

# Ascent and Unity

## *The Augustinian Account of Time and Eternity*

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### Abstract

*The question, "What is it like for a temporal being to experience eternity?" motivates a deeper analysis of St. Augustine's views on time and eternity. Augustine sees time as an incomplete, scattered and distended mode of existence. Time represents a fundamental disunity: it prevents us from experiencing the fullness of reality. Eternity, for Augustine, ultimately results from a complete unity and wholeness. While a temporal being experiences reality sequentially, an eternal being contains all of its life simultaneously. This paper explores Augustine's conception of time and eternity, and suggests how a being's experience might change from the former to the latter. In particular, it is argued that the idea of self-unification lies at the heart of our transition to eternity. Finally, an attempt is made to establish some metaphysical and ontological connection between the fleeting present moment of time and the unchanging, single present of eternity.*

In Book XI of the *Confessions*, St. Augustine attempts to grapple meditatively with some philosophical issues concerning time and eternity. As temporal beings, we may often wonder what, if anything, lies outside the scope of time. In light of this inquiry, one intriguing question that can be drawn from Augustine's analysis is, "What is it like for a temporal being to become non-temporal?" To fully understand what is being asked, we must first consider what Augustine means by *temporal* and *non-temporal* experience. I therefore propose that we answer this question by investigating three issues: (1) how a

being experiences *time*, (2) how a being experiences *eternity*, and (3) how a being's experience might change from (1) to (2).

Augustine views temporal existence as a particularly negative and troubling experience: "I am scattered in times whose order I do not understand. The storms of incoherent events tear to pieces my thoughts, the inmost entrails of my soul." Time is an obstacle between us and our union with the One, or God. Augustine's understanding of temporal experience underpins his entire Neoplatonic and Christian metaphysical framework. In Augustine's philosophy, the natural end for human beings is to obtain union with the divine. However, because of our sinful state, we lead fragmented and scattered lives. Only by struggling to unify all aspects of our person can we hope to achieve communion with the Creator. Indeed, for Augustine, "temporal successiveness is an experience of disintegration; the ascent to divine eternity is a recovery of unity."

For Augustine, time is a distraction which prevents temporal beings from experiencing the fullness of reality. Time is simply that which makes us see reality as transitory rather than unchanging. Early on in Book XI of the *Confessions*, Augustine concludes that neither past nor future times exist. He asks, "Who can measure the past which does not now exist or the future which does not yet exist, unless perhaps someone dares to assert that he can measure what has no existence?" Only the present moment exists, and yet "the cause of its being is that it will cease to be." In conclusion, "we cannot truly say that time exists except in the sense that it tends towards non-existence." Augustine does not offer an explanation for *why* the present moment always tends towards non-existence, but he *does* maintain that anything that exists at all does so by virtue of the present moment. Although past and future *times* do not exist, past and future *events* do. In particular, "the present considering the past is the memory, the present considering the present is immediate awareness, the present considering the future is expectation." Thus, a temporal being can only experience past and future events using the mind. Yet since the mind is clearly fallible — memory fails us and our predictions may not turn out to be true — it provides only an imperfect way of experiencing reality. Augustine contrasts this temporal

experience with the experience of eternity, in which "nothing is transient, but the whole is present."

Augustine ultimately concludes that the sequential nature of time fragments a temporal being. The successiveness of events *distends* or stretches us apart psychologically, mentally, and spiritually. At one point, Augustine exclaims: "See how my life is a distension in several directions." The present moment "flies so quickly from future into past" that a temporal being can only experience reality in a *succession* of durationless intervals. Even the feeling of *wholeness* which comes about with some "complete" experience — such as hearing a song from start to finish — is actually fragmented and disjointed. "What occurs in the [reading of the] psalm as a whole occurs in its particular pieces and its individual syllables. The same is true...of the entire life of an individual person, where all actions are parts of a whole, and of the total history of 'the sons of men' (Ps. 30:20) where all human lives are but parts." A temporal being is never able to experience anything more than discrete slices of reality. As the human mind concentrates on different events, it undergoes stretching and fragmentation. It is this notion that leads Augustine to describe time as a "painful and anxious experience."

