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**ABSTRACT**: This paper examines the connections between Augustine s conception of Time in two of his main works: City of God and Confession. The issue of Time is crucial for Augustine s narrative purposes, and it appears in his account of the history of mankind – the City of God, just as it appears in his account of his own history – the Confessions. Book XI in both works discuss time and creation, and put the narrative of the book in the context of time as a whole. The two accounts proceed from similar motivations and in a similar method. But they at the same time complete each other: the account of the Confessions is more detailed in the way it presents the problem and works out the solution step by step; the City of God seems to pick it up from where Confessions leaves off and takes it a step further. In this paper, I first briefly sketch the concept of time as presented in Confessions XI. I continue by pointing out how it is completed in the account in City of God I conclude by indicating how these two accounts together put into perspective Augustine's concern with narrative, as well as his use of it.

**KEY-WORDS:** Augustine; time; Genesis; narrative

# *Time and Narrative in Augustine's City of God and Confessions*

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**RESUMO**: Este artigo examina as conexões entre a concepção de tempo em duas das principais obras de Santo Agostinho: *Confissões* e *Cidade de Deus*. A questão do tempo é crucial para os propósitos narrativos de Agostinho, e aparece em seu relato da história da humanidade – a *Cidade de Deus*, assim como aparece em seu relato de sua própria história – as *Confissões*. O livro XI em ambas as obras discutem tempo e criação, a partir do livro do Gênesis, e colocam a narrativa da obra como um todo no contexto do Tempo como um todo. O argumento em cada uma dessas obras parte de motivações semelhantes e procedem também de maneira semelhante, ao mesmo tempo que se complementam: nas *Confissões*, o argumento mais detalhado na forma como Agostinho apresenta o problema e trabalha a solução passo a passo; já em *Cidade de Deus*, o argumento parece começar a partir do ponto em que *Confissões* terminam e dá um passo adiante. Neste artigo, primeiro recapitulo brevemente o conceito de tempo apresentado no livro XI das *Confissões*. Na parte II, explico como ela é desenvolvida na *Cidade de Deus*. Já na parte III, concluo indicando como esses dois relatos juntos colocam em perspectiva a preocupação de Agostinho com a narrativa, bem como seu uso dela, considerando brevemente como ela se encaixa na tradição ocidental mais ampla de pensar o tempo e a consciência humana, antes e depois de Santo Agostinho.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Agostinho; Tempo; Gênesis; Narrativa

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The transition from book X to book XI of Augustine's *City of God* marks a pivotal transition from what in Augustine's view are "false gods" and the history of the people who worship them, to the "true Christian God", and the history of the people who worship Him. This second part of *City of God* marked by this transition thus starts by his establishing Scripture as final authority on how in history God has been revealed to mankind, and Augustine looks at this divine revelation from what for him is its very beginning: the narratives about creation presented in the book of the Genesis.

On the one hand, the Genesis account of creation may be considered a natural starting point for this kind of project in that Augustine is using Scripture as basis, and that is where Scripture begins. It is also a particularly good place to start, he could argue, because it tells how *everything* started. However, the merit of starting at the beginning of Scripture or (what for him amounts to the same) at the beginning of creation goes beyond its merit qua starting point par excellence. For Augustine, the Genesis account of creation invites a discussion over the nature of time, and of past, present and future. A conception of time is of utmost importance in projects with a strong narrative element, like history and biographies. These are precisely the kind of project that Augustine engages, in the *City of God*, in the *Confessions*, in his dialogues. Narrative occupied and fascinated Augustine. This we see both in his constant use of it as a style, in which he excels like few writers, as well as in his constant philosophical worry about how it is possible and how it takes place.

