts it at the end of Book X, to 'think upon the price' of the soul's redemption,' to 'eat and drink it, and distribute it.'⁶³

Psychologically, temporal distension is presented as a painful experience of "distraction" and of unboundedness — it is unbounded because although it seems to have a limitless capacity for memory, it cannot remember from where it came, and although it seems to have a limitless capacity for expectation, it knows not what ultimately to expect. Because of the unboundedness of distended consciousness, time is experienced as "being scattered in times whose order I do not understand,"⁶⁴ wherein "the storms of incoherent events tear to pieces my thoughts, the inmost entrails of my soul..."⁶⁵ But the distended soul is healed, according to Augustine, by faith alone. By faith "forgetting the past"⁶⁶ and "leaving behind the old days"⁶⁷ the soul converts its memories, its present awareness of the past, into a faith in God's providence. So that it "might be gathered to follow the One,"⁶⁸ the soul by faith converts its expectations, its present awareness of the future, into hope: "moving not towards those future things which are transitory but to 'the things which are before' me"⁶⁹ — moving, that is, towards its hope for eternal salvation.

Conclusion

Having widened the scope considerably from the standard gloss of Augustine's alleged definition of time, I have begun to indicate the manner in which the discussion of time in Book XI can only be properly understood in light of the theological context of sin and salvation. I have

⁶³ *Confessions*, X, xliii.

⁶⁴ *Confessions*, XI, xxix.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

shown how, while some commentators read Book XI as primarily a philosophical treatise aimed at defining time, the better interpretations are those which set the narrow question of definition aside — as does Augustine. In the final analysis Book XI, taken as a whole, is not in the first place a philosophical treatise on time, it is rather a theological reflection on the mystery of creation, and a purposive reflection on the condition of the fallen soul and its hope for salvation.

I hope also to have indicated how Book XI is as much about eternity as it is about time. Time is found to be deficient, and life in time is found to be a passing away, a dissipation in the flow of impermanence, but the full Augustinian sense of this is only established by the absolute contrast with the existence of something which itself does not pass: “In the eternal, nothing is transient, but the whole is present.”⁷⁰ In eternity everything exists simultaneously in the unity of a full and fixed presence, whereas in time that which *is* has only a tenuous and ultimately illusory extended presence within the distension of the fallen soul. Existence within time is come to be seen as in all ways lacking in comparison with existence within the divine stability of God’s eternity. Ultimately, the positing and firmly held belief in such an eternal realm which *is*, in essence, everything that time *is not* is, I believe, one of the most important factors shaping Augustine’s thought. For this reason, approaches to Book XI which ignore its theological dimensions not only run the risk of profoundly distorting his discussion of time, they also obstruct the many ways in which this discussion is linked to his broader thought.

Consideration of approaches such as Thompson’s and Cavadini’s help us to see how the deep concern undergirding Augustine’s so-called “psychological view of time” is clearly not motivated by his desire to say what exactly time itself is. The deep concern motivating his discussion of time is, as I would put it, to show what the meaning of the experience of time for the human soul

⁷⁰ *Confessions*, XI, xi.

is, and how this experience can be transformed in light of the character of the eternal realm and the soul's hope for salvation. The polemical thrust of the discussion is aimed at recontextualizing and transforming the experience of time for the soul, such that the distended temporal condition comes to be understood as the grounds for due punishment for sin; while for the faithful soul the temporal realm is converted into the grounds, not for the prideful illusion of the possibility of self-determination, but for the concentrated love and praise of God. It is by approaching Book XI in this manner that we come to see how the real purpose of the book is exactly what Augustine himself clearly states it to be at the outset:

...I am stirring up love for you in myself and in those who read this, so that we may all say 'Great is the Lord and highly worthy to be praised' (Ps. 47: 1). I have affirmed this and will say it again: I tell my story for love of your love.⁷¹

Recognizing this as the purposive thrust of the book is one of the ways we begin to see how it is in continuity with the *Confessions* as a whole, a work which Augustine himself describes as having been written to the effect of stirring up towards God the mind and feelings of men.⁷²

⁷¹ *Confessions*, XI,i.

⁷² Augustine: *Retractions* II. 6, 1

Part II. Time and Eternity in Confessions I-IX

Introduction: Time, Eternity and Augustine's Rhetoric

In what follows, I will take some of the resources I have gathered from the foregoing discussion to explore some ways in which Augustine's view of time and eternity is borne out in his work beyond the narrow confines of Book XI. As described, I find Book XI to be in continuity with the rhetorical aim of the *Confessions* as a whole. I furthermore find it to contain instances of the same kind of rhetorical devices which he employs to achieve this. A note regarding this: Augustine's philosophical arguments, as we have seen above, are best understood if read not in isolation from, but as part and parcel of his broader agenda — to which end he applies all the tools of his trade as rhetor-cum-pastor, appealing as much to the feelings as he does to the mind. For this reason, I find it both more fitting and more rewarding to meet Augustine on his own grounds, which is why I will focus my discussion on what I take to be his rhetoric more so than on his arguments.

For example, as we've seen, proper appreciation of Augustine's view of time requires attention to his intense sensitivity to and insistence upon the *pathos* of time, the pathos of the ephemerality, mutability, and perishability of time and of the contents thereof. Time, for Augustine, is primarily associated with suffering: it is the vehicle of the human experiences of loss, mortality, instability, disunity and disorientation. Such connotations come through his choice of language: for example, in the way '*distentio*' is cast as a painful, anxiety producing condition, with its decidedly negative connotations of a pathological physical condition, i.e., of a bodily swelling or, as Chadwick has it, a connotation of torture, of being stretched out on a rack,⁷³ as well as through poetic

⁷³ Chadwick, *Confessions*, footnote 19, 230-231.

interludes and prayers (which, as we've seen, we might mistakenly consider incidental to his arguments,) and they are also affected through larger, more structural rhetorical moves.

For instance, we've seen how on Cavadini's reading, Book XI itself takes the structure of an 'ascent,' patterned after the ascents Augustine learned to make from the "Platonist books" and found elsewhere in the *Confessions* (namely at VII, x; VII, xvii; and IX, x). Cavadini's argument is profound and highly fruitful, and it is also persuasive insofar as he finds in Book XI the most important steps involved in an ascent.⁷⁴

We might note however how this 'ascent' lacks the full formal specificity of a mystical ascent, the likes of which we find in Book VII and at Ostia.⁷⁵ The 'ascent' Cavadini locates in Book XI lacks all the 'steps' we find in these, and the steps he does find are spread out from each other and are interspersed with other philosophical and theological arguments. It furthermore lacks the consistent directionality of a mystical ascent, as consideration of the character of the temporal and eternal realms frequently shifts back and forth, and in a voice which shifts back and forth from personal to impersonal. For this reason, I think it more precise to say that the kind of rhetorical move we find in Book XI is, while highly reminiscent of an ascent, not a proper ascent.

