

Article

Arthur Prior and Augustine's Alleged Presentism

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Abstract: This article examines the influence of Augustinian thought in the development of Arthur Prior's tense logic. In particular, the article investigates Prior's use of the 11th chapter of *Confessiones* and debates whether Augustinian temporality can correctly be characterized as a form of presentism. The investigation follows two distinct paths: The first part demonstrates the significance of Augustinian thought in the development of presentism and discusses the validity of Prior's claim that this ontological doctrine "embodies the truth" behind Augustine's view of past, present, and future. This line of inquiry will show that Augustine's discussion in *Confessiones* does contain elements that could be applied in developing such a view of the ontology of time. The second part of the article, however, will highlight the dangers of applying concepts of the modern philosophical debate anachronistically when interpreting Augustine, as his view of time is then not adequately represented and often severely misunderstood. Understanding the historical roots of presentism accentuates the need for an explicit and careful definition of the concept in the contemporary debate about time.

Keywords: Augustine; A. N. Prior; presentism; *Confessiones*; time; tense logic

1. Introduction

"Praesens," the Latin word for *present*, is the present participle of "praeesse,"¹ which contains the root word "esse" (*to be*). That this is not just a linguistic accident, but reflects a deep metaphysical connection between existing and being present is an insight shared by Augustine of Hippo (354–430) and Arthur Norman Prior (1914–1969). It is well known that Augustine's treatment of temporality has been tremendously influential in philosophy, as his analysis of eternity has been in theology.² But the former is frequently articulated in terms of the modern debate between the A- and B-theories of time, which runs the risk of misconstruing what Augustine himself has to say about time. In developing his tense logic, however, Prior engaged thoroughly with ancient and medieval sources because these earlier scholars perceived things and offered insights modern logicians did not [2] (pp. 140, 152); [3] (p. 16). A specific example of this is Prior's opinion that his presentism embodied the logic in Augustine's view that the non-existing past and future must be understood in relation to the actually existing present. By doing so, he challenged the most dominant conception of time amongst his contemporary philosophers: eternalism or, as Prior calls it, "the tapestry view of time" [4] (p. 266).

This interplay between Augustine and Prior raises two questions going in opposite directions: how did Augustine influence Prior's presentism, and is it adequate from Prior's terminology to characterize Augustine as a presentist? In order to investigate the first question, I will start by explaining Prior's presentism. In doing so, the problem arises that he never gave an exact definition, but personal notes demonstrate his struggle with formulating the notion thereof. Thereafter, my treatment of Augustine will provide an analysis of the 11th book of *Confessiones*, since this, for Prior and philosophers in general, by far is his most read and applied discussion of time. Then it will be possible to investigate the actual influence Augustine had on Prior's presentism. To answer the second question, a much broader selection of Augustine's works needs to be taken into account. After



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treating these, it will be possible to debate if and in what way Augustine's ontology of time can be characterized as presentism. Working through these steps will provide us with a nuanced view of both the theological and philosophical roots of presentism, which is not only historically interesting but also relevant to the current debate about the ontology of time since there are reasons why presentism has come to include a wide spectrum of divergent views. It also exemplifies why working with the history of ideas has the potential to change the current debate about time and tense.

2. From Augustine to Prior

2.1. Prior's Presentism

One of the reasons why contemporary presentism contains the above mentioned plurality is Prior's lack of a precise definition. This has resulted in Prior's own view being evaluated differently and thus offers considerable leeway in the interpretation of his work. Curtin and Robson, for example, say that "Prior was the first to develop presentism in detail" [5] (p. 95), while Ingram and Tallant write "we think that it's less obvious that Prior's complete view on time is presentism" [6]. It should be specified what is lacking in Prior's treatments of presentism. It is clear that only the present exists, that is, only present things and entities. This, likewise, is held by the current versions of presentism. But as a philosophical doctrine, any proper account of presentism needs to explain what this implies for the truth of past and future propositions. About this, Prior is fairly imprecise, and it is this feature that has resulted in the contemporary divergence of views.³ The influence of Prior on presentism, however, cannot be doubted (cf. [8] (p. 295); [9] (p. 167); [10] (p. 357)). Without a clear definition, later interpretations of the meaning of Priorian presentism must be derived from his entire work on tense logic. For Prior, there is a connection between presentness and truth. At the early stages of developing his tense logic, he introduces the operators *P* (it has been the case that) and *F* (it will be the case that). "The function of the operator *F*, in short, is that of forming a future-tense statement from the corresponding present-tense one, and the future-tense statement is not about the present-tense one, but is about whatever the present-tense statement is about. The same remarks apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to the operator 'It has been the case that'" [11] (pp. 8–9).