The issue of time, therefore, is crucial for his narrative purposes, and it appears in his rendition of the history of mankind – the *City of God*, just as it appears in his narration of his own history – the

*Confessions*. Book XI in both works discuss time and creation, and put the narrative of the book in the context of time as a whole. In this paper I argue that the presentation of the Genesis account of creation in these two works by Augustine proceed from similar motivations and in a similar method, at the same time that they complete each other: the version presented in the *Confessions* is more detailed in the way it presents the problem and works out the solution step by step, while the *City of God* seems to pick it up from where *Confessions* leaves off and takes it a step further. In the remainder of this paper, I will first briefly sketch the concept of time as presented in *Confessions* XI. Then, in part II, I explain how it is developed in *City of God*, In part III, I conclude by indicating how these two accounts together put into perspective Augustine's concern with narrative, as well as his use of it, by briefly considering how it fits in the wider Western tradition of thinking of time and human awareness, both before and after him.

## *I*

The puzzle in *Confessions* XI is what is time, and how do I measure time? Augustine rejects time as being either the sun or the motion of the sun, because we can imagine this motion as being faster or slower, we still have a criterion of duration that is separate from the motion of the sun itself. The same is the case in measuring poetry: I can measure poems in terms of verses, and verses in terms of syllables, and a long syllable in term of two short ones, but I can pronounce a long syllable quickly, or a short syllable slowly, and my criterion of duration is still independent from the act of pronouncing the syllables. I can measure silence, and say that it was twice as long as this sound, when neither the sound nor the silence are present anymore. How is then that I make this kind of measurement? How can I talk about long past, or long future, when they are no longer, or not yet present?

The first glimpse for solving this problem is to think of time as a distension, a spreading out. And Augustine asks "But of what is it a distension? I do not know, but it would be surprising if it is not of the mind itself." (*Confessions* XI.26.33) He pursues this thought of time as a mental event, until he is able to conclude that:

> Therefore it is not the syllables which I am measuring, but something in my memory which stays fixed there. So it is in you, my mind, that I measure periods of time… The impression which passing events make upon you abides when they are gone. That present consciousness is what I am measuring, not the stream of past events which have caused it. (*Confessions* XI.27.35-6)

If we make time a function of the mind, something mental, this explains why presenting my whole life, past and present, is a present act of being aware of the works of God in my life. It is not about my past history that is past and gone, but in one sense all history is co-temporal with my relating it, my being aware of it. In this way, my impression of using up my future as I gain more and more past, so that my past seems to be getting bigger and bigger, and my future smaller and smaller, is nothing in the world out there, but something that happens to my mind. Past, present and future get defined not as something out there, but as different function of my mind: past is nothing but things remembered. Present is nothing but things attended to. Future is nothing but things expected. Memory, attention and expectations are all co-temporal functions of the mind, the difference being only one of focus – what the mind is at a moment or other busy with.

This definition of the passage of time as a coming to awareness explains why it is that there could be no time before creation: before then there were no minds to be aware of creation. Admittedly, there was God: but God's knowledge of the world is different from any creature's knowledge of the world. As Augustine says, I would not know the world unless it existed, whereas the world would not exist unless God

knew it beforehand. God's knowledge of the world is eternal and inalterable. (cf. *Confessions* XI.31.41)

For passage of time, however, there must be a coming to awareness: for, by Augustine's definition, time is nothing but that motion in the mind that comes with a change in turning the mind from here to that, paying attention now to this, now to that, becoming aware now of this, now of that. Creatures' knowledge of the world is progressive, and it is precisely this change in the mind, the increase in awareness, that counts as passage of time.

## *II*

This fits in quite well with what happens in the *City of God*. There too, the account of creation automatically leads to the question of time. But the worry there is at a different level. There Augustine is eager to show that the passages of days in the story of creation is not days as full rotation of the sun, because the sun does not get to be created until the fourth day (XI.9). This is an argument that he does not bring in the *Confessions*, but that completely harmonises and complements his rejection of the motion of the sun as defining factor of the passage of time.

What the passages of days amount to, even before the sun is created, is not a passage of temporal days and nights (and he emphasises the fact that, at this point, there is no night), but it is rather a coming to knowledge:

> When the created light so acts in coming to the knowledge of itself there is one day; when it comes to the knowledge of the firmament, called heaven, between the lower and upper waters, there is the second day; when it comes to the knowledge of the earth and sea, and of all growing things, whose roots stretch into the ground, there is the third day; when to the knowledge of the luminaries, the greater and the lesser, and of all the stars, there is the fourth day; when to the knowledge of all the living things that come from the waters, creatures

> that swim and those that fly, there is the fifth day; when to knowledge of all land animals and of man himself, there is the sixth day. (*City of God,* XI, 7).