I make this point because in my discussion to follow I will refer to what I believe to be a more general Augustinian rhetorical move, elements of which I find to play out frequently in his

⁷⁴ Beginning with the consideration of the world (at XI, iii), then taking (at XI, vi) an 'inward turn' with consideration of God's Word in comparison with our own utterances, and culminating at the above quoted consideration of the "Beginning" (at XI, ix).

⁷⁵ For example: *And so step by step I ascended from bodies to the soul which perceives through the body, and from there to its inward force, to which bodily senses report external sensations, this being as high as the beasts go. From there again I ascended to the power of reasoning to which is to be attributed the power of judging the deliverances of the bodily senses. This power, which in myself I found to be mutable, raised itself to the level of its own intelligence, and led my thinking out of the ruts of habit. It withdrew itself from the contradictory swarms of imaginative fantasies, so as to discover the light by which it was flooded. At that point it had no hesitation in declaring that the unchangeable is preferable to the changeable, and that on this ground it can know the unchangeable, since, unless it could somehow know this, there would be no certainty in preferring it to the mutable. So in the flash of a trembling glance it attained to that which is. At that moment I saw your 'invisible nature understood through the things which are made' (Confessions, VII, xvii)*

work, and which I want to cast in my own terms. The move, which I will call Augustine's 'underside move,' both depends on and is, I believe, used to formulate his view of time and eternity in Book

XI, and it is a move which I find often exemplifies his fullest and most pathos-laden persuasive force. The move is a pattern of thought which involves a similar kind of comparative dynamics as used in ascents but which lacks their formal specificity, and which plays out on both more macro and micro levels.

The basic idea of the full move is this: Augustine begins by considering the deficiencies involved with any given temporal good (e.g., the temporal present) in comparison with that good's state of perfection in the eternal realm (e.g., the eternal present), or vice versa (the order, unlike with ascents, does not matter). Pointing beyond to the temporal good's state of perfection in the eternal realm allows him to come back and show the deficiencies of the temporal good ever more poignantly, and the more poignantly the deficiencies are shown to be, the more the longing for the perfection of eternity is intensified. Augustine will then in some manner emphasize how the 'good' or 'end' towards which the soul strives is in truth located outside of time, and thus the gap between the longing soul and what it longs for grows ever wider. Meanwhile the impossibility of the soul bridging the gap by its own efforts is reinforced. It thus becomes a mutually reinforcing cycle whereby the vision of the temporal realm as the *underside of eternity* grows darker and the meaning and value of temporal life and goods is transformed and recontextualized in such a way as to train the soul towards its hope of salvation, and away from its temporal attachments.

We have seen how this works in Book XI, for instance, in the way that Augustine's consideration of the perfections of God's eternity casts its shadow upon the ensuing discussion of the experience of time. Time becomes a reminder of the ephemerality and mortality of all things temporal, and the contrast between eternity and time, and the longing for the former, is reinforced and made increasingly poignant by repeated comparisons back and forth. In consequence of the soul's recognition that it is not a self-creator and that what it longs for cannot be attained by its own

efforts, concomitant with the hope of salvation provided by the Christian framework, the meaning and value of time, and by extension the temporal realm, is transformed and recontextualized: it is downgraded insofar as it is cast unto the lowest rung of a metaphysical hierarchy and stripped of any possible claims to ultimacy. At the same time, the temporal realm is upgraded insofar as it becomes situated within a larger teleological framework whereby it gains intelligibility. Come to be understood as the grounds to which mankind has fallen as a consequence of sin, the temporal realm becomes for the distended soul the grounds for due punishment; and for the faithful soul it becomes ordered as described — the past becoming the grounds for faith in God, the present the grounds for the love of God, and the future the grounds for the soul's hope of salvation and reunification with God.

Furthermore, when considering certain temporal 'goods,' and on the level of single passages (among which are some of the most beautiful in the *Confessions*), we see that Augustine makes use of precisely this kind of comparative dynamic to accomplish the difficult task of characterizing the spiritual experience. For example, throughout the *Confessions* Augustine relies on the comparison of temporal sensual experience with its eternal state of perfection:

But when I love you, what do I love? It is not physical beauty nor temporal glory nor the brightness of light dear to earthly eyes, nor the sweet melodies of all kinds of songs, nor the gentle odor of flowers and ointments and perfumes, nor manna or honey, nor limbs welcoming the embraces of the flesh; it is not these I love when I love my God. Yet there is a light I love, and a food, and a kind of embrace of my inner man, where my soul is floodlit by light which space cannot contain, where there is sound which time cannot seize, where there is a perfume which no breeze disperses, where there is a taste for food no amount of eating can lessen, and where there is a bond of union that no satiety can part. That is what I love when I love my God.⁷⁶

Augustine struggles with the problem that language is itself a creature of time, and that we thus lack the proper language to understand the eternal realm. Whatever we can understand about God and

⁷⁶ *Confessions*, X, vi.

eternity must speak to us as temporal, embodied beings. Thus, the spiritual experience is characterized in terms of temporal experiences, and it is by pointing beyond these to their state of perfection in eternity that Augustine gives a sense of what otherwise cannot be articulated. We see this above in terms of sensual pleasures which, in comparison with their full and fixed presence in God, are increasingly come to be seen as deficient in the temporal realm because of their transitory and ephemeral nature.

It is by means of such rhetoric that Augustine comes to insist on how, although our bodily life brings us pleasures, these cannot be considered ends in themselves. Such pleasures are certainly no means to the *happiness* for which we strive, because the sweetness we experience from them will always be mixed with bitterness. Sensual pleasures, being creatures of time, are always tending towards non-existence, thus we are driven to anxiety as we find ourselves compelled to seek fulfillment from them repeatedly, a fulfillment which is always only brief and partial. Thus, by comparing earthly sensual pleasures with their state of perfection in the love of God, Augustine transforms and recontextualizes their meaning and value. They are downgraded insofar as their deficiencies are come to be felt more poignantly and they cannot be considered ends in themselves, but they are upgraded (for the faithful soul) insofar as they are come to be experienced as grounds for the love and praise of god; and their sweetness comes to be experienced as a foretaste of the complete and everlasting sweetness to be found in eternity.

