

# Augustine and Sankara on Time

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Augustine's thoughts on time are expressed most cogently in Book XI of his *Confessions*. They also appear in Book XI of *The City of God*. Augustine's discussion of time was designed to answer the objection that if God were eternal and immutable He could not be conceived as the Creator of the world. Either the world is co-eternal with God or the result of an act of God's will at a point of time. Augustine in his discussion in *The City of God* rejects the notion of the world being co-eternal with God. Not being co-eternal with God it must have been created by God at some point of time. The decision to create thus becomes a new act of God's will. A change in will implies that God is not immutable, especially in view of the fact that Augustine, in order to maintain the simplicity of God, maintains that God's will is of the very substance or essence of God and not an attribute. That which is mutable is not eternal.

It is to answer this objection that Augustine gives an elaborate dialectic on time especially in his *Confessions*. He starts with the simple answer that time itself is of the created order. Time presupposes movement and since neither could be conceived as antecedent to creation, time must be conceived as of the created order. The world was not created in time but time was created with the world. Time thus has no reference to eternity and God remains immutable. Obviously Augustine found that the objection needed a more thorough answer than this simple one and so undertakes an examination of the nature of time itself. Augustine asserts that time

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is a succession of indivisible and discrete moments. Nevertheless, it is not as discrete and indivisible moments that we experience time. We have a real sense of duration. We measure time and talk in terms of long or short periods of time. We not only experience a sense of duration, but we have a sense of unity in our experience of time. We talk about and have a sense of the past. We anticipate and predict a future course of events. In all this Augustine seems to suggest that there is an apparent totality of time which we experience as a unity. Nevertheless, analysis shows time to be in reality nothing more than a succession of indivisible and discrete moments. The discrete moments have no duration or to put it in Augustine's phrase no space.

Let us examine this analysis and find out Augustine's solution of the contradiction between sense of duration, experience of unity and the real discrete character of the ultimate units of time.

We do talk of "a long time past" or "short time past" and of a "long time to come" says Augustine, but what does such talk indicate in reality? The past is not an actuality in present experience. It is gone. In a like manner phrases like "a long time to come" refer to that which is not, for the future is yet unborn. The adjectives "long" or "short" qualifying time therefore are in a sense, and perhaps without a deeper understanding, misleading. The legitimate phrasing provisionally might be, suggests Augustine, not "it is a long time past" but "it has *been* a long time past" the emphasis falling upon the words "it has been", and similarly it is not "it is a long time to come" but "it will be a long time to come" the emphasis falling on "will be". The adjective "long" does not qualify the past, for the past is no longer but the past when it was a present reality. But even this may be an illegitimate use for the present is continuously slipping into the past in its indivisible, passing or discrete moments. To quote Augustine "...a long time cannot become long, but out of many motions passing by which cannot be prolonged altogether."

When we refer to the past, we are, contends August-

ine, recalling in memory images of certain events which no longer are. Similarly reference to the future is merely an act of fore-thinking. And, writes Augustine, (*Confessions* : Book XI. XX. 26), "What now is clear and plain is, that neither things to come nor past are. Nor is it properly said, 'there be three times, past, present and to come'; Yet perchance it might be properly said, 'there be three times; a present of things past, a present of things present, and a present of things future'." This amounts to saying that what we have is only the past and future being united with the present in consciousness.

Augustine rejects the attempt to measure duration by reference to the motions of any body or planet, for that would be arguing in a circle for in the words of Augustine "we measure the motions of a body in time".

Is the experience of duration then illusory? Augustine contends that time is actually measured in mind. Writes Augustine (*Ibid.*, XXVII. 36), "It is in thee, my mind, that I measure times...the impression, which things as they pass by cause in thee, remains ever when they are gone; this it is which still present, I measure, not the things which pass by to make the impression. This I measure when I measure times. Either then this is time, or I do not measure times". Measurement of time is subjective.

