

PRAISE AS THE SOUL'S OVERCOMING OF TIME IN THE *CONFESSIONS* OF ST. AUGUSTINE

by W. J. Torrance Kirby

In Book XI of the *Confessions* Augustine embarks on an extensive discourse on the nature of time and its relation to eternity. He addresses the creation of the world, the nature of physical motion and the actual measurement of time. In its subject matter this discussion invites comparison with Plato's *Timaeus* or parts of Aristotle's *Physics*.¹ In books XII and XIII Augustine goes on to consider the doctrine of creation and explores the differences between pagan and Christian accounts of the origin of the world. It is not immediately clear how the argument of these final books fits into the overall plan of the *Confessions*, and this relation has been variously interpreted.² Given the strong emphasis upon autobiography in the first nine books, some have been inclined to regard the last four books as something of an afterthought or an appendix to the treatise. Others see Augustine's seemingly abrupt turn to a consideration of the doctrine of creation as

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1. Plato, *Timaeus*, translated by Benjamin Jowett, *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, edited by Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, Bollingen Series LXXI (Princeton: The University Press, 1961), pp. 1161ff., Steph. 37c-38d. Aristotle, *Physics*, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, edited by Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), Bk. IV, chaps. 10-14, pp. 289-300, 217b29-224a16.

2. See A. Solignac's survey in his introduction to *Confessions*, *Oeuvres de saint Augustin*, vol. 13 (Paris: Bibliothèque Augustinienne, 1962), p. 19. See also R.D. Crouse, "Recurrere in te unum: The Pattern of St. Augustine's *Confessions*," *Studia Patristica*, vol. XIV, *Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der Altchristlichen Literatur*, Band 117 (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1976), pp. 389-392; J.C. Cooper, "Why did Augustine write books XI-XIII of the *Confessions*?", *Augustinian Studies*, 2 (1971), pp. 37-46; and R.J. O'Connell, *St. Augustine's Confessions: The Odyssey of the Soul* (Cambridge, Mass, 1969), pp. 7-12. This essay is indebted in particular to the interpretation of R.D. Crouse.

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the logical extension of the discussion of the earlier books.³ Henry Chadwick, for instance, sees the story of the individual soul writ large in the story of creation; thus Augustine's personal pilgrimage of conversion reflects "in microcosm" the process of the entire created world.⁴ In this account, the discourse on time is to be interpreted as most intimately connected with the issue of the soul's personal confession. Supposing that there is an over-arching unity to the argument of the treatise, how precisely does the discourse on time advance the larger aim of Augustine's confession?

The discussion in Book XI begins by explicitly linking the questions of time and praise with a reference back to the opening line of the first book of the *Confessions*:

Lord, eternity is yours, so you cannot be ignorant of what I tell you. Your vision of occurrences in time is not temporally conditioned. Why then do I set before you an ordered account of so many things? It is certainly not through me that you know them. But I am stirring up love for you in myself and in those who read this, so that we may all say "Great is the Lord and highly worthy to be praised" (Ps. 47:1).⁵

The quotation from Psalm 47 — "Great is the Lord and highly worthy to be praised" — is in fact the first sentence of the *Confessions*. At the very outset of the treatise Augustine discloses his overall purpose in composing an "ordered account of many things." This central purpose, reiterated in Book XI and indeed repeated throughout the *Confessions*, is to stir up the love of God in order that he may become the object of praise.⁶ Confession, it would seem, is necessary to the praise of God, and praise in turn to *theosis*. For Augustine, from the standpoint of his conversion, praise is the expression of the ultimate human desire, namely union with God:

Man, a little piece of your creation, desires to praise you, a human being "bearing his mortality with him" (2 Cor. 4:10), carrying with him the witness of his sin and the witness that you "resist the proud" (1 Pet. 5:5). Nevertheless, to praise you is the desire of man, a little piece of your creation. You stir man to take pleasure in praising you, because you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you (*Conf.* I.i.1).

Here, it seems, are the central questions of the *Confessions* in a nutshell. What is it to praise God? What exactly does praise have to do with

3. The argument for the integrity of the treatise is clearly presented by Colin Starnes in "The Unity of the *Confessions*," *Studia Patristica*, vol. XVIII, 4, ed. Elizabeth A. Livingstone (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1990), pp. 105-111. See also Starnes's preface to *Augustine's Conversion: A Guide to the Argument of Confessions I-IX* (Waterloo, Ontario: Sir Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1990), p. xii.

4. See Henry Chadwick's Introduction to his recent translation of Saint Augustine, *Confessions* (Oxford: The University Press, 1992), pp. xxiii-xxv.

5. *Confessions* XI.i.1. All references to the *Confessions* are from the Oxford text, translated by Henry Chadwick.

6. Compare, for example, V.i.1, VIII.i.1 and IX.i.1.

confession? Why does Augustine describe man as having an instinctual urge to utter praise? Why does he refer to man so emphatically as “a little piece of creation”? What can it possibly mean for man to be made for God and to find rest in him? How is praise understood to be connected with this divine rest? And finally, how are all of these questions linked to the problem of defining time?