In contrast to the tenseless logic of W. V. O. Quine and J. J. C. Smart, Prior asserts that there is a logical connection between tenses and the truth value of propositions. "For example, it was not the case 100 years ago that I existed; there were, I would contend, no facts about me then—not even this fact of there being no facts about me at that time; though it is *now* a fact that there were no facts about me then" [11] (p. 34); cf. [4] (p. 266). From the fact that a certain event is now taking place, it follows that this event will have been, but not that it was going to be. That it is possible to reflect logically on tense-distinctions and that the same proposition can be true at one time and false at another is not a new idea but rather insights known to both ancient and medieval logicians [11] (p. 104); [2] (p. 216).

From the time of his John Locke lectures in 1955–1956 and the publication of these in *Time and Modality* (1957) to the ten-year-later sequel *Past, Present and Future* (1967), many philosophers joined Prior in working on tense logic. To the weak operators *P* and *F*, Prior added two strong operators *H* (it has always been the case that) and *G* (it will always be the case that). All of these are understood from the present, and thus presentism can be understood as a local perspective contra the global perspective of eternalism. Propositions without temporal operators are always present-tense.

While a lot of *Past, Present and Future* is devoted to discussing the present, the most radical statements about the ontology of time are found in Prior's third book on the subject, *Papers on Time and Tense*, published in 1968—a year before his untimely death—and in other posthumously published writings: "So far, then, as I have anything that you could call a philosophical creed, its first article is this: I believe in the reality of the distinction between past, present, and future. I believe that what we see as a progress of events, *a coming to pass* of one thing after another, and not just a timeless tapestry with everything stuck there for good and all." [4] (p. 265); cf. [12] (pp. 133, 138–139). Moving from a language

of space-time to a language of substances,⁴ it was possible to criticize tenseless property descriptions such as “being green in August” ascribed to a leaf. Instead “having been green in August” is a property that attaches to the leaf *now*; that is, formerly green since “in August” is a sort of “formerly” [13] (p. 81). In *Time and Modality*, Prior argues that just as there were no facts about him before his existence there would be none after his death [11] (p. 31), but this he revised 2 years later since a deceased person is still and will always be a subject of predicates. These facts, he insists, are not tenseless but present and abiding [13] (pp. 83–84). In fact, we have no need to know the date to have time references included in our utterances. Prior’s famous “Thank goodness that’s over” argument⁵ demonstrates this point, since according to him a tenseless copula could never convey what is meant by this. As he says, it certainly “. . . does not mean ‘Thank goodness the conclusion of that thing is contemporaneous with this utterance’. Why should anyone thank goodness for that?” [13] (p. 84). This demonstrates that there is something fundamental and basic about the present.

When uttering a proposition, adding “now” is redundant: there is no difference between saying “it is *now* raining” and just plain “it is raining”. Likewise, “it is *now* the case that I have been walking” and “I have been walking” are one and the same proposition. This is the motivation for Prior introducing Pp (it has been the case that p) and Fp (it will be the case that p) in his symbolic system without an analogous symbol for “it is *now* the case that p ”, since this is just the plain p .⁶ “Has been present” is just “has been”, and “will be present” is, likewise, just “will be”. He calls this the redundancy theory of the present tense [15] (p. 171). “The *presentness* of an event, we may say, is simply the *occurrence* of the event, and that is simply the event itself”⁷ [15] (p. 225).

Prior’s most explicit formulation of presentism was written in the year of his death (1969) and published a year later. It was originally a speech held at an interdisciplinary forum, thus not containing his usual amount of technical formal logic. Since its publication, “The Notion of the Present” has become a standard paper in defining presentism. The present and the real, according to Prior, “. . . are closely connected; indeed in my view they are one and the same concept, and the present simply *is* the real considered in relation to two particular species of unreality, namely the past and the future”⁸ [16] (p. 129). There is a stark difference between the real and forms of unreality that should not be minimized. “‘Really’, ‘actually’, ‘in fact’, ‘in the real world’ are strictly *redundant* expressions—that, and not any prejudice or provincialism, is their specialness” [16] (p. 130). To say that I am writing needs no qualifying prefix like “presently” or “now”. In this way, the reality of the present and anything else both consist in not requiring qualifications of these sorts. Likewise, “the presentness of an event *is* just the event” [16] (p. 131), and “what ‘is the case at the present instant’ is simply what is the case” [15] (p. 245). There is a sort of self-reference in these quotes: when determining what is the case, it is necessary to grasp the present instant which contains the truth. The present is constantly shifting and is, thus, not a permanent thing, but that these qualifying prefixes are superfluous points to the fact that the present is integrated in a deep and profound way in our syntax. And this is paramount for the establishment of tense logic.

That the past and future are equated with unreality is, indeed, a radical doctrine, which Prior was aware of. At the Bodleian Library in Oxford, the original article has been preserved containing notes Prior had written in the margin from which David Jakobsen has demonstrated that Prior himself struggled with the definition [17] (p. 37). These notes introduce two other attempts to define presentism [17] (p. 42) as follows:

- “The present simply is the real considered in relation to a particular.”
- “The present simply is the real considered with a particular kind of contrasting unreality in mind, namely the pa[st].”

