

TIME AS *DISTENTIO ANIMI* ACCORDING TO SAINT AUGUSTINE

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Abstract:

*Apakah waktu? Apakah waktu itu ada? Bagaimana mengukurnya? Pertanyaan-pertanyaan yang luput dari perhatian kita tetapi Agustinus telah menjawabnya. Jelas waktu itu ada dan ia ada karena ia “lewat” dalam hidup kita. Bagi Agustinus waktu itu adalah *distentio animi* atau pengelembungan jiwa. Disebut “pengelembungan” karena waktu adalah suatu dialektika antara 3 hal: memori, perhatian dan harapan. Pengelembungan jiwa membawa masa lalu dan yang akan datang pada saat ini yang sedang lewat. Masa lalu, masa depan dan sekarang selalu hadir dalam jiwa. Dalam masa lalu ada memori, dalam masa depan ada harapan dan saat ini ada perhatian dan ketiganya adalah aktivitas dari jiwa. Waktu itu adalah suatu dialektika tiga hal “sekarang”: sekarang tentang hal-hal masa lalu, sekarang tentang hal-hal sekarang dan sekarang tentang hal-hal yang akan datang.*

Keywords:

“Problem of Time in Augustine,” “Measurement of Time,” “Time and Creation.”

The concept of time in the history has been developed. From antiquity to our present time the philosophers have been reflecting on the one of the important elements of our life; time. Our concern is the thought of one of the great thinkers in the history: Augustine. Aurelius Augustine (354-430) or more commonly called Saint Augustine of Hippo is one of the decisive developments in the western philosophical tradition. He is one of the towering figures of the medieval philosophy whose authority and thought come to exert a pervasive and enduring influence

* Penulis adalah Dosen Filsafat di STIKAS St. Yohanes Salib.

well into modern period. Born in 354 C. E in Thagaste (now is Algeria), he was educated in Thagaste and Cartaghe. He subsequently taught rhetoric in Thagaste and Cartaghe, he journeyed from Northern Africa to Rome, seeking the better sort of students which was assumed in Rome. In 386 he found himself in Milan, that is he found what he was looking for: the truth that he finds in Jesus Christ. In the same year he was baptized by Ambrose, Bishop of Milan. In 391 Augustine was ordained as a priest and 395 he was made Bishop of Hippo. He died there in August 430. Augustine is known as Christian theologian and philosopher. His contribution to the Christian teaching cannot be doubted. He was influenced by Neo-Platonism philosophy of Plotinus. This influence embodied in his two principal works: *Confessiones* and *De civitate Dei*.

Our discussion will be centered in Augustine's concept of time. One of Augustine's influences about time is on the concept of time as linear. It brings to the understanding of history. Stoic philosopher imagined an eternal cycle composed of long periods following on another in the fixed order, periods which would always bring back in nature the same rebirth, the same destructions or what Gilson calls as "the same eternal new beginning."¹ It is not our problem here but about the essence of time.

As the starting point, time is important but we never conscious of its existence though we live our life and it is passed in time. In fact we are sons of time but we never know him. Our questions are what is the essence of time? Does time exist? Is time to be created? Is time eternal? These questions have to propose in order to open the secret of time. In this brief work I would like to examine the concept of time according to Augustine. Augustine's elaboration regarding the time is found in the book X and XI of the *Confessiones*, a work that seems to be like "first autobiography" and a "spiritual biography. In order to limit the theme we are going to concentrate on Book XI.

¹ Etienne GILSON, *The Christian Philosophy of Saint Augustine*, Victor Gollancz Ltd., London 1961, 191.