When the Psalmist acknowledges the greatness of God — *Magnus es, domine* — we are reminded of God’s distance from our human condition. God, after all, is One, eternal, and unchanging. For God it is “not one thing to be and another to live: the supreme degree of being and the supreme degree of life are one and the same thing.”⁷ The nature of man, on the other hand, “is characterized by diversity, by life of many forms, utterly immeasurable” (X.xvii.26). The immeasurability of the divine wisdom is one thing, however, and the immeasurability of human existence is quite another. The former is characterized by perfect unity and simplicity which are beyond any external measure while the latter is measureless by virtue of its diversity and multiplicity. As Augustine observes a little later in Book I

How shall I call upon my God? Surely when I call on him, I am calling on him to come into me. But what place is there in me where my God can enter into me? ‘God made the heaven and earth’ (Gen. 1:1). Where may he come to me? Lord my God, is there any room in me which can contain you? Can heaven and earth, which you have made and in which you have made me, contain you? ... What has anyone achieved in words when he *speaks* about you? (I.ii.2).

Here indeed is a difficulty. How can praise as mere speech be adequate to the greatness and simplicity of God? Song, after all, is multiple words strung together in discursive form. Can anything at all coming from the mouth of man be worthy of the divine majesty? There would seem to be an infinite gulf lying between the externality and dividedness of the creature and the perfect oneness of the creator. This gulf is expressed in radical terms by Augustine in Book XI of the *Confessions* where we are led to consider the relation of time to eternity. For Augustine, a true confession, the very possibility of praise and finally the return of the soul to its divine source all depend upon the erection of a bridge across this gulf.

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7. I.vi.10. As Chadwick points out, this insistence upon the divine simplicity is a key neoplatonic theme. See, for example, Plotinus, *The Enneads*, V.3.16, translated by Stephen McKenna (Burdett, NY: Larson Publications, 1992), pp. 455–456. See also *Conf.* XIII.iii.4: “You alone are in absolute simplicity. To you it is not one thing to live, another to live in blessed happiness, because you are your own blessedness.”

two standpoints. In the divine vision of such temporal occurrences as the natural motions of the physical world or the actions and lives of men there is no before and after or, as Augustine terms it, no "distention" of time. From the viewpoint of eternity there is no succession but only an everlasting "now." God does not precede time *in* time. God is one, eternal and self-identical and thus altogether above the dividedness of the temporal; while the creature which comes to be and passes away, on the other hand, is caught up in division and multiplicity and is thus stretched out in a condition of distention or dissimilarity with itself. For the creature "to be" is not the same as "to live."

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In the *Confessions* Augustine attempts to construct out of a multiplicity of thoughts and events an ordered narrative that will enable the soul to free itself from its creaturely experience of dissimilarity or unlikeness.⁸ In effect, through the act of confession and praise, the soul is enabled to transcend the limitation imposed by involvement in the "otherness" of time. Yet the problem remains: how can any discursive speech, however well-ordered in its parts, bridge the great chasm between the perfect unity and simplicity of the creator, on the one hand, and the dividedness and dissimilarity of the creature, on the other? For Augustine the difficulty involved in the definition of time is intimately intertwined with the problems of confession and praise. In Book XI he addresses the question of the soul's return to the One in the act of praise through a close exploration of the nature of time and of its relation to the divine eternity.

CREATION AND SPEECH

"See, heaven and earth exist, they cry aloud that they are made, for they suffer change and variation. But in anything which is *not* made and yet *is*, there is nothing which previously was not present (XI.iv.6)." The question of the relation between time and eternity arises out of a meditation upon the account given of the creation of the world in the Book of Genesis. Augustine immediately casts the question in terms of the problem of language. He notes that Moses wrote about the creation of heaven and earth in the Hebrew tongue. He longs to clasp the Patriarch, as he puts it, and beg him for an explanation of the creation. The sounds of the Hebrew language could have no impact on Augustine's Latin ears. Nevertheless, he is convinced that the truth of

8. In Book VII.x.16, Augustine remarks that he found himself far from God "in the region of dissimilarity (*regio dissimilitudinis*)." Chadwick offers the very plausible suggestion that Augustine may have had in mind the "bottomless abyss of otherness" referred to by the Eleatic Stranger in Plato's dialogue *The Statesman*, 273 d, transl. J.B. Skemp, *Collected Dialogues*, p.1039. See also *Conf.* XII.xxviii.38: "You did not make the creation out of yourself in your own likeness, the form of all things, but out of nothing, which is a formless dissimilarity to you, though nevertheless, given form through your likeness. So it returns to you, the One, according to the appointed capacity granted to each entity according to its genus." Compare XIII.ii.3.

Moses' words does not depend ultimately upon a common language. For if he could come to a certain understanding of the truth of these opening words of Genesis, certainty would not have come externally from Moses. Rather Augustine asserts that "within the lodging of my thinking, there would speak a truth which is neither Hebrew nor Greek nor Latin nor any barbarian tongue." This internal truth "uses neither mouth nor tongue as instruments and utters no audible syllables (XI.iii.5)." The soul would simply affirm that what Moses is saying is true. Thus, Augustine concludes, there is both hearing and understanding which is one for all rational creatures behind the multiplicity of languages. The soul seeks to discover this truth within itself in "the little lodging of thinking (*in domicilio cogitationis*)." At this preliminary stage of his inquiry Augustine does not press the question whether this can be achieved.⁹ This concept of a truth that speaks independently of the historically conditioned forms of human speech nevertheless foreshadows the discussion which lies ahead.