It seems that Prior’s concern is to confirm something about the present without confirming too much about the past and future. This is important for understanding the varying views in the current debate since how we talk about non-present entities must be dealt with for the position to be defensible. Because Prior was less specific on this issue, divergent views have resulted. For Prior, the past and future are needed to signify the

present similar to how the real can be signified by the merely possible. That is, having to define what “being present” means, we need to relate it to the past and future. While the present is clearly fundamental for Prior, he is here making a contrastive point: To identify the present it must be distinguished from the past and the future. “He therefore has to speak about the past and the future as being on the ontological level of *considerations*, while at the same time describing how such considerations are relevant in speaking about the relation between past, present and future” [17] (p. 42). Thus, “considered in relation to” is a vital element in Prior’s tentative definition. It is not that the real (present) stands in a literal relation to the unreal (past and future). Still, it is ontologically speaking similar to the relation between what is and what could have been or even imagined. This also demonstrates the close connection between tense and modal logic. In “Worlds, Times and Selves”, Prior abridges what “is the case at some instant” (has been or will be the case) to the modal operator \diamond [15] (p. 245). In contrast, “the present instant” is a fundamental and rich term implying what is true and the case.

While the above discussion demonstrates how Prior grappled with a precise definition of presentism and offers a glimpse of the interpretive struggles of successive generations of scholars, we must, for the purpose of this paper, attempt to define Priorian presentism in the following way: The present is fundamental and conveys what is true, real, and the case, thereby being a local perspective, which, contrary to the past and future, need no qualifying prefix like “now” or “presently”. While this may be a fair representation of Prior’s definition, it is, again, important to note that it is not very informative about our understanding of non-present times. Thus, it may suffice for a definition of presentism, but not a doctrine thereof. Because of this, presentists have since opted for different strategies when responding to the most notorious problems confronting the view. Prior’s work on tense logic and presentism clearly offers valuable insights into the nature of presentness and its relation to truth, but how does it relate to the Augustinian conception of time? In order to confront that question, we must now turn to a detailed analysis of the 11th book of *Confessiones*.

2.2. The 11th Book of *Confessiones*

After declaring that eternity belongs to God, Augustine, in typical Augustinian fashion, starts Book XI⁹ by asking questions hoping to involve both himself and the reader in seeking God emotionally and intellectually. These he addresses to God in prayer [19] (XI, 2.3) and in the midst of asking God for truth (*veritas*) and understanding (*intellego*), Augustine confesses his sin [19] (XI, 3.5) signifying that his epistemology is thoroughly based in a theological framework. Discussing the metaphysics of time happens within a framework of prayer: exaltation, confession, and asking for insight.

Antecedent to creation, what existed did not “change and diversify”¹⁰ and compared to God the created can be said not even to exist (*nec sunt*) [19] (XI, 4.6). In eternity “all is present”,¹¹ while “no true portion of time is altogether present”¹² [19] (XI, 11.13); cf. [20] (I, 4), and what is completely permanent cannot be temporal. While time and eternity are not comparable¹³ to Augustine, reflecting on eternity has a logical priority in his worldview.¹⁴ Thus, only after the first 13 chapters of Book XI are we led to his famous question “What, then, is time?”¹⁵ His reply¹⁶ can be found in the introduction of most books about the metaphysics of time. Without the present, nothing would exist. But the past and future demand further explanation since the former is no more while the latter is not yet.¹⁷ However, the present would not be a genuine time if it did not turn into past, since then it would be eternity. Thus, we can only speak of time as real because of its tendency to non-existence [19] (XI, 14.17).

The question now arises of how we can speak of the duration of a certain period of time as either long or short when the past is no more and the future is not yet. While the past has been long we ought to say that “it was long as present time”¹⁸ [19] (XI, 15.18). This, however, leads Augustine to question how the present can be extensive. A decade cannot be present since if we were in the third year the first two would be past while the last seven

would be future. But neither can the 12 months be present, neither the whole day, hour, minute, second, or nanosecond. If we could imagine a time so small that it was impossible to divide it into smaller parts, this would be the only thing we rightly could call present. It would have no extension and, thus, quickly flee from future to past. “For if it is extended it is divided into past and future, but the present has no interval”¹⁹ [19] (XI, 15.20). But in practice we still experience temporal distances, compare durations, measure, and call some longer, others shorter. Because we cannot measure that “which is not”,²⁰ that is, the past and future, we can only measure time while it flows and is experienced [19] (XI, 16.21). Notice the caution of Augustine: “I seek, father, I do not assert”²¹ [19], (XI, 17.22). He does not draw conclusions or affirm his own reasoning. He asks questions, addresses God²² in prayer, asking him for guidance. He himself finds it strange that only the present exists. It is like the future “proceeds from somewhere concealed,”²³ becomes present, and then immediately, the present hides when becoming past [19] (XI, 17.22). But if the future can be foreseen and the past recollected, they must exist somewhere. The question is where (ubi) they are.