However, who (or what) is this created light which is coming to know all these things? Certainly not God, because he is not created, and besides, His knowledge is eternal. Not humans, because they do not come to be until the sixth day. Augustine's answer comes two chapters later: "The obvious conclusion is that if the angels are among the works of God of those days, they are that light which received the name of 'day'" (*City of God,* XI, 9). This explains how angels come to be though there is no explicit account of their creation – they are the created intelligence that in the very beginning of creation comes to be aware of God's works.

This fits then with the definition of time as awareness presented in the *Confessions*. There is no time before creation because there is no change in God's knowledge. Time comes to be as soon as created minds come to be, and the passage of time is marked by their change in awareness. But these minds cannot be exclusively human minds, because humans are not created until the sixth day, and before then time has already been elapsing. (Time can also not be just the motion of the sun, because it is not created until day four, and by that point time is also already elapsing). Therefore, there must be other intelligent creatures becoming aware of the works of God even prior to human creation, and these are angels.

The concept of time as awareness then, means that the narrative of events in time is nothing other than turning my attention (the mental faculty in charge of the "present") as well as the attention of my audience, to the events stored up in my memory (the mental faculty in charge of the "past"), and becoming aware of God's work as presented in this unfolding of "past" events. With narrative, I make the "past" co-temporal with the "present" – the "past" is by no means something past and gone, but by turning my attention to it through narrative I am still

able to make it present as I perform a present action of becoming aware of God's work in the "past." This is what makes the "past" and the study of the "past" so relevant, and this is why Augustine is so concerned with it.

This also explains why both in *Confessions* and in the *City of God* the narrative is not only of events past, but of a change of awareness (in time) of God's work. That is, the *Confessions* is not simply an autobiography, but it is the progression of Augustine's increased awareness of God's work in his life. The *City of God* is not a work of plain history (it'd be a very strange one if this was what it was supposed to be), but it is the story of mankind's increased awareness of divine work – in books I-X we see the history of pagans and their belief in false gods; from book XI onwards we turn to the true God and how mankind gradually became aware of Him.

Awareness of God's work is, for Augustine, mingled with the conception of time itself – secular and spiritual history simply cannot be detached from one another. And his project in the *City of God* is precisely to establish and defend this claim:

> My task is to discuss, to the best of my power, the rise, the development and the destined ends of the two cities, the earthly and the heavenly, the cities which we find, as I have said, interwoven, as it were, in this present transitory world, and mingled with one another. (*City of God* XI.1)

The Heavenly City is not just an expectation for a distant future: The Heavenly City and the Earthly City are co-temporal, and not only that: they are intricately connected.

## *III*

In her 1999 paper "Augustine and the 'Problem' of Time", Genevieve Lloyd characterizes this way of psychologizing time with

words that denote incredulity. She refers to it as "usually regarded as something of an oddity, a curious implausible reduction to the reality of time to the working on human psyche (…) as a theory of the nature of time, such a radical psychologizing of its reality must seem counterintuitive". In other places she calls it a "daring assertion" (p. 40), "all too swift, a misguided attempt, a non-sequitur" (p. 46) that "may seem preposterous" (p. 53), "at first outrageous".

As she proceeds to draw parallels between Augustine's view and other authors, in particular Aristotle and Plotinus in greater detail, and Kant and Derrida in passing, she concludes that "whatever may be its deficiencies", Augustine's theory is

> a work of great insight into the experience of time, its connections with speech and its expression in narrative -- a profound attempt to "take account of time" and to engage philosophically with the ways in which it makes a "problem to ourselves." (LLOYD, 1999, p. 60)

Profound and insightful as Lloyd paper is, in the way she presents Augustine's theory of time as presented in the *Confessions* in the context now only of Antiquity, but also how it reverberates in modern and contemporary philosophy, an analysis of how the same argument appears in the *City of God* would have corroborated her argument and rendered it more complete.