What is the purpose of this analysis? Augustine seems to aim at showing that while the past is dead and the future is yet unborn, nevertheless there is an experience of time as a totality and unity. To put it in the words of Hartshorne and Reese :

In the present experience...is the past found as the re-membered and retained, the still somehow possessed and the future is found as the anticipated or in a fashion already possessed. Here is a unity sought for in which a transition from moment A to moment B to be followed by moment C is contained in a unit. We experience the present as following a certain past which in a certain fashion is still there for us, and

consequently the present's relation to the past can be there also. And we experience the future as in a fashion already there for us, so that we now are in a relation to the future.<sup>1</sup>

From this analysis of man's experience of time Augustine goes on to speak of the immutability of God, despite the created order being subject to change, having a past, a present and a future. When one sings a memorized psalm, though at any given moment during the act of recitation, there are words already uttered and passed on into the past and words yet unuttered and therefore only anticipated, the song is nevertheless known in its totality and unity because it is present to my mind in memory. God's mind however, does not suffer the limitations and privations of man's mind. It is infinitely and incomparably greater than man's mind.

To God then, the past and the future exist in his knowledge as an eternal present. There is then no progression and therefore no change from the past to the present and from present to the future. The distinction between the analogy of knowledge of a song memorized being now sung and God's knowledge is this writes Augustine :

For it is not as the feelings of one singing known things, or hearing a known song, are—through expectation of future words, and in remembrance of those that are past,—varied, and his senses divided, that anything happeneth unto Thee, unchangeably eternal, that is, the truly eternal Creator of minds. Thou in the Beginning knewest the heaven and earth, without changes of Thy knowledge, so in the Beginning didst Thou make heaven and earth without any distraction of Thy action (*Confessions*: Book XI, Ch. XXXI. 41).

If Augustine's unity of the past, present and future is a unity in mental act, that is, in present memory and

<sup>1</sup> *Philosophers Speak of God*: edited by C. Hartshorne and W. L. Reese, Chicago, University Press, 1953, p. 93.

present anticipation, the past is deactualized in memory except as a present mental phenomenon and the future stands unactualized excepting as a present mental act.

This analogy when applied to God does not serve the purposes of Augustine. If the past is deactualized irrevocably to God excepting as an element of present knowledge, God has changed. The past is not a living reality to him. On the other hand, if there is an immutable totality of changes present as an eternal actuality to God and this is what Augustine seems to suggest, then everything is determined and change and novelty in the world are illusory.

Secondly, despite the strong affirmation by Augustine of the freedom of man, it is difficult to accept his affirmation. Augustine in one context says that while God knows what an individual will do in the future, he nevertheless does not move the will of that individual. The act of the will of the individual is of his own free choice. On the surface this seems satisfactory. Freedom to be real must mean however open possibilities in choices. If God knows decisively how an individual will act, then by some mysterious process this open possibility is ruled out. On the other hand, if the open possibility of choice is real, as it should be if freedom is real, and the individual changes his mind, then God's foreknowledge is either limited or does not exist. The whole thesis of God's immutability falls flat.

Sankara, perhaps the most brilliant of the religious philosophers of medieval India, had also to grapple with the problem of the immutability of God or religious reality. There is a subtlety of argument and of some philosophical distinctions here that are not found in Augustine. Sankara argues that things that change represent a kind of unreality. That which is today and is not tomorrow has but a limited existence. Because of the limited existence no enduring judgment can be made of it. It does not represent an enduring value, though it may have a pragmatic value.

Sankara and his followers contend that there are three categories of judgment. Judgment that affirms what

is real, judgment that states what is unreal and thirdly the judgment that pertains to the non-existing. The definition of the real according to Sankara is as follows: "That alone is real which is not contradicted or sublated by a subsequent experience or state of things". Thus a thing or an entity may have a positive or concrete existence but if it passes off or is contradicted subsequently it cannot be treated as real.