Knowledge of the Creator is by no means confined to the revealed word of the Scriptures. The natural world also speaks. According to the Psalmist, heaven and earth "cry aloud that they are made" and this is revealed in the fact that they exhibit motion and mutability. To be created is to be subject to change and variation while, conversely, "in anything which is not made yet is, there is nothing which previously was not present" (XI.iv.6). Augustine regards this speech of the visible creation as a praise of God, that is to say, as an acknowledgement of dependence upon God as the Creator of all things. But *how* did God make the world? Augustine asks, returning to the original thrust of his inquiry. His preliminary proposal takes us back again to the interlocking themes of speech and time: "Therefore you spoke and they were made, and by your word you made them."¹⁰ Nothing else is required. There is no place, no material, no instrument of making — only speech. *How exactly does God speak? Can divine speech be discursive and thus partake of the nature of the multiplicity and division of the temporal? Or is divine speech determined by the simplicity of the divine nature and thus altogether above the discursiveness of the speech of creatures?*

In his interpretation of *how* God speaks in the act of creation, Augustine begins by making explicit the connection between the nature of speech and time. It is important to distinguish words uttered in temporal succession and reported to the listening of an "external" ear from what he calls the speaking of the eternal word. Both manners of speaking belong to God. This, in itself, is worthy of note. After all, Augustine might have drawn a simple distinction between the discursive speech

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9. See Robert D. Crouse, "'In aenigmate Trinitas' (Conf.XIII.5,6): The Conversion of Philosophy in St. Augustine's *Confessions*," *Dionysius*, vol. XI (1987), p. 59.

10. Psalm 32: 9, 6. See *Conf. XI.v.7*.

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of creatures and the perfect simplicity of the divine Word. He chooses not to do so. Given that the whole difficulty faced in his inquiry into the possibility of praise has to do with mediation between the undivided being of the Creator and the divided being of creature, it is significant that speech in temporal succession and eternal utterance both belong to God. The forms of the discursive and the simple are held together in the unity of the divine life. The example Augustine provides of the former kind of speech is the voice from the cloud at Christ's baptism reported by Matthew as saying "this is my beloved Son."¹¹ By choosing this particular speech our attention is drawn to Christ the Mediator who is described at the conclusion of Book X as having appeared "mortal like humanity, righteous like God" (X.xliii.68). We begin to see a glimmer of the christological solution to the question of how God speaks. In the Mediator the two kinds of speech, the two worlds of divine immutability and the finite mutability, are stabilized and held together in the revelation of the Word made flesh. The possibility and the manner of a human participation in this stability of the mutable and the immutable, the temporal and the eternal, is obscure at this stage of Augustine's discourse.

How, then, does God speak at the creation of heaven and earth? Most certainly not like the voice from the cloud. For as Augustine observes, the voice from the cloud is

past and done with; it began and is ended. The syllables sounded and have passed away, the second after the first, the third after the second, and so on in order until, after all the others, the last one came, and after the last silence followed And these your words, made for temporal succession, were reported by the external ear to the judicious mind whose internal ear is disposed to hear your eternal word. But that mind would compare these words, sounding in time, with your eternal word in silence, and say: "It is very different, the difference is enormous. The sounds are far inferior to me, and have no being, because they are fleeting and transient. But the word of my God is superior to me and abides for ever" (Isa. 40: 8).¹²

Through the "eternal" speaking of this Word the world of coming-to-be and passing-away is made; by this divine Word "all things are uttered eternally" (XI.vii.9). In this way the whole creation is uttered in what Augustine calls the "simultaneity of eternity." Such eternal speaking ensures, moreover, that time and change are subordinated absolutely to God as to an underlying, simple first principle. For if the words of creation were uttered discursively with syllables, words, and sentences following one another in sequence — that is, if God could only speak in words of temporal succession — then, by necessity, the

11. *Matt.* 17: 5

12. *Conf.* XI.vi.8

divine being and the divine activity could not be perfectly one with itself. Without an eternal speech, time and mutability would in fact circumscribe the divine nature, and consequently there could be neither true immortality nor true eternity (XI.vii.9). According to Augustine, the eternally spoken word of the Creator is the same Word which is described in the prologue to John's Gospel as being both with God and indeed as being God Himself. Augustine proceeds to identify this eternal Word with the "Beginning" (*principium*) of the first verse of Genesis. In this beginning, that is, in the eternal Word, in the Son, in the wisdom and power of God, heaven and earth were made. In this mystical speaking and making "no element of your word yields place or succeeds to something else, since it is truly immortal and eternal. And so by the word coeternal with yourself, you say all that you say in simultaneity and eternity" (XI. vii.9).

The condition of sinful humanity is epitomized by Augustine as confinement to a world of words in succession. The discursiveness of thought and speech, the necessary division of discourse into a temporal succession of a multitude of parts, stands as a testimony to the Fall and thus to the separation of the rational soul from the perfect unity of God. The problem of human fallenness is thus at the same time problem of both speech and time. How can the created soul overcome this confinement to mere words and gain access to the Word spoken by the Creator in the simultaneity of eternity? How can words spoken in temporal succession be adequate to expound the mystery of the eternal speech? In short, how can there be praise of God? Augustine observes at the outset of Book I that "in seeking him they find him, and in finding they will praise him" (I.i.1). Seeking and finding the divine eternity is necessary to its praise. At stake is nothing less than the return of the rational soul to the source of its being for "the heart is restless until it rests in you" (I.i.1). For Augustine the eternal constancy of the creative Word is crucial, for without it there would be no fixed point to which the soul could return, no stable *telos*, no final resting place. There would be no object to seek or to find, and consequently nothing to praise. "But when we return from error, it is by knowing that we return. He teaches us so that we may know; for he is the Beginning, and he speaks to us" (XI.viii.10). It is necessary to know the beginning in order to know the end. It is precisely through an inquiry into the first principle and origin of the world that the rational soul is enabled to comprehend man's final return to the divine rest; the recovery of original unity demands a study of that same unity in itself. In this way the inquiry into the nature of time and the creation of the world is shown by Augustine to be relevant to the problems of confession and praise.