In stark contrast to the painful and fragmented imagery which Augustine associates with time stands the "sublime" and "splendid" picture of eternity. Simply put, eternity lies outside of time altogether. The experience of eternity is characterized by words such as *simultaneity*, *constancy*, and *wholeness*. For an eternal being, nothing is "uttered in a *succession* with a conclusion, but everything is said in the *simultaneity* of eternity." Eternity is *constant* and "always in the present." As Augustine claims, "Eternity, in which there is neither future nor past, stands still and dictates future and past times." This imagery corresponds with the Neoplatonic and Christian ideas of *emanation*, *creation*, and *sustenance*. Finally, an eternal being can experience reality with a sense of *wholeness* which is beyond the capabilities of a merely temporal being. Even a temporal being who knew all there was to know about every future and past event would lack the unity experienced by a being who apprehended all of reality simultaneously: "If there were a mind endowed with such great knowledge and prescience that all things past and future could be known in the way I know a very familiar psalm, this mind would be utterly miraculous

and amazing to the point of inducing awe." Nothing of the past or the future would be "hidden" from this mind.

But far be it from you [God]... to know all future and past events in this kind of sense. You know them in a much more wonderful and much more mysterious way. A person singing or listening to a song he knows well suffers a distention or stretching in feeling and in sense-perception from the expectation of future sounds and the memory of past sound. With you it is otherwise.

Indeed, eternity is a single, unchanging present moment in which all of reality is simultaneously apprehended.

Augustine offers several clues as to how a temporal being might change in order to experience eternity. The key to this change of experience lies in the idea of *self-unification*. Scattered as we are by various events — past, present and future — which vie for our attention, we find it difficult to harmonize our thoughts, actions and desires. Nevertheless, Augustine seems to indicate that this kind of "fixity" or "stillness" is a necessary condition for experiencing eternity: "Who can lay hold on the heart and give it fixity, so that for some little moment it may be stable, and for a fraction of time may grasp the splendour of a constant eternity?" Of course, it may not be *humanly* possible to achieve the kind of harmony and orderliness which Augustine suggests is necessary for experiencing an unchanging and ever present existence. Furthermore, fixity and harmony may be a *necessary* but not *sufficient* condition for changing one's temporal experience into an eternal one. In any event, for a temporal being to experience eternity, it must somehow reach toward God — the being who is ultimately *unified*.

Augustine suggests that in returning to the source of our existence, we may achieve the constancy necessary for experiencing eternity. Since God is ultimately unified, we can use him as a reference point for our own efforts at self-unification. He explains that the "reliable truth" which leads us to the source of all things can be taught by "some mutable creature." The "reliable truth" is, of course, the Christian Gospel. Augustine means to say that it is within our power to start our journey towards experiencing eternity. In order for our experience of reality to be changed, we must

give ourselves to the source of all things. And in this way he [God] is the Beginning because, unless he were constant, there would be no fixed point to which we could return. But when we return from error, it is by knowing that we return.

Human beings, as temporal creatures, require a mediator between themselves and God in order to be able to experience eternity. Experiencing eternity does indeed require us to struggle with the scatteredness and fragmentation which besets our temporal existence. According to Augustine, our efforts ought to focus on Jesus, the

mediator between you the One and us the many, who live in a multiplicity of distractions by many things; so...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.

The mediator unifies our being in preparation for the experience of eternity. As Augustine indicates in the following passage, it is God who ultimately liberates us from the scattering and fragmentation of temporal experience: "The storms of incoherent events tear to pieces my thoughts, the inmost entrails of my soul, until that day when, purified and molten by the fire of your life, I flow together to merge into you."

Finally, it seems appropriate to highlight a possible connection between the fleeting present moment which "tends towards non-existence" and the constant present of eternity (which, for clarity, I will hereafter refer to as the Present). Although they may at first seem entirely opposite in nature, it is worth underscoring the tremendous existential and ontological importance that Augustine applies to both. For a temporal being, only the present moment is real. Similarly for an eternal being, the Present is all that exists. Augustine refers to both as dimensionless. He also explains that "if the present were always present, it would not pass into the past: it would not be time but eternity." Perhaps all of this suggests that the key to experiencing the Present lies, in some sense, in the present. "The storms of incoherent events" of the past and future indeed scatter and distract us, so that only by concentrating on our awareness of the present can we begin to unify our being.

In conclusion, I have given a three-part answer to the question, "What is it like for a temporal being to experience eternity?" First, I showed that Augustine believes *time* scatters and fragments our experience. Next, I contrasted this picture with Augustine's notion of *eternity* as a constant and unified mode of existence. Finally, I argued that Augustine presents the idea of *self-unification* as the way by which a temporal being's experience may change into an eternal one. In referring to the ideas of time and eternity, Augustine states, "In some degree I see it, but how to express it I do not know..." Although it is easy to lapse into a sense of mystery and wonder concerning matters of time and eternity, Augustine has provided a consistent and intriguing framework in which to examine a variety of philosophical questions.

## Work Cited:

Augustine. *Confessions*. Trans. and ed. Henry Chadwick. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991.