Distentio Animi in the ‘Autobiography’

In what follows, I would like to explore some ways in which these considerations might bear upon our reading of the autobiographical elements of the *Confessions*. According to my reading of the *Confessions*, we may take the autobiographical sections as being illustrative of basically the same theme which is restated in more philosophical terms in Book XI. Furthermore, I believe we can

consider the narrative arc as a whole as likewise taking the rhetorical form of an underside move whereby, once understood as the underside of his eternal life, the meaning and value of Augustine's temporal life and attachments are transformed and recontextualized in the manner described.

Briefly, what we find in Books I-IX is a highly stylized narrative meant to exemplify the existential condition of the individual fallen human soul on its spiritual quest for self-knowledge and knowledge of God, which culminates in the soul's conversion to orthodox Christianity. Formulated both as an extended prayer and as Augustine's personal autobiography, the overall gist of the entire narrative is succinctly captured at the very outset of the book, when Augustine addresses God thusly:

You stir man to take pleasure in praising you, because you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.⁷⁷

To start, by casting the narrative in somewhat abstract terms, we can see how Books I-IX are illustrative of Augustine's *psychological view of time* (properly understood,) i.e., as illustrative of the lived experience of the existential condition of *distentio*, a condition which is dramatized in the autobiography, shown to be felt by the fallen soul, in the first instance, as a kind of *restlessness* or anxiety. However, in its seeking of *rest* the soul is presented as being, unbeknownst to itself, guided by God towards its spiritual conversion, a conversion which we can also cast in terms of Augustine's philosophy of time and eternity, as conversion consists in the temporal reorientation of the soul in light of its full recognition of its relationship with eternity, the recognition that the rest it seeks lies only therein.

Augustine presents the story by interweaving two narrative voices: what I'll call the voice of his 'pre-conversion consciousness' and the voice of his 'post-conversion consciousness.' The

⁷⁷ *Confessions*, I, i.

‘autobiographical’ sections are written from the post-conversion position, however they also descriptively track the progression of his life as experienced for the first time, wherein the main theme expressed is how he is driven by restlessness as he goes through various stages of life always seeking and failing to find wisdom and fulfillment from external, temporal goods. A wisdom and fulfillment which he ultimately only comes to find by ordering the whole of his life towards God.

As Augustine recounts the path of his pre-conversion consciousness, we see how his struggle for self-knowledge is impeded by the fact that he can never be fully *present* to himself. The pre-conversion soul is shown to have only a perspectively subjective and thus very limited awareness of itself and of the situation it is in. It lives “in a multiplicity of distractions by many things”⁷⁸ because it is distended, dispersed between the distractions of immediate experience, its expectations for the future, and its memories of the past. The distended soul searches, in all directions, for *ends* upon which it can rest, but it finds none because every temporal end is found to be deficient. Thus, the distended soul seems condemned to the kind of restlessness which characterizes its pre-conversion life.

Added to this, however, is the perspective of the post-conversion consciousness, which has (in as full a sense possible in the temporal realm) overcome the condition of *distentio*. Following upon its conversion, the post-conversion consciousness is able to ground itself in light of the eternal realm and is thereby able to give a coherent and meaningful account of the whole of its temporal life. Rather than “being scattered in times whose order I do not understand”⁷⁹ it is, for example, able to look back on its previous experiences as being, from the very beginning, on a determinate path guided by the providence of God. Thus, the quest for self-knowledge involves recontextualizing the

⁷⁸ *Confessions*, XI, xxix.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

distended temporal experience in light of the eternal realm. By converting, the soul reorients itself in time; by “leaving behind the old days” so that it “might be gathered to follow the One,”⁸⁰ it becomes fully present to itself by finding God to be, on the one hand, the deepest part of itself within time and, on the other hand, by finding God to be both the creative origin and the final resting place of its soul outside of time.

Insofar as it is distended, the pre-conversion consciousness is turned away from God. ‘Spread out’ and disintegrated within the triply aspected present, it seeks rest in temporal goods, i.e., it seeks to ground itself in sensual pleasures, in human relationships, in worldly ambitions and the quest for worldly knowledge. None of which is stable enough to afford the fallen soul the rest it seeks precisely because of the ephemerality of such things, because of their tendency towards nonexistence. However, the soul is driven on by its longing for completeness and reintegration, and following upon its conversion and its recognition that “you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you,” the psychological condition of *distentio* is, to a large extent, ameliorated. It is ameliorated because by means of faith the post-conversion consciousness has come to orient itself within time in the manner described.

Time and Conversion

Less abstractly, what we find in Books I-IX is the ‘autobiography’ of a young St. Augustine: a gifted, philosophically minded North African Roman bent on coming *to know and to understand*. The autobiographical sections encompass the 33 year period from his birth, early education, and adolescence (Books I and II); through his later student years and early professional life as a master of rhetoric, during which time he is ‘distracted from God,’ devoting himself wholeheartedly to his

⁸⁰ Ibid.

friendships and somewhat to his pleasures, persistently to his secular ambitions and, primarily, to the earnest and thorough examination of the available philosophical schools of thought and religious sects of his day.

Thus, the narrative is largely propelled in the first seven books by a series of this-worldly, *intellectual* conversions which, with mounting intensity, lead to his final *spiritual* conversion in Book VIII. His first intellectual conversion is initiated by his positive encounter with Cicero's *Hortensius*, an exhortation to study philosophy, which kindles his longing for the "immortality of wisdom."⁸¹ This is followed, after a disappointing encounter with scripture,⁸² to his intellectual conversion to Manicheism,⁸³ a materialist sect which he embraces because "unaware of the existence of another reality, that which truly is..."⁸⁴ and with which he remains involved for a decade. Later, having grown increasingly disillusioned with Manichaeism, he comes, under the influence of the skepticism of the New Academy, to a state of doubt,⁸⁵ a doubt which opens him to a renewed interest in the Catholic faith and, after learning an allegorical approach to reading scripture, he decides to become a catechumen in the church.⁸⁶

Shortly thereafter, his illuminating encounter with the "Platonist Books" helps him to overcome his materialist inclinations, and thereby to understand and accept the true wisdom of the doctrine of the Word and to finally cut his lingering ties to Manichaeism.⁸⁷ His conversion to Neoplatonic metaphysics forms the intellectual gateway to his spiritual conversion as it is the apprehension of the non-material, non-successive character of eternity provided by the method of

⁸¹ *Confessions*, III, iii.

⁸² *Confessions*, III, v-vi.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ *Confessions*, III, vii.

⁸⁵ *Confessions*, V, x.

⁸⁶ *Confessions*, V, xiii-xiv.

⁸⁷ *Confessions*, VII, ix.

introspective ascent that allows him to catch a glimpse of the *true* object of his longing, a longing which is reinforced as he comes to see the deficiencies of his life in the temporal realm more poignantly.⁸⁸ By the end of Book VII his final intellectual conversion is complete; the glimpse of the eternal he achieves by ascent facilitates the ‘birth pangs’ of his conversion to orthodox Christianity, and he becomes increasingly eager to rid himself of his temporal attachments.