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In the divine creative act, that is in the speaking of the eternal Word, there is a going out — a *processio*, as it were — from the original divine unity. In this making out of nothing, otherness or dissimilarity come to be. It is in the contemplation of this act of creation, this *processio* from God, that there is also the hope of return, a corresponding return (*reditus*).¹³ The naturally implanted desire to praise the Creator is itself the expression of this urge to return to the original unity. True praise depends finally upon a true knowledge of the eternal Word sought and found; mere self-knowledge is not enough. Augustine remarks at the beginning of Book X,

may I know you, who know me. May I “know as I also am known” (1 Cor. 13: 12). Power of my soul, enter into it and fit it for yourself, so that you may have and hold it “without spot or blemish” (Eph. 5: 27). This is my hope, and that is why I *speak* (X.i.1).

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Knowledge of the soul is attainable solely through a prior knowledge of God. Speech as both confession and praise exhibits the striving of the rational soul to return to the One out of the anxious condition of “dissimilarity” in which self-knowledge is obscured. All of this contributes to an explanation of the urgency of Augustine’s quest for the ability to praise. This same order of knowing — God first, and then the soul — begins to elucidate Augustine’s emphasis on the study of time and the creation of the world in a discourse of confession. To know the beginning is the crucial step towards knowledge of the end. Understanding God’s creative act enables the soul to return out of the restless, discursive world of temporality to the eternal, divine rest. Augustine’s remarks at the outset of Book XI that he intends to meditate on God’s law “from the beginning in which you made heaven and earth until the perpetual reign with you in your heavenly city” (XI.ii.3). This is, at least initially, puzzling. On the surface these words seem to imply a scriptural commentary from Genesis through to the Revelation of St. John the Divine in the last three books of the *Confessions*. This, of course, never materializes. In actuality, Augustine never gets beyond the first few verses of the Creation account in Genesis before the end of the treatise. For Augustine, meditation on first things is simultaneously and effectively a meditation on last things as well.¹⁴ To contemplate the *processio* of the Word from the divine unity into the realm of dissimilarity

13. Compare XIII.iv.5: “Even if the creation had either never come into existence or remained formless, nothing could be lacking to the good which you are to yourself. You made it not because you needed it, but from the fullness of your goodness, imposing control and converting it to receive form — but not as if the result brought you fulfilment of delight. The corollary of your perfection is that the imperfection of created things is displeasing. So they seek perfection from you that they may please you.”

14. In this Augustine follows an established precedent of neoplatonic speculation. For Plotinus the One is the terminus of all striving in the world *because* it is the originative first principle. See Plotinus, *The Enneads*, translated by Stephen McKenna, (Burdett, New York: Larson Publications, 1992) III.8.7: “It is certain, also, that as the Firsts exist in vision all other things must be straining towards the same condition; the starting point (f#/6) is, universally, the goal (05).” Cp. *Ennead* V.4.1 on the One as origin and VI.9.3 on the One as end.

or discursive speech is the very means whereby we are able to attain to a knowledge of the possibility of return (*reditus*). To understand the relation of creature to Creator and, more specifically, the relation of time to eternity is to comprehend the possibility of the soul's return to that original unity.

The chasm between discursive speech and the eternal Word still yawns. At the beginning of Book XI Augustine asks: "Lord, eternity is yours ... Why then do I set before you an ordered account of so many things?" How can there be an approach to the eternal Word through words of speech which sound and pass away? Can there be any bridge over the "bottomless abyss of dissimilarity" which divides the temporal creature from its eternal creator so long as the "heart is still flitting about in the realm where things change and have a past and future?"¹⁵ Augustine portrays this abyss very vividly:

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? Then it may compare eternity with temporal successiveness which never has any constancy, and will see there is no comparison possible. It will see that a long time is long only because constituted of many successive movements which cannot be simultaneously extended. In the eternal, nothing is transient, but the whole is present (XI.xi.13).

This view is to some degree comparable with the account of eternity in Plotinus's third *Ennead*.¹⁶ The simplicity of the principle of eternity is especially difficult for the mind of man to grasp. Again, quoting from Genesis, Augustine asks whether he has sufficient strength for this undertaking: "can the hand of my mouth by *mere speech* achieve so great a thing?"¹⁷ Can any discursive human speech be adequate to God's simplicity and greatness? Is it even intelligible to say "You are great, Lord, and highly to be praised" (I.i.1)? This is the difficulty with which he began the treatise in the first place. Even the most ordered account will fall short of the unutterable simplicity of the divine being, for it will inevitably be broken into "period and part."

Can any discursive human speech be adequate to God's simplicity and greatness? Is it even intelligible to say "You are great, Lord, and highly to be praised" (I.i.1)?

15. VII.10.16, XI.i.1 and XI.xi.13. Compare Plotinus, *Ennead* I.8.13: "We are become dwellers in the Place of Unlikeness, where, fallen from all our resemblance to the Divine, we lie in gloom and mud."

16. Henry Chadwick draws attention to this similarity between Augustine and Plotinus. See his note to XI.xi.13, p. 228. See *Ennead* 3.7.3: "That which neither has been nor will be, but simply possesses being; that which enjoys stable existence as neither in process of change nor having ever changed — that is Eternity. Thus we come to the definition: the life — instantaneously entire, complete, at no point broken into period or part — which belongs to the Authentic Existent by its very existence, this is the thing we are probing for — this is Eternity."