Though Augustine does not know this, he insists that wherever they are they must be there as present [19] (XI, 18.23), since his logic of the ontological status of the past and future still applies. His childhood, for example, is in the past which no longer exists. But presently he has pictures (imagines) thereof that he can revive in his memory.²⁴ Whether there are such pictures regarding the future, Augustine does not know, but future things can be predicted from present circumstances. Since it cannot be correctly stated that past, present, and future are the three tenses, the following is more correct: “There are three times; the present concerning the past, the present concerning the present, [and] the present concerning the future”²⁵ [19] (XI, 20.26). Augustine cannot see (video) these three anywhere else than in the soul and calls them memory (memoria), consideration (contuitus), and expectation (expectatio).²⁶ It is still all right to use “past” and “future” in common speech as long as we understand that they do not really exist [19] (XI, 20.26).

The problem of how we measure time still remains.²⁷ How can we measure the present time if it has no extension? Time comes from the future and flows through the present into the past: “Hence from that which is not yet, through that which lacks extension, into that which is no more”²⁸ [19] (XI, 21.27). Augustine calls it a “very entangled riddle”²⁹ and confesses his ignorance (imperitia) to God [19] (XI, 22.28). He does not know (ignorare) what time is and, therefore, does not know (nescio) what it is that he measures. “Thence it seems to me that there is no other time than distension: but of what thing I know not, and it is surprising if not in one’s own soul”³⁰ [19] (XI, 26.33). We can neither measure the past, present, or future, nor that which has no beginning and end, and yet we still measure time. It must then be in one’s soul/consciousness/mind (animus) that time is measured. It cannot be measured before or when it has passed, but as it passes. When singing a song, our consciousness can compare the length of the verse to the chorus and remember the parts that have been sung while being aware of what comes next—all of this happening while singing the present part [19] (XI, 27–28). The further along one gets in singing, the expectation is shortened while the memory is prolonged. Being aware of the whole song is the big picture just like the present is related to the whole of life or even all of history.³¹ That God is before (ante) all times as the creator of them [19] (XI, 30.40) is not a temporal antecedence. Neither time nor creation is eternal, thus God’s eternity is understood by Augustine as something categorically different from sempiternity.

A neat summary of Augustine’s view of time in *Confessiones*’ 11th book is not feasible, as he does not know what it is. But a summary can be given about how Augustine thinks about it. The present is non-extensive, while the past and future are non-existing. This is similar to Prior’s description of the present as a razor-thin moment and the unreality of the past and future. Augustine’s long discussion of measuring time demonstrates that while a subjective dimension (the soul) is used to explain how this could be done, a belief is also present in our *prima facie* experience of temporality. This common-sense attitude is akin to Prior, who thought logic could be applied directly to language and reality. Though

not every aspect of reality could be formalized, Prior went further than Augustine in arguing that temporality could. Finally, it should be noted that while the past and future do not exist in comparison to the present, according to Augustine, he also says that neither does creation compare to God. This insight provides us with a hint, to be expanded on later, of how accurately the label “presentism” applies to his ontology of time. From the other similarities, however, it is now possible to investigate historically how Prior utilized Augustine’s reflections on temporality in developing a presentist ontology.

2.3. Prior’s Utilization of Augustine

In 1931, at the age of 16, Prior wrote three essays.³² In *Essay Scientific* [27], Prior discusses Einstein’s view of the world’s beginning and objects to it. He then poses the Manichaeic question and goes on to quote the following passage from *Confessiones*: “What, then, is Time? The past is not, the future is not, the present—who can tell what it is, unless it be that which has no duration between the two nonentities? There is no such thing as ‘a long time’, or ‘a short time’, for there are no such thing as the past and the future. They have no existence, except in the soul” [27] (p. 259). This, however, is not an actual quote from *Confessiones*, but a rather imprecise summary of a larger passage. I call it imprecise as it stresses the subjective side of Augustine’s argumentation without reference to neither his belief in common sense experience nor his admission that he does not know what time actually is. Prior’s only application of it is saying that the relativist (that is, the Einsteinian space-time cosmologist) must argue in a similar fashion. It does, however, demonstrate that the ideas from *Confessiones* impacted Prior’s thinking about time at an early age. Thus, the very first textual evidence we have of Prior contrasting the non-existing past and future to the actually existing present occurs in direct reference to Augustine.