AUGUSTINE'S PROBLEM IN TIME

Augustine in his examination of time asked, *quid est enim tempus?* (what, then, is time?) [XI, 14:17]. This question is regarding the very nature of time. Augustine, when he asks this famous question, he is not asking what time is in simple and brief sentences or paragraphs regarding what time is and is not (*esse et non-esse*) for he knew already that the temporal flux is to be understood in terms of coming to be and passing away. Rather he is asking what will serve to bring temporal flow to rest so that he can have a time for meditation on God's Law. This question soon raises at least two oppositions of the concept of time in antiquity. On the one hand sceptical argument poses that time does not exist. Time is non-being. Meanwhile on the other hand a guarded confidence in the everyday use of language forced us to say that in some day which we do not yet know that time is exist. In sceptical argument according to philosopher Paul Ricoeur, time has no being since the future is not yet, past is no longer and present does not remain. And yet we do speak of time as having being. We say that things to come *will be*, that things *past were* and that things present are *passing away*.²

The two opposition arguments of time made Augustine then writes in his *Confessiones*: "I know well enough what it is, provided that nobody asked me; but if I am asked what it is and try to explain, I don't know" (XI, 14:17). This statement as if Augustine is a sceptic who believes that time has no being, time does not exist.

However his following notion in the *Confessiones* expresses his position. Augustine asserts, "But, then, how is it that there are the two times, past and future, when even the past is now no longer and future is now not yet? But if the present were always present, and did not pass into past time it obviously would not be time but eternity. If then, time present come into existence only because it is passes into time past, how can we say that even this is, since the cause of its being is that it will cease to be? Thus we cannot truly say that time *is* only as it tends toward not being? (XI, 14:17).

In the following reflection Augustine writes, "If nothing were passing away there would be no past time, and if nothing were coming, there would be no future time and if nothing existed there would be no

² Paul RICOEUR, *Time and Narrative*, University of Chicago, USA 1990, 7.

future time” (XI, 14:17). This is the phenomenological starting point of Augustine’s investigation and it stands in between what he knows and what he does not know. On the one hand he knows what the word “time” means; on the other hand, he does not know how to give a philosophical analysis of the concept corresponding to it.³

In XI, 18:23 Augustine then says, “if the future and past do exist, I want to know where they are.” So wherever they are and whatever they are (future and past things), it is only by being present that they are.” To resolve this difficult issue, Ricoeur poses the notion of narration and prediction. Narration implies memory and prediction implies expectation. We can include memory and expectation in an extended and dialectical present. It is Augustine’s formula: “it might be correct to say that there are three times, a present of past things, present of present things, and present of future things” (XI, 20:26). From this statement, Augustine resists the argument of the sceptics, it is not strictly correct to say that there are three times, past, present and future.⁴ Augustine then argues, that “the present of past things is memory, the present of present things is direct perceptions (*contuitus*) and the present of future things is expectation (XI, 20:26). But how do we know these? Augustine replies: if we may speak in these terms, I can see (*video*) three times and I admit (*fateorgque*) that they exist. This seeing and this admission indeed constitute the phenomenological core of the entire but the *fateor* join to the *video* bears witness to the sort of debate to which this seeing is the conclusion.⁵

Carl G. Vaught proposes an analysis about it bases on XI, 18:18, in this passage, Augustine expresses that the belief that time does not exist is to say the future “is” only because it is *not yet*, the past “is” only to the extent that it is *no longer*, and present “is” only because it *was not* and *will be no longer*.⁶ However, in this expression Augustine is not claiming that the future does not exist because what is in the future is not occurring in the present, nor he claims that the past does not exist because what is in the past has occurred already. Rather he is claiming

³ Carl G. VAUGHT, *Access to God in Augustine’s Confessions Book X-XIII*, State University of New York, Albany 2005, 25.