Concreteness and positive existence are not in themselves guarantors of reality. As we stated earlier if a thing is today and is not tomorrow, it is a passing thing, representing no permanent value. If this were so, religious reality cannot be subject to change. Religious reality would be unreal which is absurd. It must therefore be immutable. That is the meaning of the term "eternal". The conceptual poles are not therefore strictly time and eternity but change and immutability. This seems to be the implication of the well known Christian hymn "Abide With Me". One of the stanzas has the following words "Change and decay in all around I see, O Thou who changes not abide with me". According to Sankara religious reality then is changeless, immutable and eternal and it alone represents reality.

What then is the nature of our world, of history which is such an intractable fact of human experience? Sankara accepts in full measure the concrete character of the world and of historical process. Time is a fact not only of subjective experience but has an objective dimension. But, as we stated earlier, the realm of change represents unreality. But the unreal in this sense must be distinguished from the non-existing. A statement like "A barren woman's son" refers to the non-existing. The proper designation of our world is that it is both real and unreal, the former because it has a positive and concrete existence and the latter because it represents an order of change. If religious reality were immutable and the world represents a changing order, what is the relation between the two?

You will recall that Augustine's solution is to say that past, present and future which are different moments

in the created world are present to God as an eternal now so that God's eternity in reality is a changeless and unending present. We have seen some of the difficulties that result from this.

Sankara's solution is more complex. To him God and the Absolute are not the same. God as personal and as an active agent represents a lower level of religious reality. The Absolute is beyond God conceived as personal and as an active agent. Personal God is the creator and sustainer of this world of our experience. The cosmos is constituted of matter, but matter by itself cannot evolve a cosmos for it is inherently unintelligent. On the other hand, if matter were conceived as an independent principle or entity, God would not be a creator of the world but only its architect or artificer and as an architect he would be subject to limitations imposed by the nature of the material he works on.

Personal God then is both the material cause and the efficient cause of the world. So-called matter is in truth an aspect of the being of God and by his will God evolves this aspect into a cosmos. He is the being of this cosmos or of the world. World is the heterisation of God. A personal God by such a relationship to the world cannot be thought of as immutable.

But if mutability, as both Augustine and Sankara seem to agree on, is a mark of the finite world and definitely not of what is ultimate, then a personal God is just as phenomenal as the world itself. Personal God according to Sankara as Radhakrishnan would put it "is the mediating principal between Brahman (the Absolute) and the world" sharing in a limited way "the nature of both."

Augustine solves the problem of time and mutability by treating them as modes of the existence of creatures. Sankara would treat time and mutability as modes of the empirically conditioned. There is a basic and fundamental difference between their respective positions. Time to Augustine is an imitation of eternity. It represents the procession of the creatures toward divine love.

To Sankara on the other hand, time and mutability

and everything subject to them, while having concrete and positive character, by the very nature of mutability they represent the realm of the unreal though not of the non-existing. The word is phenomenal and has only a pragmatic value. A personal God himself is phenomenal.

Augustine's position is dualism. Sankara's is monism. But both search for flawless perfection of the religious reality, which is natural and legitimate. But perfection that is conceived via negation, that is by merely excluding from the life of religious reality some features of the world of our experience such as change or mutability, or so excluding them on the basis of the demands of formal logic or laws of thought, is fraught with danger. Sankara, despite insisting that a personal God is utterly worthy of man's devotion, treats him nevertheless as less than the highest and views him as phenomenal. The Absolute or Brahman however, though perfect, is static. Radhakrishnan, representing the criticism of one of Sankara's intellectual adversaries of a slightly later period, characterises the Absolute of Sankara this way "Brahman (as conceived by Sankara) is a blank suggesting to us the famous mare of Orlando, which had every perfection except the one small defect of being dead". Sankara however, had the intellectual courage to be consistent with his logic.

Augustine it would seem to me, lacks this consistency. How the immutable can be conceived as having any dynamic relationship with the world of change, how an immutable God can be treated as the creator of the world or how the event of Incarnation could be justified if God is immutable are matters I do not understand. A God for whom the past and the future are an eternal now or realized present, for all practical purposes should be conceived just as static as Sankara's Brahman. But if consistency is the hobgoblin of small minds, let Augustine have his credit for his inconsistency. His place in the history of Christian thought will no doubt continue to elicit great admiration.