17. XI.xi.13 (my italics).

THE ASCENT OF THE SOUL¹⁸

Augustine expresses an acute anxiety at the seeming impossibility of bridging the two utterly disparate realms of discursive speech and divine Word, the realms of time and eternity:

In this Beginning, you made heaven and earth, in your Word, in your Son, in your power, in your wisdom, in your truth speaking in a wonderful way and making in a wonderful way. Who can comprehend it? *Who will give an account of it in words?* What is the light which shines right through me and strikes my heart without hurting? It fills me with terror and burning love: with terror inasmuch as I am utterly other than it, with burning love in that I am akin to it (XI.ix.11) [my italics].

*In praise there is
an expectation
of homecoming,
of a discovery
of the heart's
natural place.*

First of all, how is this burning love present in the soul? The passage quoted is an unmistakable echo of the opening paragraph of Book I where Augustine asserts that to praise God is a desire naturally implanted in man. In a famous passage later on in Book XIII Augustine offers an explanation of this love by appealing to the Aristotelian doctrine of natural place.¹⁹ All bodies tend towards their natural places according to their natural weight. Fire moves upward by nature away from the earth just as a rock tends downwards towards the center. In their natural places all bodies attain to their natural state which, for Aristotle, is rest. Of the soul, however, Augustine says "my weight is my love (*pondus meum amor meus*). Wherever I am carried, my love is carrying me. By your gift we are set on fire and carried upwards: we grow red hot and ascend. We climb 'the ascents in our heart' (Ps. 83: 6), and sing 'the song of steps' ... as we move upwards to the peace of Jerusalem" (Ps. 121: 6) (XIII.ix.11). What is especially interesting in this passage for our present inquiry is the return of the heart to its resting place through *song*. A "song of steps" implies a distention of degrees in the liturgical approach to "the house of the Lord," which here stands as a metaphor for the soul's longing to return to the divine rest and thus to cross over the chasm which divides the temporal from the eternal. In praise there is an expectation of homecoming, of a discovery of the heart's natural place and consequently a teleological sense of reaching out towards the attainment of the complete actuality of the soul. Through the praise of God in song the distention of the soul is contained and stabilised. By the same token, terror and suffering remain so long as the heart continues to be separated from its natural

18. In his essay "*Recurrens in te unum: The Pattern of St. Augustine's Confessions*," R.D. Crouse interprets the structure of the *Confessions* as a threefold scheme of the soul's ascent (*exteriora, interiora, superiora*). See p. 390: "The discussion moves from the phenomenal description of biography (Books I-IX) to psychology (Book X), and thence to theology (Books XI-XIII)." See note 2 above.

19. Aristotle, *On the Heavens*, 268b11-269b18, translated by Richard McKeon, op.cit., pp. 399-401.

resting place. With a simultaneous allusion to the pilgrim Paul and to the much-enduring wanderer Odysseus, another singer of songs, Augustine groans "with inexpressible groanings" on his "wanderer's path" and longs for his homecoming.²⁰ Like *pious* Aeneas too, the stoical wayfarer, Augustine bids his soul endure and press on strongly (*insiste, anime meus, et adtende fortiter*) until he arrive at the eternal city, "the homeland of peace" (*patriam pacis*).²¹

Augustine's reflection upon homecoming leads him back once again to the question of time and the soul's suffering of distention. For time is the culprit in the heart's suffering of anxiety and terror; time entraps the soul and restrains it from the fulfillment of its natural, heavenward motion. One rather curious expression of this entrapment the soul in the "realm of dissimilarity" is the despairing speculation that there must have been a time before creation (XI.vii.9). Were this the case, time would necessarily circumscribe the act of creation, and thus contain the life of the Creator rather than being itself contained; consequently there would be no stable principle of constancy and rest to which the soul could hope to return. Such a view of time, Augustine argues, would overturn a true account of both eternity and immortality. Where time and change are absolute, by necessity there can be no perfect identity of being and activity; and without such an identity, the natural urge for rest on the part of the rational soul would be altogether impossible to fulfill. In effect there would be no principle of unity prior to "otherness." For Augustine, as for Plato, time can only be a creature. "You have made time itself. Time could not elapse before you made time. But if time did not exist before heaven and earth, why do people ask what you were then doing? There was no 'then when there was not time'" (XI.xiii.15).²² It is important to note here that Augustine's dependence upon Plato has limits; he rejects the concept of the demiurge in so far as it implies the corollary of a pre-existent matter. The demiurge of the *Timaeus* must persuade "necessity" and impose form

*Time is the culprit
in the heart's
suffering of
anxiety and
terror; time
entraps the soul
and restrains it
from the
fulfillment
of its natural,
heavenward
motion.*

20. XII.xvi.23. For Paul's reference to the groaning of creation for its heavenly homecoming see Rom. 8: 20-25. Homer, *The Odyssey*, 1.1-2 & 5. 220-224, transl. Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Anchor Books, 1961), pp. 1 & 87. See R.J. O'Connell, *St. Augustine's Confessions: The Odyssey of the Soul* (Cambridge, Mass, 1969).