⁴ P. RECOEUR, *Time and Narrative...*, 10-11.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁶ C. G. VAUGHT, *Access to God in Augustine’s Confessions...*, 126.

that the past, the present and the future do not exist as standpoint in which he can engage in the contemplation of the Word of God. This is so because the three temporal modes are shot through with negation, making it impossible to find place of rest in any of them.”⁷

Therefore Augustine does not deny that time indeed exist because we pass our life in time. Time is real since it is part of the created world. He notes that we speak about long and short times. However, since any interval of time can be divided into two parts, one past and one future, only the past and the future can be extended: present cannot be extended. It must consist of unextended instant. Were it extended its interval would be divisible into past and future. In this point, neither the past nor the future exist since the past is gone and the future is yet to come.⁸

Only Augustine is neither a sceptic nor he bases his reflection in the motion of celestial thing in Aristotle’s concept of time. Augustine’s problem is how to express this issue in the exact concept. The following passages are how Augustine resolves this problem in the measurement of time.

MEASUREMENT OF TIME

In order to resolve the measurement of time elaborates it in XI, 21-37, Augustine has made early assertion regarding how he measures time in XI, 16: 21. He said, “we measure time only when it is passing.” Now this notion is repeated in XI, 21: 27. “I said just now that we measure time as it passes.” He then adds, I know it because we do measure time... We could measure a thing which did not exist” (XI, 21:27). By the second statement he as if raises an enigma and how he resolves this enigmatic? According to Paul Ricoeur, this statement is immediately transformed into an *aporia*. What passes away is, the present. Passing, in effect, is being in transit. It is therefore legitimate to wonder: “where is it coming from, what is passing through and where is it going” (XI, 21:27). Term “passing away” (*transire*) which necessitates dwelling in the way on is the quasi-spatiality. We must say that “passing” is going *from* (*ex*) the future, *through* (*per*) the present *into* (*in*) past. This transit according to Ricoeur confirms that the

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Philip TURETZKY, *Time*, Routledge, New York (NY) 2002, 59.

measurement of time is done in relation to some measurable period and that all the relations between intervals are in relation to “a given period.” This seems to lead to a total impasse: time is not extended in space and Augustine asserts that “we cannot measure what has no duration.”⁹

Augustine poses 4 cosmological arguments. However, these arguments must be rejected. He poses the last argument which is an argument that the investigation will be forced to search in the soul alone. First argument: if the movement of the heavenly bodies is time, why should this not also be said of movement of all other bodies as well? (XI, 23:29). This argument anticipates the thesis that the movement of the star is vary, accelerate or slow. Second argument, if the light of the sky cease to move and if the potter’s wheel continue to turn, then time would be indeed have to be measured by something other than movement (XI, 23:29). Third argument underlying the earlier presupposition is the conviction taught by Scripture that the star is the only light intended to mark out time (XI, 23:29). So disqualified, if we may put in this way, the star cannot constitute time by their movement. The last, “if one ask what constitutes the measurement we call “day” we spontaneously think that the twenty four hours of the day is measured by movement of the sun through one complete circuit. But if the sun is to turn faster and complete iss circuit in an hour, the “day” would no longer be measured by movement of the sun (XI, 23:33). Thus Augustine rejects these arguments.

The last is the argument whereby Augustine proposes to resolve the problem of measurement of time. This argument is an argument of what he called *distentio animi*. This argument substitutes of four arguments above. Augustine asserts: “I see time, therefore, as an extension (*distentio*-distension) of some short. But do I really see this or only seem to see it? You will make it clear to me, my Light and my Truth” (XI, 23:30). What is the meaning of the *distentio animi*? We have to apprehend this term properly. Augustine then asserts: “it seems to me, then, that the time is merely an extension, though of what it is an extension I do not know. I begin to wonder whether it is an extension of the mind itself (XI, 26:33). Time is not future which is not, nor the past

⁹ P. RICOEUR, *Time and Narrative...*, 12.

which is no longer, nor the present which is no extension but time “passing.” It is in his very passing, in the transit.¹⁰

According to Carl G. Vaught, *distentio* means something that is “stretched apart, expanded, and extended,” often in different direction and he proposed word “extension or expansion” to translate this word into English but I prefer to use “distension” as Recoeur’s proposes. The third meaning of this word is an ideal way of conveying the richness of what Augustine want to communicate when he claims that the present can be measured only if it is in certain space. The space he has in mind is an analogical extension of space in the unusual sense and insofar as it includes the past, the present and future as constituent element, it is “extended” in different direction simultaneously.¹¹