Focussing now on where Prior’s tense logic actually began, the language of Augustine is evident in *Time and Modality*, although the debt is never acknowledged directly. Demonstrating the superfluousness of the present-tense operator S (it is the case that), Prior concludes: “the *presence of the presence* of an event or state is simultaneous with the *presence* of that event or state, and that in turn is simultaneous with the event or state itself” [11] (p. 10). If we handle this symbolically, it can be seen that the redundancy theory applies: $SSp = Sp = p$. As Augustine speaks of “the present concerning the past” and “the present concerning the future” [19] (XI, 20.26), Prior uses similar language. He argues that the *presence of the futurity* or the *futurity of the presence* of an event is simultaneous with the *futurity* of the event itself ($FSp = SFp = Fp$). Mutatis mutandis, the *presence of the pastness* or the *pastness of the presence* of an event is simultaneous with the *pastness* of the event itself ($PSp = SPp = Pp$). This simply means that saying “Today, it is five years ago that this happened” and “Five years ago, this event was happening” implies the same content. According to Prior, it is the propositions themselves that are tensed.

These views of the nature of time and language remained a major preoccupation of Prior’s body of work. In the more refined later work, *Past, Present and Future*, Prior discusses the tense-logical laws proposed by J. N. Findlay in “Time: A treatment of some puzzles” [28].³³ In the course of his argument, Prior points to an affinity between Findlay’s mode of thought and Augustine’s, as he claims that there is a “hint of these laws” in *Confessiones*.³⁴ Prior then goes on to summarize Augustine’s view the following way: “‘ x future’, in fact, ‘= (x present) future’” [3] (p. 9). What he means by this is that if something is said to be future, it will not be future *when* it is, but present. Prior’s most thorough application of Augustinian temporality, however, is found in his 1962 article, “Changes in Events and Changes in Things”, in which he discusses the flow and passage of time³⁵ [15] (p. 7). One of the main points is that events do not change but happen. It is things that change which we then describe events having occurred. If an apple changes color by receiving sunlight, it is the apple, the thing, that has changed. Before introducing Augustine into the discussion, Prior speaks of changes “. . . which go on in the event *while it is occurring*” [15], (p. 9). Similarly, Augustine speaks of time being measured presently (*praesens*) as it passes [19] (XI, 27.36). It is existing things that change, but changes can also

change since an event can become further and further past [15] (p. 9). The question is, then, how can an event become further past while not existing?

What goes on for any length of time will have a present phase as well as future and past ones. In order to reflect on this, Prior uses Augustine's notion of a "long time" and briefly summarizes some points from [19] (XI, 15–26) before turning to his constructive work [15] (p. 11). According to Prior, most metaphysical problems require talking about grammar. Verbs are used to construct sentences out of names, and contrary to verbs, adverbs can be used to construct sentences out of sentences. Based on this, Prior suggests the following: "putting a verb into the past or future tense is exactly the same sort of thing as adding an adverb to the sentence" [15] (p. 13). This means that "I *was* drinking coffee" and "I am *allegedly* drinking coffee" are related to "I am drinking coffee" in the same way. That we form the past tense by modifying the present tense is merely a historical coincidence that could just as well have been done by tacking on an adverb. The past and future tense could be formed by prefixing sentences with "it was the case that" or "it will be the case that". These grammatical considerations lead Prior to the subsequent conclusion [15] (pp. 13–14):

The construction I am sketching embodies the truth behind Augustine's suggestion of the 'secret place' where past and future times 'are', and his insistence that wherever they are, they are not there as past or future but as present. The past is not the present but it *is* the past present, and the future is not the present but it *is* the future present.

The adverbial character of the past and future tense can be seen in the construction of complicated sentences out of simple ones: "It will be the case in seven minutes that it was the case two hours ago that I am drinking coffee". If something was formerly the case but no longer, a change has occurred, which can be captured by these "tense-adverbs", as Prior calls them [15] (p. 14). Still, these sentences are not about words but real things—me and my coffee! A sentence may seem to be about (changes in) an event but fundamentally it really is about (changes in) a thing. And this applies both to changes of occurring events and examples like events receding further into the past [15] (p. 16), though the latter demands more of an explanation [15] (pp. 16–19). Taking his cue from Augustine's discussion of a "long time", Prior uses grammar to argue that a presentist ontology logically follows. Augustine demonstrated the present moment as razor-thin and non-extended by focusing on the human experience of reality. Prior's focus on logic and language reveals the present as something fundamental in which our past and future tense statements are grounded. A past-tense fact, for example, is true by being abiding from moment to moment, while it can be explained how it was not a fact before the given change actually occurred in the thing. In this way, a proposition about the past can be true by abiding from moment to moment even though the moment when it happened no longer exists.

Thus, Augustine inspired the development of the presentist ontology of tense logic, and presentism has both philosophical and theological roots. But the question remains whether he would agree that presentism "embodies the truth" behind his reflections on temporality. Having moved from Augustine to Prior, it will now be necessary to move in the opposite direction to investigate the second question: whether Augustine's view of time can adequately be labeled presentism. To reach a satisfactorily nuanced conclusion on this question requires an in-depth assessment of a much wider selection of Augustine's body of work.