However, his resolve to proceed to baptism and enter the church as a sexual celibate is hampered because he “was still firmly tied by woman,”⁸⁹ a final bond which is increasingly loosened as he listens to a series of powerful conversion stories, culminating in a story of two civil servants who decide to rid themselves of the world and live a life of celibacy and devotion to God, reasoning thusly:

...What do we hope to achieve with all our labors? What is our aim in life? What is the motive of our service to the state? Can we hope for any higher office in the palace than to be Friends of the Emperor? And in that position what is not fragile and full of dangers? (...) And when will we arrive there? Whereas, if I wish to become God’s friend, in an instant I may become that now.⁹⁰

Profoundly shaken by these conversion stories, Augustine becomes, for the first time, *present to himself*; with a visceral recognition of his soul’s fallen condition, i.e., of the depth of the sinfulness of his lingering temporal lusts, he begins the process leading to his full and final *spiritual* conversion:

But while he was speaking, Lord, you turned my attention back to myself. You took me up from my own back where I had placed myself because I did not wish to observe myself, and you set me before my face so that I should see how vile I was, how twisted and filthy, covered in sores and ulcers. And I looked and was appalled, but there was no way of escaping from myself.⁹¹

⁸⁸ *Confessions*, VII, x-xviii.

⁸⁹ *Confessions*, VIII. i.

⁹⁰ *Confessions*, VIII, vi.

⁹¹ *Confessions*, VIII, vii.

The day having come when he ‘stands naked before’ himself, he arrives at a theretofore unrealized ‘certainty by which to direct his course.’ Yet for a brief and harrowing time he hesitates on the verge of conversion. At which point Augustine digresses with a discussion on the nature of his lusts and the *divided will* he experiences as he tries to overcome them, a discussion which we may read as a further elaboration on the existential condition of *distentio*. This discussion begins:

The enemy had a grip on my will and so made a chain for me to hold me a prisoner. The consequence of a distorted will is passion, habit is formed, and habit to which there is no resistance becomes necessity. By these links, as it were, connected one to another... a harsh bondage held me under restraint. The new will, which was beginning to be within me a will to serve you freely and to enjoy you, God, the only sure source of pleasure, was not yet strong enough to conquer my older will, which had the strength of old habit. So my two wills, one old the other new, one carnal, the other spiritual, were in conflict with one another, and their discord robbed my soul of all concentration.⁹²

We find here another important clue as to the way in which the meaning of *distentio* has implications far beyond the mind’s capacity to measure time by means of the perdurance of attention, or to experience time as a source of anxiety. It also results in a ‘divided will’ in the soul. *Distentio* as we recall is a consequence of sin and, as we see here, it is also the means by which sin is perpetuated. The present state of the distended soul is one of bondage to its distorted will. Sinful passions experienced in the past perpetuate themselves through the memory by forming carnal habits, habits which necessitate the sinful passions of the present and of the future, thus forming a seemingly unbreakable chain which binds the soul to the temporal world through its lusts. This chain is thus the soul’s punishment for sin, its links reaching back to the punishment of the original sin of Adam.⁹³ Yet, there is another will which longs for its salvation; the spiritual will yearns to break the chain. Thus, the distended soul is not only ripped apart in the multiplicity of temporal distractions, it

⁹² *Confessions*, VIII, v.

⁹³ *Confessions*, VIII, x.

is also torn between its worldly desires and its spiritual yearnings, and it is “torn apart in a painful condition, as long as it prefers the eternal because of its truth but does not discard the temporal because of familiarity.”⁹⁴

Returning to the unfolding drama, with the temporal not yet discarded, a gripping presentation of the torments caused him by the “burning struggle with myself”⁹⁵ ensues. He pants, groans, gesticulates wildly, “twisting and turning in my chain until it would break completely.”⁹⁶ But his struggle is of no avail until he arrives at the key recognition that it is not by his own efforts that he will break free. To let go of the idea that he can break his chains through his own efforts requires the humbling of the pride he takes in his own abilities. In an imagined conversation with Lady Contenance he considers all of the people who have attained the state to which he aspires, “Are you incapable of doing what these men and women have done?”⁹⁷ Contenance goads him:

Do you think them capable of achieving this by their own resources and not by the Lord their God? (...) Why are you relying on yourself, only to find yourself unreliable? Cast yourself upon him, do not be afraid. He will not withdraw himself so that you fall. Make the leap without anxiety; he will catch you and heal you.⁹⁸

Finally, “from a hidden depth a profound self-examination had dredged up a heap of all my misery and set it ‘in the sight of my heart,’”⁹⁹ he then proceeds to make the leap - throwing himself to the ground weeping violently, his pride finally overcome by humility. At the climax of his agony the Lord indeed ‘catches’ him, he hears the haunting voice of a child chanting *tolle, lege*: “Pick up and read.”¹⁰⁰ He runs and seizes his volume of the letters of Paul, opens it at random and reads the first

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ *Confessions*, VIII, viii.

⁹⁶ *Confessions*, VIII, xi.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ *Confessions*, VIII, xii.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

passage upon which his eyes fall, a passage which, miraculously, directly commands the resolution of his crisis: “Not in riots and drunken parties, not in eroticisms and indecencies, not in strife and rivalry, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh in its lusts.”¹⁰¹ Having finished this sentence: “it was as if a light of relief from all anxiety flooded into my heart. All the shadows of doubt were dispelled.”¹⁰² Now at peace, Augustine commits himself to celibacy and the Catholic Church, and finally rids himself of all ambition for success in this world.

Thus, Augustine’s final conversion, his spiritual conversion, differs from his previous intellectual conversions precisely because this is the point at which he overcomes (insofar as it is possible for the fallen soul) the psychological condition of *distentio*, now of one single will he becomes a true pilgrim, a “fellow citizen in the eternal Jerusalem.”¹⁰³ Whereas none of his intellectual conversions significantly changed his soul’s orientation, which remained towards temporal ends. Upon the full recognition of his sinful, distended condition, the recognition that God made him for himself, his turning away from pride and towards faith and humility, and his receiving of God’s Grace - all of which we find dramatized in this section - Augustine’s pre-conversion and post-conversion voices finally converge, and from thereafter he is no longer chained to the world by his lusts. A citizen, now, of the City of God on earth, the meaning and value of temporal life and temporal goods are now finally transformed and recontextualized for Augustine in the manner described above.