In the following explanation, according to Augustine, time cannot be measured by body. Inasmuch “a body is sometimes moved in the different ways and sometimes stand still... and time, therefore, is not the movement of a body” (XI, 24:31). We can say that this distension or extension is not a distension of the body but distension of the soul (*animus*). Why *animus*? Explaining the reason, Augustine points out by analogical of sound (XI, 27:34). As the word *distentio* suggests, even when the sound exists and can be measured; it is not static, but it is moving on into the past. While it is passing away, it is being extended over some track of time where it could be measured, for the present has no space. Sound according to Augustine is “moving” through time where the context in which it is moving is neither expand of space nor a “space” of time that is extended in the present but a tract of time which it is being extended as it passes away. By the *distentio animi*, means that in this sense makes a time of meditation possible because it is more stable than the temporal flux that does not exist (*non esse*).¹²

In what, then, does distention consist? The theory of *distentio* is joined to that of threefold present. Theory of the threefold present reformulated in the terms of the threefold intention, makes *distentio* arise

¹⁰ P. RECOEUR, *Time and Narrative...*, 16.

¹¹ C. G. VAUGHT, *Access to God in Augustine’s Confessions...*, 132.

¹² C. G. VAUGHT, *Access to God in Augustine’s Confessions...*, 135-136. Cf. John Spencer HILL, *Infinity, Faith and Time: Christian Humanism and Renaissance Literature*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, Quebec City 2000, 78-87.

out of the *intentio* that has burst asunder.¹³ In the XI, 28:38 Augustine points out it in the following say:

“Suppose that I am going to recite the Psalms that I know. Before I begin, my faculty of expectation is engaged by the whole of it. But one I have begun, as much of the Psalm as I have removed from the province of the expectation and relegated to the past now engages my memory and the scope of the action which I am performing is divided between the two faculties of memory and expectation, the one looking back to the part which I have still to recite. But my faculty of attention is present all the while, and through it passes what was the future in the process of becoming the past. As the process continues, the province of memory is extended in the proportion as that of expectation is absorbed. This happens when I have finished my recitation and it has all passed into the province of memory.”

The theme of this paragraph is the dialectic of threefold present as the dialectical of expectation (future), memory (past) and attention (present) each considered no longer in isolation but interaction with one another. Expectation and memory are themselves both said to be “engaged,” the first by the whole of the poem before the start of the song, the second by the part of the song that has already gone by: as for attention, its engagement consist completely in the active “transit” of what was the future in the direction of what becomes past. It is this combined action of expectation, memory and attention that “continues.” The *distentio* is then nothing other than the shift in, the non-coincidence of the three modalities of action: “and the scope of the action which I am performing is divided between the two faculties of memory and expectation, the one looking back to the part which I have already recited, the one looking forward to the part which I have still to recite.”¹⁴

Distentio animi then brings past and future together in a continuous present and there is also in Augustine’s experience an intention animi toward eternity.¹⁵ “The *distentio* that dissociates the three intentions of the present, - the present of the past or memory, the present

¹³ P. RECOUER, *Time and Narrative...*, 19-20.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁵ J. SPENCER, *Infinity, Faith and Time: Christian Humanism and renaissance Literature...*, 82.

of the future or expectation, and present of the present or attention – is *distentio animi*. In this sense, Augustine’s measurement of time rejects Aristotle’s explanation on the origin of time on the basis of cosmic motion. Augustine intends to show that the time is a distention. Furthermore, the fundamental is the distention of soul (*distentio animi*).