3. From Prior to Augustine

3.1. Augustinian Temporality in Wider Context

In philosophical scholarship, [19] XI—or even just the second part—is at times read in isolation which is problematic. As I will argue, this does not present an accurate view of Augustine's conception of time and leads to fallacious interpretations. Richard M. Gale, in his collection of essays, publishes only [19] (XI, 10–31), and concludes that Augustine's analysis "suffers from circularity" and that "Time is essentially subjective and psychological" [31], (p. 5). Similarly, Sean E. Power utilizes nothing beyond *Confessiones* XI

and concludes: “Augustine decides that time cannot be in [sic.] the world. It must only be in the mind. It must be *mind-dependent*” [32], (p. 151). These erroneous conclusions emphasize the need to interpret Book XI in the context of a broader reading of the Augustinian corpus.³⁶ As I will demonstrate, an adequate representation of Augustine requires understanding temporality in relation to divine eternity, creation, and the human condition.

3.2. On Divine Eternity

For Augustine, God is “the most hidden and the most immediate . . . the immutable moving everything”³⁷ [19] (I, 4.4). All temporal things have their origin in this eternal cause, thus it made sense for Augustine to reflect on eternity before time due to its logical priority. Before creation, there was properly speaking no “before,” and everything is done by God today (*hodie*) including events way past and future for us [19] (I, 6.9–10). Being eternal means being “entirely everywhere”³⁸ [19] (III, 7.12), and being before (*ante*) all times can also be described as being above (*supra*) all times [19] (VII, 9.14). Notice that Augustine often speaks of time in plural due to its fickle nature, while eternity, on the contrary, is singular. According to him, even if infinite time meant any alteration of God’s substance it would not be true eternity [34] (VIII, 19.38); [23] (19). God does not partake in eternity—he is not merely eternal but *is* eternity³⁹ [35] (V, 10.11). While there can be no accidents (*accidens*) in God (*Trin.* V, 4.5) there are, however, predicates attributed to him relatively in time. Without implying any change in his substance, he, for example, begins to be the Father of the sinner regenerated by grace⁴⁰ [35] (V, 16.17). Both past and future, from our point of view, are present to God’s knowledge—all is grasped simultaneously⁴¹. When times are spoken of in relation to God, it is applied through analogy and likeness (*similitudo*) [35] (V, 8.9).

Augustine’s preferred language in [19] is to describe God as being above time instead of outside of it: “rising above the whole of past and future times”⁴² [19] (XII, 28.38). Thereafter, he applies different expressions when articulating God’s eternity: “whole everywhere, eternal without time”⁴³ [35] (V, 1.2), “without any time”⁴⁴ [35] (II, 5.9), and “hidden eternity ever present”⁴⁵ [35] (II, 5.10). The often used expression “*sine tempora*” cf. [35] (II, 5.9) demonstrates how Augustine in his later writings understands eternity more as being timeless than “above” time. This shift is likely due to being less dependent on a Neo-platonic framework.⁴⁶ Augustine says “my God is present everywhere, whole everywhere”⁴⁷ [36] (I, 30, cf. VII, 30), that is, while not being confined by either time or space God is present to us both spatially and temporally. In conclusion, God, and nothing else, is eternity.⁴⁸

3.3. On Creation

In the course of his life, Augustine wrote three commentaries on The Book of Genesis,⁴⁹ or, more specifically, its first three chapters. In the first two commentaries, Augustine is focused on addressing the Manichees from whom he had distanced himself through Neo-platonic inspiration. It was the Manichees who asked the question also found in *Confessiones* about what God was doing before he created, to which Augustine answers: “before the beginning there was no time”⁵⁰ [46] (I, 2.3). Time was created simultaneously with the time-bound creation (*creaturis temporalibus*) that is the visible creation [46] (II, 3.4). Heaven and earth are described as being created outside of time in their formless, invisible, and unassembled state, though not equally eternal with God [19] (XII, 12.15) because of it having a beginning [19] (XII, 15.19). Due to the limitations of our human language, however, we are only able to speak of it as being preceding in time ([19], XII, 29.40). In platonic fashion, Augustine calls this heaven “an intellectual heaven”⁵¹ from which the material universe was formed [19] (XII, 13.16). All causes were made with potentiality and could from there evolve through intervals of time in which God is still creating [34] (V, 23.45): “unrolled in time from those primordial envelopes”⁵² [34] (VI, 6.9). While things can precede each other in either time or causes, everything created is preceded by divine eternity [34] (VI, 8.13).

