

Augustine on God, Time and Eternity

The problem of giving an account of time arose for Augustine as a direct result of his doctrine of creation from nothing. If creation is really from nothing, it is an absolute beginning and there can be nothing before it. Augustine was faced with the objection that, if the world is not conceived as eternal, then one can ask what was happening before it came into existence. This objection was used by Augustine's opponents to refute the idea of an absolute beginning of the world. Augustine's answer is to reject the conception of time that underlies the objection. This conception of time regards time as being of the same kind as a series of events. If we ask what happened before 1942, it is logical to expect an account of certain events prior to 1942. But it is not logical to treat time as a series of events or to ask what was happening before the series began. It makes sense to ask what happened before *any given* event but not to ask what happened before *all* events. Time is not like a fluid in which all things float or like a box in which all things are contained. It is a field of all the *relations* of "before" and "after" of events. Time is a relation of temporal things. It came into being with temporal things. One cannot speak of it except as elapsing *between* them. (Can we then think of the creation as *an event*? the event such that all other events follow it?)

This is only the beginning of Augustine's reflections on time. He discovered that, it was difficult to understand in what sense, if any, time was *real*.

The past of a thing no longer exists; in calling it past what we say is precisely that it "was", not that it "is". The future is not yet, but *will be* and there *is* only the present time left with any claim to reality. But what is the present? Is it this year? this day? this hour? this minute? this second? It seems we are compelled to say that the present vanishes to the point at which the future becomes past. Does the present have any extension (>0)? If it has some non-zero extension, can it be divided into

an earlier and a later half? If every present time has some extension then does it exist *between* its earlier half and its later half? If it is something in addition to its earlier and its later half, can it in turn be divided into an earlier and a later half? Can this process of division be continued without limit? If so, it seems to follow that any present time contains infinitely many periods of time. But then it would seem to follow that every period of time is infinitely long, which is absurd. But if the present time has no extension and cannot be divided into an earlier and a later half, how is it possible to be aware of the present? That which has no extension would seem to be no time at all and so not to exist. We cannot be aware of mere nothing. But we are aware of periods of time of varying duration. We can and do measure time. How is it that we can measure what is not yet or is no longer and has no extension when it is?

Augustine suggests that in the mind's awareness, what is actually past has a kind of present existence insofar as it is *remembered*, and the future insofar as it is *anticipated* or foreseen. He is cautious to avoid inferring from this that the past and future are somehow real. But we can speak of the past and the future as being present to the mind *in memory and expectation*.

So, even though it may seem that the ephemerality of passing time leaves no room for the reality of duration, it may exist "in the mind".

2

Before elaborating this suggestion, Augustine considers the possibility that time can be identified with movement, particularly with the movements of the stars or the sun. He rejects this idea for the reason that it is not logically impossible for the sun to change its speed. So time cannot be defined as movement to measure duration. Rather, we rely on our awareness of duration to estimate duration of motion or rest. Even if all external motion on the part of

objects in our surroundings were to cease, we would still be aware of the duration of the state of *rest* that followed.

So the mind is aware of duration as such. In its awareness of passing time, the mind is "stretched out" (*distentio*) between an expectation of what is to come and a memory of what has passed. He says "Time it seems to me is nothing else than extension, though I do not know extension of what: probably of the mind itself"

It is not clear why Augustine seemed unwilling to admit the possibility of such a temporal distention existing outside the mind in temporally extended things. Was Augustine content with the notion that time has no reality outside the mind?

From the beginning of the history of philosophy, Philosophers have thought that there were things with no beginning or end, that which is eternal. Four characteristics have been attributed to *The Eternal*.

- 1) It has no beginning or end, no past or future
- 2) It is, and is in the present,
- 3) It is unchanging
- 4) It has life

Plato held that there was something eternal, though he may have taken "life" to mean only being a first cause, not biological life. He was the first to use the term "*aion*", or eternity. Plotinus took the eternal to be a mind, and so eternal in the sense given by these four characteristics. He differed from Plato in taking time to be an illusion of sorts, so that everything, including individual human souls, which are subject to the illusion of time, is eternal.

Augustine seems to agree with Plato that this world is in time and he nowhere adopts Plotinus' view that time is an illusion. He does adopt the Plotinian view that The Eternal is literally alive, though, since he thinks it is a mind, i.e., God. But how can the eternal endure if it experiences no past or future? Augustine argues that it is precisely that

which has a past and a future, i.e. time, which cannot have duration. So only that which has no past or future can have duration. Without the eternal, that which is all at once (and thus exists in something like a period, i.e. God), duration is impossible for anything.

Augustine seems to have never quite made up his mind as to whether time is entirely subjective, a figment of the human mind or whether it has at least some objective foundation independent of human awareness, i.e., our activity of measuring. Plotinus did not shrink from the conclusion that time is entirely subjective, a mere illusion of finite, imperfect human minds. He had no compunction about making all dependent finite beings co-eternal with the Divine Mind so that even human souls exist eternally just as the divine Mind exists eternally. Plotinus, of course, did not have to stay within the limits of Christian doctrine and was, in fact, opposed to Christian doctrine.

3

Augustine's interest in the problem of time is not the same as that of other philosophers.

Whereas philosophers like Plato, Aristotle or Plotinus are interested in the problem for its own sake, Augustine is interested in it as a means of seeking God. His solution to the puzzles about the nature of time is connected to the religious objective of gaining some acquaintance with one's creator. The notion that time is a relation between events established by the mind's holding past, present and future together in memory, attention and expectation helps the believer to grasp the possibility of something which is aware of the whole past, the present and the whole of the future *all at once*. That which is capable of directly knowing the whole of the past and the future all at once must exist eternally rather than temporally. That would be God. In learning how the human mind can stretch over past, present and future, we gain a glimpse of our soul's likeness to God as his noblest mortal creature and thus we may get a very limited glimpse what God himself is like

God's eternity raises other problems . Can God act within the course of events of human history? Can God have knowledge of the events that transpire in human history at the times that they actually are happening?