The condition of *distentio* is not, however, entirely overcome until the soul’s final salvation, in the meantime post-conversion Augustine remains in the world. Remaining in the world, he cannot entirely escape the pull of temporal distractions, however his attitude to them has entirely changed.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ *Confessions*, IX, xiii.

The ‘autobiography’ continues for one more Book, which opens thusly: “O Lord, I am your servant, I am your servant and the son of your handmaid. You have snapped my chains. I will sacrifice to you the offering of praise.”¹⁰⁴ Now the servant of the Lord, his mind “free of ‘the biting cares’ of place-seeking, of desire for gain, of wallowing in self-indulgence, of scratching the itch of lust,”¹⁰⁵ Augustine finalizes his retirement from his worldly career, spending a vacation period meditating upon his renewal, writing in praise of God and awakening, by reading the Psalms, to the sentiments which would come to define his later vocation:

How I cried out to you in those Psalms, and how they kindled my love for you! I was fired by an enthusiasm to recite them, were it possible, to the entire world in protest against the pride of the human race (...) what vehement and bitter anger I felt against the Manichees!¹⁰⁶

And:

During those days I found an insatiable and amazing delight in considering the profundity of your purpose for the salvation of the human race.¹⁰⁷

Shortly thereafter, Augustine is finally baptized, and he shares with Monica another mystical ascent before her death. He closes Book IX by reflecting on the life of his mother, and requesting for future readers of the *Confessions* to remember his parents in their prayers.

Compared to the emotional intensity and tight structure of the preceding Book, Book IX seems strangely subdued and loosely organized. However, one finds within the patchwork of topics discussed therein ample evidence of the condition of the newly reborn soul, the soul which has broken its chains and been gathered to follow the One, and which has thereby transformed and recontextualized the meaning and value of temporal life and temporal goods. Most prominently, one

¹⁰⁴ *Confessions*, IX, i.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ *Confessions*, IX, iv.

¹⁰⁷ *Confessions*, XI, vi.

such good is friendship, and human relationships in general, the transformation of which I would like to now discuss in greater detail.

Time, Eternity and Friendship

To set the stage for this discussion, however, we must go back to the early chapters (Books I-VI), in which we find the pre-conversion consciousness progressing down a path laden with pleasures and pains as it immerses itself in such things as friendship, literature, sex, theatre, philosophy, and its secular ambitions, etc. The lustful soul is distracted by the multiplicity of such goods; it seeks its rest, its own completion in them, mistaking them as means to happiness in this world, and it is thus earthbound, chained to its own punishment by its sins. Whereas the post-conversion consciousness has come to view all such things not as worthy ends in themselves but as earthly temptations, distractions from God. Distractions about which (at least for the less offensive of these) it has come to conclude:

Let these transient things be the ground on which my soul praises you, God creator of all. But let it not become stuck in them and glued to them with love through the physical senses. For these things pass along the path of things that move towards nonexistence.¹⁰⁸

A conclusion which should by now sound familiar as the kind of conclusion which follows upon what I have been referring to as Augustine's underside move. Indeed, I believe we can look back on the various episodes in the early chapters of the *Confessions* and see the way the push towards conversion results from the cumulative effect of underside moves, the most crucial (and the most vivid) of which pertains to Augustine's treatment of friendship.

In my discussion above I have already signaled the ways in which temporal sensual pleasures, worldly ambitions, and the quest for knowledge are transformed in light of the soul's reorientation

¹⁰⁸ *Confessions*, IV, x.

towards the eternal. We've seen, furthermore, how it is the habit of sex which most firmly binds Augustine to the world prior to his conversion. However, on my reading, temporal friendship is presented as at least as profound of a temptation for the soul as sex is, as it is friendship, a higher order temptation than sensual pleasures (and one of the highest pagan virtues,) which is presented in the narrative as bringing the soul both the greatest happiness and the greatest sorrows.

For example, one of the most moving sections in Books I - IX centers around the description of the death of a friend, a friendship which for the pre-conversion consciousness is described as having been "...sweet to me beyond all the sweetness of life that I had experienced."¹⁰⁹ Augustine describes it as a highly affectionate friendship "welded by the fervor of our identical interests," thus echoing pagan views on the nature of friendship. However, according to the pagan view true friendship was for the sake of virtue, whereas for the post-conversion consciousness "true and eternal" friendship could only exist for the sake of God, between persons grounded on their agreement, not on just any divine subjects, but on the "true religion," i.e., between friends united simultaneously with one another and with God.

Thus, the post-conversion consciousness looks back on the friendship which the pre-conversion consciousness describes as the experience of forging a unity with another soul ("he was my other self," "He was half my soul,"¹¹⁰) and recognizes it as having been:

...less than a true friendship which is not possible unless you bond together those who cleave to one another by the love which 'is poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit who is given to us.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ *Confessions*, IV, vi.

¹¹¹ *Confessions*, IV, iv.

Whereas friendships for the sake of virtue involves the idea of the soul finding its best self as reflected in the friend, and of its striving to live up to the noble and worthy reflection it finds therein, for Augustine implicit in this is the idolatry of the soul's striving for its own perfection in this world – a sinful, misdirected striving rooted in pride. Friendship offers the distended soul a taste of that which it is always seeking, i.e., an experience of unity. For the post-conversion consciousness, such an experience of unity will come to be a ground for the love and praise of God, as it comes to be experienced as a foretaste of the eternal unity of souls in the Heavenly Jerusalem. However, for the earthbound soul it is a false unity, offering a false sense of completion. Thus, despite the sweetness afforded by the experience of friendship, it also brings the worst kind of misery, as evidenced by how Augustine describes his experience following the death of his friend:

Grief darkened my heart. Everything on which I set my gaze was death... all that I shared with him was without him transformed into a cruel torment. My eyes looked for him everywhere, and he was not there. I hated everything because they did not have him... I had become to myself a vast problem...¹¹²

In its grief, the pre-conversion consciousness is shown to be entirely overcome by misery: “the state of every soul overcome by friendship with mortal things and lacerated when they are lost.”¹¹³ It weeps, it groans, it withdraws from the world. Becoming a vast problem to itself, it sees death everywhere, everything becomes “an object of horror, even light itself.”¹¹⁴ It flees from itself, from its hometown, from its memories there; and it remains inconsolable until the course of time gradually distracts it with new hopes, new friends, ultimately “the causes of new sorrows.”¹¹⁵

Indeed, some of the most powerful rhetoric in all the *Confessions* is to be found in the passages on the friendship of mortals and those directly thereafter. This is because it is the

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ *Confessions*, IV, vi.

¹¹⁴ *Confessions*, IV, vii.