Augustine is quite explicit about the interior connection between creation, time, motion, and change: “that there is no time without movement or change”⁵³ [36] (XI, 6). After explaining how this is contrasted with eternity, he continues:

It is far from doubt that the world was not created *in time* but *with time*. For what happens in time happens before one time and after another, afterward it is past and beforehand it is future. But there could be no past because there was no creation whose motion and change were acted upon. On the contrary, the world was made *with time* if, in its creation, motion and change were made.⁵⁴

But again, having knowledge of the created is inferior to having knowledge of the Creator. Augustine compares the former to the twilight of the evening on the days of creation and the latter with the bright, shining morning [36] (XI, 8). Our knowledge has “three tenses,”⁵⁵ and, under the condition of time, events past and future can be said not to exist (non sint) compared to the present⁵⁶ [36] (XI, 21). For God, however, all tenses are stable in an eternal present. Augustine uses “temporale” in association with “infirmum”, the superlative degree of “low” [36] (XV, 22), where God’s discourse is more elevated (sublimior) persisting in eternity [36] (XVI, 6). Speaking of existence in degrees is not problematic for Augustine.⁵⁷ When God created, time was also created as a real objective creation—not just psychologically or subjectively—and time is a creation connected with movement and change.

3.4. On the Human Condition

Aside from the middle part of *Confessiones* XI, Augustine’s voluminous writings do not devote much attention to the metaphysics of time but only to the temporal in relation to the eternal. In Neo-platonic fashion, being engrossed in the temporal reality presses the soul further downwards, while contemplating eternity enables it to be lifted upwards⁵⁸ [35] (IV, 12.15). Human knowledge is achieved through exterior or interior sensation which always happens in the present (praesentia); that is “before the senses” (prae sensibus) [36] (XI, 3). Faith is able to distinguish between temporal and eternal things but is itself temporal while oriented to attain the eternal [35] (1.3); [36] (X, 14). God also gives temporal order to the events of history, the larger picture of which is hidden from our understanding [36] (IV, 33). Time is, thus, not only an objective part of creation but of history as well. As creator, God also orders existence, motions, beginnings, and endings [36] (VII, 30), thus time is not only created *from nothing* but is also involved in God’s ongoing creation.⁵⁹ Therefore, it is not feasible to interpret Augustine as having a purely subjective view of time.

Augustine also speaks of time in an existential manner in which human beings from the birth of their bodies are involved in a process that inevitably leads to death. All material and temporal life subject to change is always already one day closer to death and even nearer tomorrow. Our remaining time decreases in a constant march, from which there is no pause, to our impending last breath [36] (XIII, 10). For all of us, this happens at the same speed (velocitas). Augustine thus presupposes an objective or at least intersubjective rate of time. He compares the present moment with the word “dying”. Nobody can really be said to be dying. Either a person is dead or still alive. In the same way, the present has no succession or interval since there is no space⁶⁰ in which the future changes into the past [36] (XIII, 11.1). But in the present, death is still a reality since it would otherwise be meaningless to speak of before and after death. Both are a reality “. . . that cannot be disentangled by any utterance nor avoided by any reason”⁶¹ [36], (XIII, 11.1). Time is real though we have trouble conceptualizing it. We, therefore, speak of time in relation to nature and the movement of celestial bodies, history, and inner human life.

From this broader corpus containing Augustine’s later and more mature works, there appears to be little if any room for a subjective account of time. If this is the case, there seems to be at least a tension between this and the 11th book of *Confessiones*. While I argued that time in the latter is not presented as purely subjective or psychological, Augustine’s discussion of time as a distention of the mind, and the past and future as memory and expectation at the very least has a subjective flavor. Though we have noted

certain developments in Augustine's thinking on the issue, I think a consistent reading between *Confessiones* XI and his broader writings can be presented: the world is created with time, and our common sense view of history is correct. In this way, Augustine believes in time as an objective and mind-independent reality, though he ultimately does not know what time is. As humans, we only ever experience the present, since we cannot actually live in the past or the future. This severely limits what we can prove. The soul, consciousness, or mind (*animus*), however, is able to measure time in practice while events are occurring. Though it is beyond proof, this subjective experience strongly indicates how objective reality is. The present is something fundamental and unique, but the subjective dimension in Augustine's discussion does not make time subjective, though it does make objective time something that we ultimately have to believe in. The result of his investigations is not a syllogism nor does he even summarize his conclusions in *Confessiones* XI. However, his analysis treats time as something ontologically real being a part of the created order.

3.5. Augustine's Proto-Presentism

Based on the observations at hand, it is certainly clear that the notion of the present plays an important role for both thinkers. But how similar are Augustine and Prior on closer examination? As it turns out, there are vast differences both in method and ontology. While Augustine really does seek to understand the nature of time, he does so within a theological holistic framework where every theme is involved in seeking God. This process is to some extent question-asking that cannot be summed up in a conclusion and, thus, has an aporetic taste. Prior's epistemology is different. Though he does not claim that all of existence can be formalized, we should formalize as much as we can, time being one of them. This analytical, or, as he would prefer, grammaticist approach applies more neatly defined concepts than Augustine. Though Augustine clearly has great analytical ability, the modern analytical approach would be too reductionistic for his overall view of human knowledge and its goal. Given the great span of years that separate Augustine from Prior, it is hardly surprising that they differ methodologically. That being said, this distinction in methodology is too important not to be reiterated, since, as I have argued, neglecting Augustine's worldview and general way of thinking frequently leads to misinterpretation.