Augustine understands memory, attention, and expectation as acts of the mind (*anima*) in which we remember, attend to and expect intentional contents toward which we orient our attention. The future things, do not exist yet but there is an expectation of the future in the soul; past things exist no longer but there is a memory of past in the soul; and through the present that passes away in an instant lacks spatial extent, attention abides. This consideration lead Augustine to unorthodox conclusion that the future and are not long, but that “a long future” is “a long expectation of the future” and then “a long past” is “a long memory of the past,” and both of which are modification of abiding present (11, 28:37).¹⁶

Vaught adds in his analysis that it is important to notice that we should not speak about an expectation of a long future or a memory of a long past because contents of the act in question do not exist (11, 28:37). This leaves no other option than to understand a long future as a long expectation of the future and a long past as a long memory in the past, where extensive magnitudes that qualify existing thing are transformed into intensive magnitudes that qualify acts and contents of consciousness. Once this has been done, the past, the present and the future become threefold distention of soul, where expectation (future), attention (present) and memory (past) are ways in which soul can transcend the flux of what comes to be and passes away.¹⁷

Augustine understands memory, attention, and expectation as acts of mind (soul) in which we remember, attend to and expect in intentional contents toward which we orient our attention. We are able to transcend the flux because our expectation and memories exist in the present, where we make access to the intentional content that these acts present to consciousness. Augustine perceives this dynamic dimension by claiming

¹⁶ C. G. VAUGHT, *Access to God in Augustine’s Confessions...*, 140.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 140-141.

that attention transfers expectation into memory and that the reality that we expect passes through what we consider into what we remember in which what shall be present proceeds to become something absent.

TIME AND CREATION

We would like to extend the presentation on the discussion of the relation between time and creation, one of the Scripture's teachings even puts it in the beginning of the Holy Bible and it is one of the most problematic issues throughout the history of philosophy. As we have said that according to Augustine, time is real and it is *distentio animi*. According to the Scripture the world is not eternal, it is created in time. If this world is not eternal, Manichaeans asks, for example what was He doing *before* He created heaven and earth? Augustine's answer is that "*antequam faceret deus caelum et terram, non faciebat aliquid*, before God heaven and earth, he did not make anything, (XI, 12:14). Before creation there was no time: there was only eternity. God, who created time, is beyond time. In other words according to Gilson, "with respect to God there is neither before nor after: He *is*, in a motionless eternity."¹⁸ God is being eternal has created everything, even time. World is also created by God and it is not eternal. Only God is being eternal. Thus, there is difference between God and creature.

The first problem is that Scripture says "In the beginning God created heaven and earth." Our attention is "in the beginning," *in principio*. What does it mean? Many interpretations arise and we have no interest to discuss it here. In our understanding it is clear at least that the Scripture thereby attributes "a beginning" to every creature. Now since time is by definition changes, and so as the creature. It had a beginning, therefore, so that things which have duration are not eternal, nor is time itself eternal but only God. God is a completely realized perfection and He is immutable and admits of no change.

Therefore, time is one of the things that God created. This implies that God is not only the ground of temporal episodes but also the creator of the temporal framework within which these episodes occur. By this

¹⁸ E. GILSON, *The Christian Philosophy of Saint Augustine...*, 191.

point God precedes time and not time precedes God since God is the Creator of time. If time precedes God, God is not eternal.

CONCLUSION

As a conclusion, Augustine apprehends the time as *distentio animi*. Time, therefore is not beyond our life but it is part of life itself. Augustine points out time in its very nature. Time contains in our consciousness as the very nature of our function of *anima* or soul. Time is then a dialectical between threefold present things: “the present of past things, the present of present things, and the present of future things. These threefold are understood memory, attention, and expectation as acts of soul in which we remember, attend to and expect in intentional contents toward which we orient our attention. In other words, in the present the past survives in memory and the future pre-exists and as an anticipation based on the present perception. Time by this definition is something impermanent and its being remains foreign by definition to the permanent immobility of the divine eternity. As well as to other creatures time is also created as a creation *ex nihilo* by God since only God is eternal but the world like time, is not eternal.

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