¹¹⁵ *Confessions*, IV, viii.

experience of the death of a loved one by which Augustine most poignantly illustrates the misery of the human condition, a condition which is miserable precisely because of the nature of its existence within time:

For wherever the human soul turns itself, other than to you, it is fixed in sorrows... Things rise and set... they grow old and die... So when things rise and emerge into existence, the faster they grow to be, the quicker they rush towards non-being. That is the law limiting their being. So much have you given them, namely to be parts of things which do not have all their being at the same moment, but by passing away and by successiveness, they all form the whole of which they are parts.¹¹⁶

The post-conversion consciousness looks back on the utter despair experienced by the grieving pre-conversion consciousness, “What madness,” it exclaims, “not to understand how to love human beings with awareness of the human condition!”¹¹⁷ Indeed, it is the loss of the friend which prompts the recognition that much of human suffering is a consequence of making what amounts to a temporal mistake, the mistake of loving temporal things as if they were eternal.¹¹⁸ But, alas, the post-conversion consciousness observes:

The Word himself cries to you to return. There is the place of undisturbed quietness where love is not deserted if it does not itself depart... ‘Surely I shall never go anywhere else,’ says the word of God. Fix your dwelling there. Put in trust there whatever you have from him, my soul, at least now that you are wearied of deceptions... You will lose nothing... in the presence of God who stands fast and abides.¹¹⁹

And, finally:

If physical objects give you pleasure, praise God for them and return love to their Maker... If souls please you, they are being loved in God; for they also are mutable and acquire stability by being established in him. Otherwise they go their way and perish. In him therefore they

¹¹⁶ *Confessions*, IV, x.

¹¹⁷ *Confessions*, IV, vii.

¹¹⁸ *The reason why that grief had penetrated me so easily and deeply was that I had poured out my soul on to the sand by loving a person sure to die as if he would never die.* (*Confessions*, IV, viii.)

¹¹⁹ *Confessions*, IV, xii.

are loved; so seize what souls you can take with you to him, and say to them: 'Him we love; he made these things and is not far distant.'¹²⁰

Thus we can see how friendship has been downgraded for the post-conversion soul, it can no longer be seen as an end in itself, as a means to happiness in life. It cannot be such because friendship is mutable, it lacks the stability needed to provide the soul the rest it seeks because it is a temporal good and as such it is defined by its rush towards non-existence. The soul which seeks its happiness in the temporal realm seeks "the happy life in the region of death; it is not there. How can there be a happy life where there is not even life?"¹²¹ However, friendships in the region of death, in that inconceivably minute, specious 'point' of transition between the fall and salvation, is also upgraded by Augustine. Although it is upgraded only for the citizen of the City of God on earth, for whom friendship, as mentioned, may become a foretaste of the eternal unity to be experienced in heaven.

With the right attitude towards its friends, which means loving them in and for God instead of loving them as ends in themselves, the post-conversion consciousness escapes the painful distension caused by loving temporal things as if they were eternal, and thereby forging false unities. This recontextualizes (some) human relationships, as they are come to be seen as an expression of a higher context. Returning now to Book IX, we find this transformation subtly illustrated. We notice, first how now, upon every mention of another person or people Augustine immediately clarifies whether, and to what extent they were "giving their minds to (God's) law."¹²² We furthermore notice how Augustine's true friends are now a vaguely defined 'us,' a community of fellow converts which joins him in his retreat from the secular world so that they may 'live in a house in unanimity.'

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² *Confessions*, IX, i.

In Book IX we also find how the post-conversion consciousness' experience of grief has been transformed. Augustine discusses the death of two friends, his son and finally his mother, Monica. The way the first three deaths are discussed are remarkable in their brevity and restraint in comparison with the earlier description of the death of a friend, but the conditions for this contrast are also made clear. For example, in the discussion of the death of Nebridius:

Soon after my conversion and regeneration by your baptism, he too became a baptized Catholic believer. He was serving you in perfect chastity and continence among his own people in Africa, and through him his entire household became Christian, when you released him from bodily life. Now he lives in Abraham's bosom... that is where my Nebridius lives, a sweet friend to me, but Lord, your former freedman and now adopted son. There he lives; for what other place could hold so remarkable a soul? (...) He no longer pricks up his ear when I speak, but puts his spiritual mouth to your fountain and avidly drinks as much as he can of wisdom, happy without end.¹²³

But also found in the discussion of the death of Verecundus,¹²⁴ and in the surprisingly restrained discussion of the death of Augustine's son, Adeodatus.¹²⁵ In all of which we find not an outpouring of grief, but an assessment of the extent to which they served God in life, and a sense of relief that they died faithful, baptized Christians and have found their rest in God. The post-conversion consciousness no longer suffers the depth of misery consequent of loving temporal things as if they were eternal, because the friend has acquired stability by being established in God. Having discovered God to be the deepest part of itself, the soul discovers the same to be true of the other, thus what it loves in the friend is God.

¹²³ *Confessions*, IX, iii.

¹²⁴ *Most generously he offered us hospitality at his expense for as long as we were there. Repay him Lord, at the rewarding of the just. Indeed you have already rewarded him with their lot. For when we were absent during our stay in Rome, he was taken ill in body, and his sickness departed this life a baptized Christian. So you had mercy not only on him but also on us. We would have felt tortured by unbearable pain, if in thinking of our friend's outstanding humanity to us, we could not have numbered him among your flock.* (Chadwick, *Confessions*, 158.)

¹²⁴ *Who but you could be the Maker of such wonders? Early on you took him away from life on earth. I recall him with no anxiety... We associated him with us so as to be of the same age as ourselves in your grace. We were baptized, and disquiet about our past life vanished.* (*Confessions*, IX, iii.)

¹²⁵ *Who but you could be the Maker of such wonders? Early on you took him away from life on earth. I recall him with no anxiety... We associated him with us so as to be of the same age as ourselves in your grace. We were baptized, and disquiet about our past life vanished.* (*Confessions*, IX, vi.)

