

## **Augustine, *Confessions*, book 11** **(or, the nature of time and eternity)**

My mind is on fire to solve this most perplexing mystery. O Lord my God, good Father, I implore you in the name of Christ: do not hide these things, so familiar and yet so secret, from my longing; let me break through to them until they begin to shine by the light of your mercy, O Lord. (*Confessions*, 11.22)

**Introduction:** We are going to continue to ask whether humans can still have free will if God infallibly knows everything that they will choose to do before they do it. But, to understand Boethius's answer to that question, it will help to first study the nature of time, and God's eternal, timeless nature.

**1. Creation of the World:** Augustine begins by trying to reconcile two beliefs: (a) God is eternal, and (b) God made the universe and everything in it.<sup>1</sup> How did God do this?

- Not out of pre-existing matter. It is not as if there was some matter laying around, and then God shaped the universe out of that—for then the MATTER would also have to be eternal. But, it is not. So, God created the universe out of NOTHING (i.e., *ex nihilo*).

The book of Genesis (in the Bible) describes God as “speaking” the universe into existence. But, then:

- The words were not uttered IN time. It is not as if God spoke, and one syllable followed another in time—for then there would have had to be TIME and CHANGE in God. But, God is timeless and changeless; i.e., eternal.

So perhaps the “speaking” is a metaphor, and God simply WILLED the universe into existence out of nothingness. Yet, the universe is thought to have had a beginning:

- God did not create AFTER a time. If God is beginningless, but the world has a beginning, it may seem to follow that God existed for an infinite amount of time before He created. So, God was just sitting around for a really long time doing nothing, before finally deciding to create something. Augustine rejects this, because it raises two difficult questions:

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<sup>1</sup> In fact, Augustine gives a quasi-argument for the existence of God, stating that the universe MUST have been created, and therefore God exists. This is a “cosmological” argument—we’ll study it in unit 2.

- (a) What was God DOING before He created the world? (to which, he mentions a joking reply of his time, "He was preparing hell for people who ask that!")
- (b) More importantly, if God was first NOT willing the universe into existence and then He WAS willing it, there would have had to be some change in God (e.g., some new desire or will). But, God is changeless.

- Eternity is entirely non-temporal. The answer is that 'eternal' does not mean, 'existed for all time, since forever.' Rather, it means, 'outside of time altogether.' For an ETERNAL being, there is no coming to be, or passing away; i.e., no change. Rather, everything is present "all at once", so to speak. Augustine says,

"In eternity nothing passes away, but the whole is present." Eternity "stands still and so has neither past nor future." To God: "Your years do not come and go. ... Your years stand all at once because they stand still. ... Your day is not day-after-day but today, because your day does not give way to any tomorrow or follow any yesterday. Your today is eternity." (11.11, 11.13)

God is timeless and changeless. However, creation is temporal and changing. Importantly, Augustine thinks that the beginning of the universe was also the beginning of TIME ITSELF. So, it doesn't even make sense to ask what God was doing "BEFORE" the creation of the universe, since there was no "before". He writes, "[since] time itself was something you had made; times could not pass before you made times" (11.13)

So, there is no problem of a NEW will arising in God which drives Him to create. God's will is eternally just a part of his being, and is timeless. He just forever and always wills to create, from the single moment that is God's eternal present.

**2. The Nature of Time:** So, the world, unlike God, is in time. But, what IS time? Augustine confesses, "Is there any short and simple answer to that question? Can anyone even wrap his mind around time so as to express it in words? ... If no one asks me, I know. If I want to explain it to someone who asks me, I do not know." (14.17)

Yet it at least essentially involves a FLOW. Unlike God, we who are in time experience a coming-into-being of tomorrow (i.e., the future) into today (i.e., the present), and a passing away of today into yesterday (i.e., the past).

If there were no flow, and everything just existed "all at once", then there would not be time (or change). There would just be ETERNITY.

**Two Problems for Presentism:** But, how does that work? Do future times not yet exist, and somehow flow into existence for the present moment, and then pass away back into non-existence as they become the past? Augustine suggests so. In contemporary philosophy, we would call him a **Presentist** about time.

Presentists believe that only the present exists, and the past and the future do not.

1. How Long is the Present? First Problem: If the present is all that exists, how long as it?

We are living in the present century (the 21<sup>st</sup> century). Is THAT the present? No. For, we're in progress in the middle of that century right now. Some of it has already passed away into the past, and some of it is yet to come (in the future).

So, is the present YEAR the present? No. For some of it has already passed, and some of it is yet to be.

And so on. For ANY extended period of time—a month, a day, an hour?—that we consider, there will always be some of it that has already passed, or some of it that has not yet come to be, or maybe some of both.

Conclusion: The present is extensionless—i.e., it has NO duration at all.

“If any part of time can be conceived that cannot be further divided into even the tiniest parts of moments, that alone is what should be called ‘present’. Yet that present flies away into the past with such speed that it cannot be extended by even the slightest amount. For if it is extended, it is divided into past and future; but the present has no duration.” (11.15)

But, then, all that exists is the tiniest, most insignificant, ephemeral sliver of time. Whoa...

2. How Do We Make True Claims About Past and Future? Second problem: If the future and the past do not exist, then how can we make true claims about them?

(a) Statements About the Future: God’s prophets claim to “see” the future and tell us what will happen (not to mention that God Himself sees the future; it also seems that I have said something true when I say that <The Sun will rise tomorrow>). But, how can a prophet “see” the future if there is nothing there to see?

