

Saint Augustine's *Confessions* and
His Thoughts On Memory and Time

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Saint Augustine's "Analysis of Memory"

In the book *Confessions*, by Saint Augustine, the book is rather a collection of thirteen books; the tenth of which could stand alone as a beautiful homage to one's inner thoughts on the relationship between memory of the Christian God. Book ten is called "Augustine's Confession of His Present," this is also broken down into parts, all of which have their own names and their own chapter titles. Uniquely enough, the section entitled "Analysis of Memory" carries the largest number of chapters, and none of which have titles (VIII–XXV). Even so, does carry out the name as the section title implies. Augustine nearly prints his heart, mind, and voice out onto paper for all of us to attempt to understand, he even outright cries to his reader: "Who can analyze this, or understand how it can be?" (p. 202).

In book ten, Augustine is slowly giving the reader his logic to what he is eventually building up to. This build up in logic and detail allows it so that once when one gets to the end of *Analysis of Memory*, everything becomes as clear as day and makes sense to what he was speaking of before—maybe even a small, luring puzzle for those who want to understand his writings. The first components of Augustine's logic is what most philosophers at the time agreed on: what we perceive comes through our senses, and then added this to that notion: "by the senses are there for thought to remember them" (p. 196). Augustine is stating that all of which is in our memory is there through the experience of our senses.

The next component in Augustine's logic is the matter of truth and this comes down to "three kinds of questions—whether a thing is, what it is, of what sort it is ... the truths themselves" (p. 198). We hardly think of tomatoes when we are making fruit salad, Augustine

explains this to be a sort of sixth sense to the human perception, our memory keeps this information for everything in our lives to keep things straight and in order. And along with images, truths, Augustine also suggests that “the things themselves are neither Greek nor Latin, nor of any other language” (p. 199), they are but of this world with the sensory perceptions that we can liken to them. But all the while, we cannot have any memory of a sense or image that we have not experienced, and the memories we do have are of only the images and senses and not the things themselves, but this is how we recognize them.

When forgetting what is in our memory, Augustine says that we must be able to recognize what it is we are digging for within our mind—then we can remember what we forget because we can recognize it in our memory as what we are looking for. And in this digging, Augustine explains that our mind can shuffle through our memory and know what it is that it is not looking for, with this ability of elimination, this is how we can remember when we try to. This is the first build up in Augustine’s logic, compiling exactly how he defines how we know and remember things in our lives, the next is where he turns this logic to the argument of happiness and God.

What is strange is that Augustine first starts this by asking “where and when had I any experience of happiness, that I should remember it and love it and long for it? ... And unless we knew with certain knowledge, we could not will it with so certain a will” (p. 207). But Augustine goes on to paint the picture of men not knowing what true happiness is, nor the knowledge of what it ever was, and thus cannot recognize it with their senses or memory. Unless it is of the happiness Augustine writes here: “For there is a joy which is not given to the ungodly but only to those who love Thee for Thy own sake, whose joy in Thyself. And this is happiness, to be joyful

in Thee and for Thee and because of Thee, this and no other. Those who think happiness is any other, pursue a joy apart from Thee and is no true joy” (P. 207). What happiness is is a relationship with God, and a loving, forgiving, understanding, undying kinship with Him.

“Thus it is not certain that all men do desire to be happy, since there are those who do not desire to rejoice in You, O God: and as this rejoicing is the only happiness, they do not really desire happiness” (p. 208). What Augustine has done is he has ripped apart what is meant to be happy and has replaced it in his text with God. This is where Augustine has found his happiness, and considers it to be the truest form of happiness as he can recognize it in his memory as what makes him happy. Suggesting that in other minds, there is a disagreement on what happiness is, what the image of it is, but for his faith and the whole of the Christian religion, God should be in the heart as what is recognized as happiness.

Saint Augustine's "Time and the Universe Began Together" and "What Is Time?"

Following Saint Augustine's tenth book, "Augustine's Confession of His Present," is his eleventh: "In the Beginning God Created (Genesis 1:1)," which is one of the shortest books in his Confessions and surrounds the ideas of God and time. Book eleven could also be aptly called "Augustine's Confession of His Past, Present, and Future," and would suit it just as well. Out of thirty-one, there are two sections, "Time and the Universe Began Together" and "What Is Time?" in which Saint Augustine attempts to explain his thoughts on the relationship between God and time and this is to answer the odd question of: "what was God doing before He made heaven and earth?" (p. 240). This question is both odd and silly to Augustine as he tries to prove that there was no "doing," no "before," and no time whatsoever.

The composition of book eleven is laid out very similarly to Augustine's book ten. One of the differences between the books is how, in the eleventh, Augustine works in the opposite direction as he does in book ten: by first starting with his main point and then goes through the logic steps to show why his thoughts are correct. "You are the Maker of all time, and before all time You are, nor was there ever a time when there was no time!" (p. 242)—here, Augustine is trying to say that whatever is outside of time, that is God, but too, that there is nothing outside of time. It is clear as to why this was difficult for Augustine to write, and most to read, but what he is trying to convey is that when God created time, there was no actual "when" for Him to do so. And so just as the section title reads: "Time and the Universe Began Together."

One small chapter after asking the odd question, Augustine gives his answer with this: “Before God made heaven and earth, He did not make anything. For if He had made something, what would it have been but a creature? And I wish I knew all that it would be profitable for me to know, as well as I know that no creature was made before any creature was made” (p. 241). And then more and more with his writings and ramblings, it can be seen quite clear that Augustine is from 300-400 A.D., speaking to people at the same point in time. Teaching them how to view time, measure it, be aware of it. It was really quite interesting once this revelation was made. One example is when Augustine is explaining how regarding time as either “short” or “long” is to compare it to another amount of time—when in using any sort of duration as a comparison, the adjectives are proved to be useless.

The next point of logic that Augustine brings up is what does and does not exist: “If nothing passed there would be no past time; if nothing were approaching, there would be no future time; if nothing were, there would be no present time” (p. 242), and all the while, these points are not in our plain of existence as all three could not possibly exist simultaneously. By breaking this down further and further, Augustine shows that the present time is “found to be the only time capable of being” (p. 244) as both the past and future cannot be seen nor touched, it is nonexistent. What Augustine does admit though is that within the mind, this is where all three time points are allowed to exist simultaneously. “For the mind expects, attends, and remembers,” (p. 254). The future exists as we know what we can *expect* from the future, of course with only what is in our past experiences. The present exists, as it should, when we are in *attendance* of what is going on around us in every moment of the day. Lastly, the past exists as we can remember it in our memories through experiences, all of which are covered in his book ten. And with this, it can

be seen as to why Saint Augustine is said to be a poet. While even so, we can think of many things today that might have thrown off Augustine's writings, or his entire thought pattern, we can still appreciate how in a time more than 1500 years ago, Saint Augustine was one of the brightest minds with his use of logic, rhetoric, and poetic rhythm.

References:

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