For the recently converted Augustine however, still ‘a beginner in authentic love of you,’ this is tested by the death of Monica, the main theme of Book IX. Remembering his beloved mother, he speaks at length of God’s gifts to her, he praises her great piety, modesty, sobriety, and tolerance. He recalls the *Vision at Ostia*, a shared mystical ascent and glimpse of the eternal achieved in conversation, a conversation in which “this world and all its delights became worthless to us,”¹²⁶ and following upon which Monica, no longer finding any pleasure in this life, hopes for her death, which follows shortly thereafter. Upon her death Augustine recalls how although ‘overwhelming grief’ welled up in his heart, he struggled (and for a long while succeeded) to hold back his tears, because such displays of grief are not appropriate when ‘religious and devout souls are released from the body.’ He reflects on how the cause of his pain was “the break in the habit formed by our living together.”¹²⁷ And how although he prayed for relief, God did not ease his pain because:

I believe that you gave me no relief so that by this single admonition I should be made aware of the truth that every habit is a fetter averse even to the mind that is not fed upon deceit.¹²⁸

Even to the post-conversion consciousness, that is, every temporal ‘habit’ or attachment, including human bonds, chain the mind to the earth and cause it to suffer insofar as it has not been fully recontextualized. Out of weakness Augustine finally breaks down and weeps for his mother “for a fraction of an hour,”¹²⁹ for which he asks for charity from his critics. He suffers the loss of what is, symbolically at least, his first and last temporal bond, a suffering which he overcomes first by confession, then by recognizing it not as a loss but as a victory. His heart is healed of that wound, he

¹²⁶ *Confessions*, IX, x

¹²⁷ *Confessions*, IX, xii.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

is confident of the fate of Monica because “By the chain of faith your handmade bound her soul to the sacrament of her redemption.”¹³⁰

With no transition, the ‘autobiography’ ends, and at the beginning of Book X the reader finds herself with the bishop Augustine a decade later, now “gathered to follow the One,”¹³¹ his mind given to God’s law, he ends the *Confessions* with three books devoted to his current philosophical and exegetical concerns. Book X is prefaced by a prayer: “May I know you, who know me. May I know as I also am known,”¹³² which hearkens back to the opening question of Book I. Thus the autobiographical portion is bracketed by the question of how the fallen soul can know God. At the heart of the difficulty of coming to know God is the fact that God is outside of time, whereas the fallen soul is distended in time, the main thesis of Book XI. Books I-IX, as I have shown, dramatize the difficulties of this quest for the individual soul, illustrating how *distentio* is manifested in the lived human life as restlessness and suffering in the face of the ephemerality of all things temporal, as a being ‘spread-out’ among ephemeral distractions away from God’s stability, distractions which divide the fallen soul and chain it to the world; binding it through its misdirected desires to its own punishments.

By the end of the *Confessions* as a whole, Augustine’s answers to his question have accumulated. There are several means by which the soul comes to know God: by praising God’s works, “the beauty of heaven and earth;”¹³³ by Scripture; by God’s Word, the divine Son; and by the human soul itself, which in the beginning was made in God’s own image and likeness.¹³⁴ The soul

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ *Confessions*, XI, xxix.

¹³² *Confessions*, X, i.

¹³³ *Confessions*, XIII,xxii-xxiii.

¹³⁴ *Confessions*, XIII,xxiv.

was made to know God, to yearn for its rest in the eternal love of God: “You have made us for yourself...”¹³⁵ but, as a consequence of the Fall, it is punished by living as a mortal among mortals in time. The sinful soul, unaided by grace, compulsively seeks happiness by misdirecting its love to temporal goods, which leave it only more depleted.¹³⁶ Ultimately, Augustine’s answer to the question is, as we have seen, that the soul must break free of its temporal chains and submit itself to the chains of faith. Only the love of God heals, sustains and fulfills. But it is ultimately only through God’s grace that the soul becomes of one will and is able to reorient all its love away from time and the contents thereof and move “not towards those future things which are transitory but to the things which are before”¹³⁷ it.

Augustine’s Theology of Time: Beyond the Confessions

In its treatment of the subjective experience of time for the individual soul, the *Confessions* is, on the one hand, a consummately introspective work. On the other hand, although ostensibly Augustine’s own personal autobiography, it is meant to portray the generalizable experience of the fallen human soul on its spiritual journey towards conversion. As such, Augustine’s view of what time is for the individual soul can serve as a starting place for reflection upon his view of what time is for mankind. We’ve seen how in the *Confessions* the main difference between the pre-conversion and post-conversion consciousness is how it is oriented within the temporal realm: the post-conversion consciousness is one which has, as described, by the grace of God broken the chains of its temporal attachments and ordered the whole of its life and love towards God, and has thus ameliorated the suffering of *distentio* insofar as it has come to experience the temporal realm as the

¹³⁵ *Confessions*, I.i.

¹³⁶ See Paula Fredriksen, “The *Confessions* as Autobiography,” in *A companion to Augustine*, ed. Mark Vessey, et al. (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2015,) 94-95.

¹³⁷ *Confessions*, XI, xxix.

grounds for faith, love and hope. Whereas the pre-conversion consciousness is illustrative of *distentio* at its most painful, the full import of which is, as I hope to have already shown, multi-complexed. With the pre and post-conversion consciousness in the *Confessions* we find an examination of two very different states experienced by a single soul, and with this the implication of there being a decisive division between two very different *kinds* of souls on earth. This is a division which maps onto the division between the condition of the souls of the citizens of the Earthly City and the condition of the souls of the citizens of the Heavenly City in the *City of God*. A work in which we find Augustine's view of time not from the perspective of the individual soul, but from all of mankind.

While it is not within the scope of this paper to enter into a discussion of the *City of God*, I will, to conclude, draw upon it in order to widen the context once again on the question of what time, and what the human experience of time is according to St. Augustine. As I have discussed, narrow readings of Augustine's philosophy of time in Book XI, because they fail to consider the theological dimensions of that discussion, are mistakenly prone to accuse him of holding an exclusively subjective account of time. In my discussion of Book XI and the *Confessions* as a whole I have treated in some detail the meaning of Augustine's 'psychological view of time,' of what living in time means, according to his vision, for the individual soul. But I have only touched piecemeal upon aspects of his view of the shared time of history, of the meaning of time for mankind. This can only be understood in light of a fuller overview of his theology.

To start: for Augustine, as we've seen, time began with God's creation of the world. The world therefore is not eternal, as it had a beginning. The world will also end, following upon the Last Judgement, when heaven and earth will be destroyed and a new heaven created. Between the beginning and the end of the world occurs the narrative of mankind. This narrative begins in the

Garden of Eden. Like all that God created, man was created good, but lacking God's perfection and thus liable to corruption. Man was also created immortal, but God left man to the freedom of his will, with the threat of the punishment of death if he should sin, and the promise of ascending to a better place if he should preserve his righteousness by acknowledging his dependence upon and inferiority to God. But Adam and Eve, out of their prideful desire to be more like God, chose to disobey. They were tempted into this "original sin" by the Devil, the leader of a group of rebellious angels who had been cast out of their place in heaven and into eternal perdition. Having sinned, the first human beings and all their progeny fall as well, and are thus condemned to their due punishment: a life of sin and misery ending in death and an ultimate everlasting damnation.¹³⁸