My purpose in writing this article is to suggest possible



alternative ways of doing Christian theology to the ways of classical theology.

I suggest that the perfection of God should be conceived as axiological. He is the perfect good. No doubt evil has got to be explained, that is another theme to be dealt with, but not in the present article. But axiology cannot be separated from ontology. The good cannot exist in a vacuum; nor is it vacuous. I suggest however, that if perfection is conceived axiologically, even though such perfection needs an *onta* as a base, that base need not determine the nature of perfection.

Thus that as a human being I am mortal need not be held up against me as a mark of imperfection of my being. Mortal nature is part of my *onta*. If God were also mortal, he would not be conceived of as God. That is the nonsensical character of the sentence "death of God" and not its implied atheism. There is nothing however, in the definition of the *onta* of God that should preclude change, especially if that *onta* is conceived in personalistic terms. On the other hand, it is contrary to the definition of what is personal if change were excluded. God as the perfect good is changeless but God as an active agent does change. That is inherent to his *onta*. Immutability and personal activity are together inconceivable.

Starting with this, let me outline in my own fashion a possible course for Christian theology. I find that the dualism which has been the characteristic stand of classical theology raises many difficulties. The otherness of God is of necessity reduced to spatio-temporal priority. The affirmation of the sovereignty of God, for the Creator must be sovereign over his creation, leads to the doctrines of pre-destination or election. At least phenomenologically this is true, as evidenced in two systems somewhat similar to each other, viz. Calvinism and Islam. "Incarnation becomes a space trip" to borrow a phrase from J. A. T. Robinson. But the alternative is not a Sankarite type of Monism where religious reality becomes almost a void.

I suggest theology that affirms the unity of the Creator and created order. St. Paul is an excellent authority

for this. And the virtue of St. Paul's position is that for the unity to exist or to be conceived there must be within that unity a plurality. To quote "For Christ is like a single body with its many limbs and organs, which many as they are, together make up one body... A body is not one single organ but many. Suppose the foot should say 'Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body', it does belong to the body none the less". God however, is not the sum total of the parts. Even as Christ remains as the head, so does he remain in control over the created order. Or to use an analogy, even as my self remains in control over my activities and the movements of my person, though inherent in that person and continuous with it, so does God. Creation is not *ex nihilo* but is the actualization of that which belongs to the very being of God and because of this character of belonging, there is the distinction between the Creator and the created.

Let me use the Doctrine of the Trinity to make the suggestion a little more clear. God the Father is the Creator—the actualizer of his own potencies. Creation is neither out of necessity nor out of need to confer his love on an object. Even as an artist creates not out of a want but out of a fullness, so does God create out of the fullness of his being and he does so continuously. Creation is an expression of his freedom. And he stands in control of it, nevertheless inviting men to be participants in his freedom. The Son is the historical disclosure and historical paradigm not only of the Father's nature but of the everlasting unity between the Creator and creature. If God did not possess humanity in himself as one of his potentials or man was not created in the image of God, Incarnation would be inconceivable. The two natures of Christ would be, to borrow a phrase once again from Robinson, "like oil and water never blending". Dualism oscillates between docetism and the denial of Incarnational reality. Incarnation is the historical paradigm that discloses the unity of the Creator and the created order. The Holy Spirit is the continuing witnessing activity of God to this paradigm and unity.

There are many themes that need to be dealt with,

such as the nature of evil, sin, salvation, etc., in the light of this model. Space does not permit me even to attempt a suggestive treatment. Let me conclude by saying that recent theology by writers like John Cobb or S. Ogden is much more akin to what I suggest rather than to classical theology. But the ontological aspects of the nature of the unity I am speaking about are not always satisfactorily dealt with by these authors. This is a task that must be taken seriously if God is not to be reduced to a uniting or unifying relation among men. We need also to develop a theology of nature and this model permits it. According to tradition, man is given mastership of all nature. It is his to exploit. He has done too good a job; only it threatens his survival. A theology of nature is possible only on the affirmation of a unity between the Creator and the created.