She starts by looking at the *Confessions* more broadly, from the earlier chapters, considering how Augustine's use of narrative, especially as concerns grief in different stages of his conversion story, informs the theory of time in later in book XI, as well as his own narrative project.

> The passage of time, though it may heal a specific grief, is itself now seen as a source of anguish – of separation and internal fragmentation of the self. What the passage of time cannot deliver, however, Augustine finds in his own activity of narration." (LLOYD, 1999, p. 42)

For Lloyd, to frame the narrative in terms of his conversion, and his awareness of himself in relationship to his awareness of God's presence in his life is crucial for his project. As she argues, "To ignore the theological context is also to set aside the literary structure of the work" (Lloyd, 1999, p. 40):

> To properly understand what Augustine has to say about time, then, one must see the interconnections between philosophical content and literary form. (LLOYD, 1999, p. 40)

Reverberating a point which Hannah Arendt makes in her 1958 work, *The Human Condition*, Lloyd makes the point that "The narrator has knowledge denied to the protagonist of how the story goes on" (LLOYD, 1999, p. 40). For Lloyd, Augustine's theory of time is a theory of mind and both intimately relate literary structure and theology, since, as she argues, for Augustine, "[m]emory is gathered up in a move forward in the hope of eternal life" (LLOYD, 1999, p. 43):

> The philosophical discussion in book 11 is not an answer to a timeless philosophical question as to the nature of time. It is rather an attempt to resolve a problem posed to consciousness by the human experience of time. (LLOYD, 1999, p. 40)

Starting from an account of Augustine's grief and the Aristotelian idea of "friend as another self" (p. 4), Lloyd proceeds to frame Augustine's view of time as a rejection of Aristotle's argument in book IV of the *Physics*, and more aligned with Plotinus argument in book III of the *Enneads*. And the difference between the two, for her, is precisely the importance Plotinus assigns to "consciousness", not only individual consciousness, but to the "World Soul".

> On Aristotle's model mind is outside change, located as an external observer – a measurer of motion. Minds can, it is true, be said to change and hence to be in time; but there is no privileged position

> for soul in the definition of time other than that of the observer and measurer of change. (LLOYD, 1999, p. 47-48)

As she traces Augustine's puzzles about time as a dissatisfied response to Aristotle's own puzzles in the *Physics*, and his solution of time as a "number", an "enumeration" she presents a detailed view of how the solution presented by Plotinus to the problem of time reverberate in Augustine's own solution, both with respect of the metaphors relative to speech, but also, and specially, in Plotinus's view of time as a distension of soul – and of the World Soul at that. Lloyd however, does not make the connection to the role of angels in Augustine's reading of the creation story in the Genesis, which would have supported her analysis even further: in its closeness to Plotinus's own theory, in the strangeness she assigns to it, and in the role Christian theology plays in Augustine's theory of time and of mind.

> It is we that must create Time out of the concept and nature of progressive derivation, which remained latent in the Divine Beings" (PLOTINUS, *Enneads*, 3.7.11) But the "we" here does not refer to calculating, measuring intellects Time for Plotinus depends on soul in a deeper, more metaphysical way that makes movement itself imbued with soul. Soul is manifested in movement, not just present to it as external measurer of a soulless substratum of time. (LLOYD, 1999, p. 48-49)

In turn, she traces Plotinus's ideas about the soul and the cosmos to Platos's *Timaeus*, in opposition to Aristotle's thinking *De anima*. A main difference she assigns to Plotinus's world soul and Plato's is precisely the role Plotinus assigns to time and change: "In the *Timaeus* time, though subject to change, is created to a pattern of the changeless. Soul interfuses and envelops the world and this presence of soul is prior to the creation of time." (LLOYD, 1999, p. 49)

> The philosophical implications of the Timaeus's story of time as the moving image of eternity are not entirely clear. It suggests that there is some movement and change in the world independent of time – that what time adds is ordered movement. Time and the heavens begin together -- framed after the pattern of the eternal nature. The creation of time is the creation of orderly motion – predictable, law governed, and hence fit to convey something of the nature of the eternal. In this picture, the presence of soul in the world is not particularly tied to the nature of time. The idea of time as the moving image of eternity is not specifically connected with that of the movement of the world soul that diffuses the whole creation. (LLOYD, 1999, p. 49)