21. XI.xxvii.34 and VII.xxi.27: "It is one thing from a wooded summit to catch a glimpse of the homeland of peace (*patriam pacis*) and not to find the way to it, but vainly to attempt the journey along an impracticable route surrounded by the ambushes and assaults of fugitive deserters with their chief, 'the lion and the dragon' (Ps. 90: 13). It is another thing to hold on to the way that leads there, defended by the protection of the heavenly emperor." Compare Virgil, *The Aeneid*, IV. 476-479, transl. Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Random House, 1983), p. 108: "But now it is the rich Italian land/ Apollo tells me I must make for: Italy,/ Named by his oracles. There is my love;/ There is my country (*hic amor, haec patria est*)." Cf. *Aeneid*, IV. 456-457, 546-551 and 607-621.

22. Compare Plato, *Timaeus*, 37d, *Collected Dialogues*, p. 1167: "the nature of the ideal being was everlasting, but to bestow this attribute in its fullness upon a creature was impossible. Wherefore [the demiourgos] resolved to have a moving image of eternity, and when he set in order the heaven, he made this image eternal but moving according number, while eternity itself rests in unity, and this image we call time Time and the heaven came into being at the same instant."

on a preexistent formless matter.²³ The Creator of heaven and earth, according to the Augustinian account, makes his materials as well.²⁴

With yet another allusion to the nature of speech, Augustine addresses the difficulty of finding a satisfactory definition of time: "Take the two tenses, past and future. How can they 'be' when the past is not *now* present and the future is not *yet* present?" Even the being of the present is open to doubt. The present must pass directly into the past and thus time exists only in the sense that it tends towards non-existence.²⁵ It is speech that would appear to affirm the being of time in some fashion. As Augustine observes, we *speak* of intervals of time. It would seem that the rational soul possesses some awareness of times longer than the "now" in spite of the demonstrable non-existence of the past and the future. For Augustine this is a puzzling question which will occupy his attention for much of the remainder of Book XI. He addresses the soul and sets the question of time: "let us see whether present time can be long. To you the power is granted to be aware of intervals of time, and to measure them" (XI.xv.19). Not even a single day can be said to be entirely present and an hour is composed of "fugitive moments." Is it possible to think of some smallest portion of time which is indivisible and which can be termed the "present?" Even if this were possible, which it is not, this present would flee into the past and become an interval of no duration whatsoever. Thus Augustine concludes that "if it has no duration, it is divisible into past and future. But the present occupies no space" (XI.xv.20). It seems that we are left with no alternative but to affirm that time is nothing at all!

How can "being" be ascribed to anything subject to the distention of time? Despite the metaphysical difficulty of these modes of speech we continue to use them.

The mind is nevertheless conscious of intervals which can be compared with one another as longer and shorter. Yet how is it possible to measure the past which does not exist or the future which has not yet come into being? Can that which has no being be subject to measurement (XI.xvi.21)? Augustine's *linguistic* difficulties with the definition of time are reminiscent of the discussion in the *Timaeus*: "when we say that what has become *is* become and what becomes *is* becoming, and what will become *is* about to become and that the nonexistent *is* nonexistent — all these are inaccurate modes of expression."²⁶ How can "being" be ascribed to anything subject to the distention of time? Despite the metaphysical difficulty of these modes of speech we continue to use them. Augustine, however, goes a step further and affirms the logic of common usage with the remark that "most of our language is inexact. Yet what we mean is communicated" (XI.xx.26).

23. *Timaeus*, 48e-53c, *Collected Dialogues*, pp. 1176-1179.

24. See XII.vii.7, xvii.24-26 and xxviii.38.

25. XI.xiv.17 (*nisi quia tendit non esse*).

26. *Timaeus*, 38 b, *Collected Dialogues*, p. 1167.

What then do we *mean* when we say that the something either past or yet to come "is"? The solution for Augustine lies in the supposition that time in a certain way exists in the soul which remembers and expects. In the soul which holds together past and present the distended intervals of time are marked off and stabilised. Thus there is "a present of things past" which we call memory; there is "a present of things present," or immediate awareness; and finally there is "a present of things to come" in expectation. The customary patterns of speech incorrectly assert the independent being of past, present and future. Yet this does not wholly resolve the question of measurement. If all times are necessarily "present time," how can there be distinct moments to measure? "How do we measure present time when it has not extension? ... it comes from what as yet does not exist, passes through that which lacks extension and goes into that which is now non-existent" (XI.xxi.27). Surely there cannot be measurement of what has no extension. In his zeal to resolve this difficulty Augustine utters a fervent prayer:

My mind is on fire to solve this intricate enigma. Do not shut the door, Lord my God. Good Father, through Christ I beg you, do not shut the door on my longing to understand these things which are both familiar and obscure... Grant what I love. For I love, and this love was your gift. Grant it, Father... Through Christ I beg you, in the name of him who is the holy one of holy ones, let no one obstruct my inquiry. 'I have believed, and therefore speak' (Ps. 115: 1; 2 Cor. 4: 13) (XI.xxii.28).

If we look back again to the conclusion of Book X we recall that Christ's chief role for Augustine is to act as the Mediator between God and humanity by virtue of having "something common with God and something in common with humanity" (X.xli.66). This invocation of Christ the Mediator is placed significantly just in advance of the final resolution of the interlocking problems of speech and time. Augustine sees the contrarities of being and becoming, eternity and time, discursive speech and the unity of the divine Word as christologically linked. The rational soul has something in common with both being and becoming; the soul is caught in the distention of time yet stands divinely above time by its ability to measure the before and after in a present awareness which is analogous to eternity; the power of speech manifests this twofold relation. By meditating upon the dialectical union of the divine and human natures in the one person of Christ by the mystery of the incarnation, Augustine gains illumination in his reflection on the difficulty of the rational soul's self-alienation in the distention of time and discursive discourse. In this context, an analysis of the intelligibility of speech in the form of praise becomes a paradigm for Augustine's resolution of the problem of time.