(b) Statements About the Past: We often “see” things that have happened (in our memories) and seem to make true claims about the past. But, how can we “see” the past if the past does not exist to see?

In short, how can a statement about the past or future even be TRUE if the statement is about something that doesn't exist?

*[**Truthmaker Theory:** Augustine's worry here foreshadows a contemporary problem. A popular view today is that every true statement needs a "truthmaker"; i.e., some THING that MAKES the statement true. For instance,*

*<Chad exists> is made true by ME, the human being.*

*But, then, what makes the following true?*

*<Augustine was born in 354 AD>*

*<The Sun will rise tomorrow>*

*That is, what existing THING makes these statements true? If the past does not exist, then it is not Augustine's birth in 354 that makes the second statement true. And if the future does not exist, then it is not the Sun's rising tomorrow that makes the first statement true. So, what makes these statements true?]*

Which Times Exist? Augustine entertains the idea that maybe the past and future DO exist, and simply come forth and recede into some "secret place". Among contemporary philosophers, there are three major views of time:

(a) **Presentism:** Only the present exists.

(b) **Growing Block:** The past and present exist, but the future does not (yet).

Problem 1: Like presentism, if we accept that there are true statements about the future, then they seem to lack suitable truthmakers.

Problem 2: If the past and present both exist equally, then why does it SEEM as if the present is somehow privileged, or has "more" existence than the past?

Problem 3: If the past exists, where is it? (or rather, when is it) It may seem absurd to think that the past is somehow "out there" somewhere (or somewhen).

(c) **Eternalism:** Past, present, and future ALL exist equally.

Problems 2-3: An even worse version of problems 2 & 3 arises for eternalism.

Problem 4: Furthermore, if all times exist equally, then why does time seem to FLOW? As Augustine points out, if all times existed at once, it seems like there would just be a static, changeless eternity.

Augustine speculates that eternalism might be true, but asks, "If indeed future and past things exist, I want to know where they are." (11.17) In short, if the past and future are real, where in the heck are they!? He concludes that they cannot exist.

What Past Statements are About: Augustine argues that statements about the past are not, strictly speaking, about the past EVENTS (since those no longer exist). Rather, they must be about IMAGES which past events "stamped on the soul" while they were still present. In short, they are about things in your MEMORY.

What Future Statements are About: Similarly, statements about the future are not, strictly speaking, about future EVENTS (since those do not yet exist). Rather, we simply make PREDICTIONS based on "causes or signs". Though the future does not exist, future events "can be predicted on the basis of present things that already exist and are seen." (11.18) For instance, when I see the dawn, I can predict that the Sun is about to rise. So,

- The past "exists" in our *memory*.
- The present exists as the object of our *attention* (i.e., all that we perceive is present).
- The future "exists" in our *expectation*.

**Time is Motion?** But, we still haven't answered the question: WHAT IS TIME?? It seems that we measure time by the motions of heavenly bodies (e.g., the Sun, the Moon, and the stars). Maybe time JUST IS the motion of heavenly bodies?

Consider a day, which we measure as one revolution of the Sun. Which of these two things does 'day' refer to?

- (a) The motion itself?
- (b) The amount of time that elapses while the motion takes place?

The time of one day cannot be (a), the motion itself. For then, if the Sun went around in a single hour, THAT would be a day. This makes no sense.

Furthermore, it seems coherent to imagine the Sun STOPPING for an hour. If that is possible (Augustine believes it ACTUALLY happened once) then the Sun can stop while time still passes.

Conclusion: Time doesn't stop when bodies stop. They stop and start IN time. And we measure the duration of both motion AND rest. Time continues even when bodies are motionless. Therefore, time cannot be the motion of bodies.

*[Thought Experiment #1: Augustine says that if the Sun, Moon, and stars all stood still, it seems like time would still pass if only **a single potter's wheel** were spinning and nothing else. But, what if ALL motion in the universe stopped? Would time still pass? If not, then maybe time IS motion (ANY motion).*

*Thought Experiment #2: What if ALL motion in the universe instantly doubled in speed? Would everything REALLY be going twice as fast? Could we, even in principle, NOTICE? Or do we only notice that something is speeding up when it does so RELATIVE to other things? If so, then maybe time is just the motion of things RELATIVE to one another?]*

**How Do We Measure Times?** A final problem with Presentism: We do measure times, and compare times. We say that 100 years ago was “long time ago”—longer than 10 days ago; We say that things take a “long time”; And so on. How do we do this?

When I speak, I can judge one syllable to be twice as long as another. But, what am I measuring? What two things am I comparing?

- Not the future, since it does not yet exist.
- Not the present, since it is not extended (i.e., it has no duration).
- Not the past, since it no longer exists.

Perhaps I measure the present WHILE the syllables are PASSING? But, when we measure how long a voice sounded, we cannot do this until AFTER it has stopped sounding. When we measure the length of two uttered syllables, we compare their lengths from beginning to end—and we cannot do this until they've ENDED. But, once the syllables have been completed, they no longer exist to measure.

Answer: Augustine gives a solution. Recall that he said of the past, we make statements about IMAGES in our soul (i.e., memories), not the things themselves. Similarly here, when comparing or measuring times, I measure IMPRESSIONS in my soul that the present leaves there as it passes into the past.

As Augustine closes, he prepares to sing a song. While he is singing, the WHOLE song will be in his mind. However,

- The part that has been completed will “exist” as an impression in his memory.
- The part has NOT been completed “exists” in his expectation of what is to come.
- His attention will always be to that durationless part of the song that is present.

In fact, all of life is like this. Each action that you take is just another syllable in the “song” of your life. Dude...