Whereas for Plato and Aristotle soul is an external observer of time, and in the case of Plato's *Timaeus* even prior to the creation of time For Lloyd's argument, a distinctive feature of Plotinus's and Augustine's view of time, is their view of soul and time as co-eval: they are created simultaneously, and inherent features of each other. This fits with my reading of Augustine's role of angels in the Genesis passage in the *City of God.*

Thus, whereas Plato's demiurge, when he makes the cosmos, makes time a "moving image of eternity" (PLATO, *Timaeus* 37d), in Plotinus's cosmology it is the other way around: it is through time that soul ascends to a view of eternity, a twist that Augustine later will also employ. (LLOYD, 1999, p. 49):

> For Plato the associations of time as image of eternity are with order, predictability, permanence. Time, as the image of eternity, bestows something of its permanence on the disorderly change of a world lacking true temporal order. For Plotinus there is a darker side to the idea of mimicry. The emphasis is on the introduction of transience where before there was permanence. (LLOYD, 1999, p. 49).

This twist, if may use an anachronic but not completely unrelated metaphor, is a Copernican Revolution in the way to see time

and eternity, in the role it attributes to the soul. "Our awareness of eternity is crucial in Plotinus's account of time. Time, rather than being the measure of change, or even a feature of change as measureable, is a product of soul. It is a mimesis performed by soul in response not to the perception of change but rather to the eternal."(LLOYD, 1999, p. 50, my emphasis).

By seeing, on the other hand, the "dark side" of Plotinus's mimicry, that which deals with the fragmentary nature of what is perceptible in time, Lloyd is able to link back to Augustine's view of narrative as that which brings a unity to human's fragmentary existence, giving the narrator a "God-like" perspective to bring unity and meaning to a story that feels fragmentary and meaningless as it unfolds – be this story the autobiography of a given human being, be it the collective history of human kind.

> The shift that Augustine has made is from seeing consciousness as in time to seeing time as in consciousness. It is a shift we will seen undone and remade throughout the subsequent philosophical tradition. In Augustine's version of this reversal of the relations between consciousness and time a crucial structural role is assigned to God. (LLOYD, 1999, p. 56)

Lloyd concludes her paper by pointing out how Augustine's view of time and mind not only echoes and builds upon that of his predecessors, but also anticipates what Kant himself called a Copernican Revolution in the way of seeing time as "form of inner sense." But she finds Augustine's theory deficient, compared to Kant, in that "Kant is able to give much more sophisticated expression to the interdependence of time and human consciousness, and the alternative idealized form of consciousness he uses to clarify it lacks Augustine's explicit theological commitments" (LLOYD, 1999, p. 60).

Maybe if she had considered the Genesis passage in the *City of God,* she would have had even more reason to find fault in Augustine for

the excessive weight he attributes to theology in his theory, and perhaps would have found his theory even more strange, outrageous and counterintuitive. At the same time, she would have found even more elements to connect his theory to that of his predecessors, and would have had a more encompassing picture linking theology, history, literature and theory of mind.

## *Conclusion*

In this paper I argued that the Genesis's account of creation is central for Augustine's understanding not only of time, but of his very narrative project, be it of his own life in the *Confessions* or in his attempt as a historian in the *City of God*. In both projects, book XI plays a pivotal role in framing the narrative in a way that is both puzzling and ingenious. Connecting past and future, Augustine's theory, on the one hand interweaves a wealth of tradition available to him through the currents of Platonism, Aristotelianism and Neoplatonism, not to mention the strong weight of the Judeo-Christian tradition presented in the Scriptures and in his role in the Christian church. At the same time, looking way into the future, he foreshadows foreshadowing such as Immanuel Kant's view of time and space as conditions of human knowledge, or Hannah Arendt's theory of narrative, or even more contemporary theories about the relativity of time. His contribution to the debate about the nature of time and of consciousness, not to say theology and language is to this day thought-provoking and innovative.

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