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In his final assault on the predicament of time, Augustine breaks through to the realization that time is actually nothing more than a distention of the mind itself. The truth begins to dawn in a deepened reflection upon the nature of speech. Augustine addresses the example of Ambrose's evening hymn of praise, "*Deus creator omnium* — God the creator of all things" (XI.xxvii.34). Rhetorically this is a master stroke, for in the analysis of this single phrase the diverse threads of his discourse in Book XI — namely, creation, time and speech — are all woven together in a single, vivid metaphor. Take the words in themselves: *Deus-creator-omnium*. First there is God (*Deus*); there follows the name which implies his action (*creator*); and lastly the product of that action (*omnium*). Here we have the essential elements of the question discussed in the last three books of the *Confessions*, namely the doctrine of creation. Augustine proceeds to analyze the meter of the phrase with the intention of resolving once and for all the problem of time. In addition, these particular words taken together constitute a praise of God, the very possibility of which is the occasion for this entire discussion in the first place. Thus at the end of Book XI Augustine draws together into a single view the doctrine of creation, the problem of time and the soul's longing for union with its divine origin.

Let us begin with the connection between language and time. These three words — *Deus-creator-omnium* — are sounded from syllable to syllable by a physical voice. The sound begins, continues for a certain space, and finally ceases. The succession of syllabic sounds is followed by silence. Prior to the voice's giving utterance, the words lie in the future where there can be no measurement of them. Once the sounding of the words has past there can likewise be no measurement, for they are gone. During the actual process of recitation, however, it seems that these syllables — eight of them — can somehow be measured; it so happens that there are four short and four long in an iambic order: *Deus-creator-omnium* (XI.xxvii.34). None of these syllables sounds simultaneously with another but each is pronounced in succession. There can be no permanence of the sounds themselves in the external act of recitation. One syllable follows another into and out of existence. One might even question whether the syllables themselves *exist* as discrete entities, although Augustine chooses not to do so.²⁷ What he does remark is that we can take one kind of syllable, say the short, and make it the measure of the long. How is it that the short syllable is held onto such that it is "present" to measure the long? The former has

27. Compare Plato's discussion of the "knowability" of syllables and the relation of part to whole in *Theaetetus*, 202 d,e–204 a, *Collected Dialogues*, pp. 909-911.

ceased before the latter has sounded. How can we say that one syllable has twice the length of another when the sound of the so-called measure has flown away out of existence? For Augustine this possibility of measurement is indeed a wonderful thing:

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. Do not distract me; that is do not allow yourself to be distracted by the hubbub of impressions being made upon you. In you, I affirm, I measure periods of time (XI.xxvii.36).

It is the "present consciousness" of memory which measures the "stream of past events," or in this case a stream of transient syllables. In this way the past as well as the future are understood by Augustine to coalesce within the rational soul in a unified and continuous vision.²⁸ Thus a long past is a "long memory of the past" since the past itself has no existence. The same applies to the future through expectation.

By way of further explication of this concept of continuity Augustine asks his reader to consider, for example, the recitation of a psalm; perhaps he has in mind the psalm quoted at the outset of the treatise - "You are great Lord, and highly to be praised (I.i.1)." In recitation, especially of some familiar piece, there is an expectation in the mind of succeeding syllables and words, perhaps of whole sentences or verses. Each portion of the psalm — syllable, word, line — is sounded in turn and passes from expectation through present awareness back into memory. The point here is that this passing from expectation into memory is more than just a coming-to-be out of not-being and then, in a flash, passing back again into not-being.²⁹ Rather the soul, through the faculty of memory, gives a degree of permanence to what is uttered. Were it not so there could be no comprehension of meaning whatsoever behind the series of multiple and diverse sounds. Without the soul's power to gather together the various syllabic sounds into a single, unified and continuous whole, there could not even be individual words, let alone a sentence or a complete psalm. In short, without the unifying power of the soul there could be no meaning in speech. Through the power of the rational soul there is a permanence in and through the impermanence, an identity which contains and stabilizes the dissimilarity of distinct, multiple sounds.

Augustine speaks of the act of recitation as a stretching (*distensio*) of the soul in two directions; as expectation decreases in quantity memory proportionately increases. He gives the example of a person singing a familiar song who "suffers a distention or stretching in feeling and in sense-perception from the expectation of future sounds and the

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28. "Attention," he observes, "is continuous, and it is through this that what will be present progresses towards being absent (XI.xxviii.37)."

29. This ontological formulation has Platonic origins. See *Timaeus*, 38 b.

memory of past sound" (XI.xxx.40). The same rule applies furthermore to each constituent part of the psalm just as it applies to the whole. Quite unexpectedly Augustine draws a truly astonishing universal corollary:

the same is true of a longer action in which perhaps that psalm is part. It is also valid 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 (XI.xxviii.37).

The rational creature imitates the Creator in its power to unify the divided moments of past and future in the "now" of intellect.