Thus, the full meaning of *distentio* involves the experience of the souls of all of mankind which has fallen, as punishment for Adam and Eve's misuse of their will, not just into time (as the Garden of Eden existed in time) but into time as a process which is a constant, painful movement towards death.¹³⁹ Although we've seen how this is thematized in the *Confessions*, Augustine is more explicit about it in the *City of God*:

In fact, from the moment a man begins to exist in this body which is destined to die, he is involved all the time in a process whose end is death. For this is the end to which the life of continual change is all the time directed, if indeed we can give the name of life to this passage towards death... everyone is in death from the moment that he begins his bodily existence.¹⁴⁰

Thus, as we've seen, temporal life for the fallen soul is, like time itself, a tendency towards nonexistence. But this 'life' is a miserable punishment not only because it will end in death, however, as the individual soul is punished also by falling into a 'life' of conflict: internally it is distended in time, and its will is divided as is described in the *Confessions*: its flesh battles against its spirit and its

¹³⁸ J.F. Shaw, trans., *St. Augustine, the Enchiridion on Faith, Hope and Love*. (Chicago: Regnery/Gateway, 1961.) 9-31.

¹³⁹ Shaw, *Enchiridion*, 32.

¹⁴⁰ *City of God*, XIII, x.

spirit against its flesh. Scattered in times whose order it does not understand, it seeks a final rest which it is condemned not to find within the temporal realm.

It is also miserable because it falls into a world of conflict of man against man. In paradise, there was no such conflict as man was created good and endowed with sufficient reason to seamlessly organize life in paradise. However, with the sin of Adam, human nature falls into a state where every human impulse is guided by egoistic passions, namely greed and lust for limited earthly goods, and for domination over others. Thus socially, be it on the level of the family, the city, the states, or the whole of mankind, life on earth is always either in war or on the verge thereof, and these social units and the citizens thereof yearn for a final peace which they are also condemned not to find within time.¹⁴¹

However, although man turned away from God, God did not entirely abandon man. All that man enjoys of temporal peace, health, fellowship, and the goods of nature are God's gift to the fallen creature. But in addition to these undeserved gifts God, in his infinite mercy, assumed human flesh and appeared on earth in the form of a mortal man. Before the Incarnation all of mankind was justly damned, with no possible way back to God, but with the death of Christ came the possibility of salvation. But only for a very small minority of 'saints' and a few faithful souls that lived before the Incarnation. All sons of Adam will die a first death, wherein their souls will be severed from their bodies as they await the end of times. But the few elect souls, the citizens of the City of God, are predestined to replace the small number of rebellious angels who fell from heaven.

Having been given the gift of faith and unmerited grace these souls will, following the Last Judgement, be reunited with their bodies and will join God in the Heavenly Jerusalem, where they

¹⁴¹ *City of God*, XIX, v-xii.

will enjoy the bliss of eternal peace, suffering no variation and experiencing no distending in the successiveness of time. Whereas the remainder, the citizens of the Earthly City, representing the vast majority of humanity, will be condemned to everlasting distention: they will be reunited with their bodies to suffer the punishment of everlasting war “in which the will is so at odds with the feelings and the feelings with the will, that their hostility cannot be ended by the victory of either - a struggle in which the violence of pain is in such conflict with the nature of the body that neither can yield to the other.”¹⁴²

Conclusion

I end with this theological narrative because this is the foundation and main framework of all of Augustine’s psychological, moral, social and political thought. As such it is also the starting place from which his ‘psychological view of time’ in Book XI and his view of the existential condition of mankind in the *Confessions* as a whole derives; views which I have, in my above considerations, given an account. By gradually widening the scope of the question concerning Augustine’s philosophy of time, I hope to have shown how narrow approaches which disregard this, the theological framework of Augustine’s thought, are prone to misunderstand and distort it.

I hope also to have shown how such approaches also obstruct the pathways by which we find the coherence of his thought. I have hinted at how Augustine’s view of time as presented in the *Confessions* may open up unto a discussion of the links between that work and the *City of God*, as there are important analogies which can be drawn here. The temporal/eternal distinction is of course the basis for his distinction between the earthly city and the heavenly city, and it is the basis for his downgrading of earthly justice and peace as compared to the true justice and true peace which are

¹⁴² *City of God*, XIX, xxviii.

possible only in the eternal realm. However, this discussion deserves a separate analysis, which is beyond the scope of this paper.

Rather, I have focused on discussing some of the links which can be drawn between Book XI and the autobiographical portion of the *Confessions*, thereby underscoring the coherence of that work. Further work would need to be done to tie in the books on Memory and Genesis. I take Book XI, however, to be central because of the manner in which it, when properly approached, helps us to understand Augustine's view of the existential condition both of an earthbound fallen soul and of a citizen of the 'Heavenly Jerusalem.' It is, as I hope to have shown, Augustine's conception of time and eternity which most forcefully reveals and makes meaningful the human condition of restlessness and existential anxiety. I have discussed how this distinction operates in the interplay between the pre and post conversion consciousness, and how this drives the autobiographical chapters.

Furthermore, I have discussed how Augustine's discussion of time is purposive, and how to achieve his intended effect he must employ a rhetoric that is capable of stirring the feelings as well as the minds of men, by revealing more and more the hopelessness and inadequacy of life apart from God. Only with a sense of the perfection of eternity can the soul come to understand the complete deficiency of its life within time. Thus, much of Augustine's persuasive force is also anchored on his philosophy of time. With such considerations, I hope to have shown how my opening question "What is time, according to St. Augustine" cannot be properly answered simply with a narrow philosophical analysis of his discussion of time in Book XI. Ultimately the question is synonymous with the question of what man is in his view.

The autobiography presents a narrative in which man is found to be a fallen, deficient being in a deficient temporal realm, the meaning and value of which is recontextualized in light of the

converted soul's faith in God and hope for eternal salvation. It is the inadequacy, the impermanence, the rush to non-existence of all things temporal which drives this narrative, and it is only by means of the apprehension of an eternal realm that the soul comes to see its journey as being one of an upward path. For Augustine, it takes this kind of recontextualization to understand the meaning and possibilities of man's restlessness and anxiety. The bitterness which is the curse of the partiality and ephemerality of mortal human existence is for him a hidden blessing, as it drives the soul towards the recognition that it is a fallen, sinful creature suffering its due punishment, which means that it will not find what it seeks in this life. Fortunately, there are other ways of facing Augustine's phenomenological observations connected to the human condition of mortality, existential anxiety and conflict, and differing assessments of what it means to live in a temporal horizon which is not tied to any higher and qualitatively different context of eternity. Augustine's presents a view of what the mortal human life *in time* is like which is, although dark, not wrong. Thus, the rejection of the theological framework, which is entirely called for, does also call for existential courage.

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