At this stage of the discourse Augustine pulls on his seven league boots and strides in three steps from the action of reciting a single psalm to a gathering together of *all* the actions of human history! The connection drawn between the theory of human speech and time as history is truly astounding. Yet what is the whole of human history when compared with the divine act of creation? By speaking the eternal Word, "God the Creator of all things" utters everything that is — past, present, and future; and in this utterance the distention experienced by the creature is altogether absent. In our temporally conditioned human discourse about the eternal divine speech the present tense seems to Augustine to be most appropriate; for "your 'years' are 'one day' (Ps. 2: 7; 2 Pet. 3: 8), and your 'day' is not any and every day but today, because your today does not yield to a tomorrow, nor did it follow on a yesterday. Your today is eternity" (XI.xiii.16). The rational creature imitates the Creator in its power to unify the divided moments of past and future in the "now" of intellect. In Book XIII Augustine demonstrates how this is evidence of the *imago dei* in man.³⁰ The unity of a psalm known by heart, recited and perhaps understood; the unity of the dramatic action of the liturgy in which that psalm is a constituent part; the unity of a human life "where all actions are parts of a whole"; and the unity in history of the actions of humanity throughout all time: *all* are examples of stabilised distention, of unity sustained in and through dissimilarity and multiplicity. For Augustine, the ultimate intelligibility of such a unity is attainable through contemplation of the Trinity. In the divine life, unity in and through difference and division is expressed in the relation of the persons of the Trinity. An image or likeness of this trinitarian life is reflected in these examples of speech, time and history.

For Augustine, the ultimate intelligibility of such a unity is attainable through contemplation of the Trinity.

In all of the finite examples addressed there is a stretching out (*distensio*) of multiple constituent parts in time; these parts are nonetheless held together as continuous wholes through their respective principles of permanence. The diversity and multiplicity of the constituent syllables of a psalm can be held together as a continuous whole by memory in the rational soul. The discourse Augustine offers here in this treatise as "an ordered account of many things" can also recreate the past and

30. See XIII.ix.10.

hold it together in the more permanent "now" of confession. Just as the word *Deus* can be held together with the word *omnium* in the faculty of memory before, during and after Ambrose's hymn is sung, so also, by analogy, there would seem to be a more general hope of bridging the abyss between Creator and creature, and thus ensure a "return" of the soul out of the realm of dissimilarity to rest in the divine unity. It must be remembered that the soul's homecoming to the *patriam pacis* cannot be achieved by a reflection of the soul into itself; rather, the return must originate, as does the creation itself, in divine action:

See how my life is a distention in several directions. 'Your right hand upheld me' (Ps. 17: 36; 62: 9) in my Lord, the Son of Man who is mediator between you the One and us the many who live in a multiplicity of distractions by many things; so 'I might apprehend him in whom also I am apprehended' and leaving behind the old days I might be gathered to follow the One.... Then shall I find stability and solidity in you, in your truth which imparts form to me (XI.xxix.39-xxx.40).

The agency of union is the Mediator who is both creature and Creator at once. The contemplation of the mystery of the Word made flesh opens the path to confession and praise and thus also to a gathering together or collecting of the soul out of the "region of dissimilarity." The soul discovers its stability and permanence in the divine unity, for the soul has itself come into being through the utterance of the eternal Word. The origin truly is the end.

Thus for Augustine, the creation of souls and indeed of the entire world is, as it were, the outward manifestation of God's own eternally recited psalm. On this view, man, who is described at the beginning of Book I as "just a little piece of your creation," might be taken to represent a single word or syllable of this eternal psalm. It would be inaccurate to infer from such a metaphor that there could be any distention in the speaking of the divine Word of creation such as that experienced in the speech of the creature. On this point Augustine is very clear:

Certainly 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. From such a mind nothing of the past would be hidden, nor anything of what remaining ages have in store, just as I have full knowledge of that psalm I sing. I know by heart what and how much of it has passed since the beginning, and what and how much remains until the end. But far be it from you, Creator of the universe, creator of souls and bodies, far be it from you 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.... Let the person who understands this make confession to you. Let him who fails to understand it make confession to you (XI.xxx.40).

The soul discovers its stability and permanence in the divine unity, for the soul has itself come into being through the utterance of the eternal Word.

In spite of the great difference between creature and Creator with regard to both knowing and speaking, Augustine insists that his full knowledge of the psalm that he sings is itself nonetheless an imitation of the divine self-knowing. When the divided moments of past and future are contained and stabilised within the unity of the "now" of present apprehension, the rational soul imitates the life of the divine. God too "returns" to himself out of his division as a Trinity of equal persons.³¹

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Augustine has shown in this discourse on creation that time, and indeed all the mutable content which time measures, are in actuality absolutely dependent upon and derived from an eternal and immutable divine source. In the act of praise the creature imitates the Creator by holding together the distended words and syllables in a single vision; both the nothingness of time and the dissimilarity or otherness which it represents are overcome in a recitation which can stand as a complete and intelligible act. The same knowledge that renders praise an intelligible action gives both purpose and structure to the *Confessions*. When Augustine gathers together his own life in the "now" of confession, it is as if the whole treatise, like the hymn of St. Ambrose, constitutes a praise of God. When Augustine recites the phrase *Deus creator omnium*, the words which designate God and the creation are stabilised and held together in the "little lodging of thinking." By his contemplation of the intelligibility of this simple utterance, he is able to begin to understand how, in praise, creature and Creator are permanently united in the perfect rest of the eternal city of God. □

31. See James Doull, "What is Augustinian *Sapientia*?" *Dionysius*, vol. XII (Dec., 1988), pp. 61-67. Doull's formulation of this question of trinitarian return is especially helpful in the interpretation of the *Confessions*.