The concept of eternity is a clear example of different views on the scope and limit of human knowledge. For Augustine, God is eternity which by definition is something the human intellect could never grasp.⁶² We ought to pursue growing in understanding but would never reach a complete picture when it comes to the very nature of the divine. Again, his terminology is not analytically satisfactory describing divinity as both above (*supra*) and without (*sine*) time. Augustine distinguishes between the way God and human beings know; the former being all-knowing in an eternal now, the latter only knowing in time. Prior would never make such a distinction. Prior defines omniscience as "for every *p*, if *p* then God knows that *p*" [15] (p. 40) and asks whether the verb "knows" should be understood as present tense or tenseless. If God's knowledge is tenseless, it is restricted to timeless truths—if any such exists. In fact, if tensed truths exist and we ask what God knows *now* the answer would be nothing. Thus omniscience should be defined in the following way: "It is, always has been, and always will be the case that for all *p*, if *p* then God knows that *p*" [15], (p. 43). Contrary to Augustine, there is no in-between or categorically different way of knowing for God in Prior's more stringent analytical approach. "I simply cannot see how the presentness, pastness or futurity of any state of affairs can be in any way relative to the *persons to whom* this state of affairs is known" [15] (p. 57). That being said, the differences should not be exaggerated as if we cannot speak across the divide. Both Augustine and Prior sincerely want to know what time is and both apply logic as well as language and common sense experience in articulating it. The Polish notation system of Łukasiewicz may not have been part of Augustine's toolbox, but he was certainly analytical in his discussion. Indeed, for Prior, formalizing Augustine's text was a fairly straightforward endeavor. Certain subjects (like formalizing eternity) would be too much for human capacity, according to Augustine, but he would still seek to know all

that he could. While the theistic presentist may wish to consider how straightforward talk about the ontology of time carries over into talk about divine eternity, this point can be sidestepped by presentism in general.

This leads us to another difference that will settle the question of Augustine's alleged presentism: the ontology of time. While Augustine does speak of the non-existence of time, his (Neo-Platonic) degreed ontology should be kept in mind where temporality exists in a lower degree than eternity, past and future events are said not to exist (non sint) under the condition of time, and creation is said not to exist (nec sunt) compared to God. In sum, Augustine does not fit neatly into modern categories like eternalism, the growing block view, or presentism. While Prior at times considers a three-valued logic [11], (pp. 86–93); [2] (pp. 230–240); [3] (pp. 135–136), existence is not a matter of perspective ([4], p. 268) and neither relative nor degreed. Something exists or does not exist—there is no in-between. This is ultimately what separates Augustine from Prior: Even though Augustine employs similar language when he says the present exists in contrast to the past and future, his view cannot be characterized as presentism in accordance with the various definitions of Prior. His ontology is different and, thus, he would not agree that Prior's construction "... embodies the truth behind ... the 'secret place' where past and future times 'are'" [15] (p. 13). In my view, however, *Confessiones* XI does contain a sort of proto-presentism due to its stress on the present as basic, the present as connected with existence, and the past and future as grounded in the present. But if one seeks to understand what Augustine meant it must be viewed in relation to his historical context and larger pursuit. Prior's inspiration and development of Augustine's view is, of course, still a legitimate academic endeavor.

While this article mainly seeks to understand the theological and philosophical roots of presentism, the historical approach contributes more to the current debate than simply warning about misinterpreting Augustinian temporality. Examining Priorian presentism clearly demonstrates why contemporary presentism "has come to include a wide spectrum of divergent views". A stronger awareness of the historical roots of Prior's line of thinking should lead modern philosophers to carefully and explicitly articulate what is implied by "presentism" whenever the view is defended or attacked. Indeed, the name "analytic philosophy" demands this. While defining presentism is fairly straightforward, the implications this has of non-present times and how the truths of these are interpreted is what demands an explanation, since this is where the debate gets problematic and relevant. Finally, the invention of tense logic is proof that a thorough engagement with history may change the current philosophical debates radically.

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Notes

- ¹ Literally "to be before", though it also contains the meaning "to preside over".
- ² "Augustine's thinking [about eternity] was the core that determined the broad outlines of all that later medieval philosophical theology made of the concept of God" [1] (p. 73).
- ³ Examples of these are primitivist, reductive, and ersatz presentism (cf. [7], pp. 47–61; [5], pp. 95–101).
- ⁴ This was an important insight of N. L. Wilson contributing to being logically rigorous about the way we commonly speak of enduring and changing individuals, though he does so without using tenses: "Wilson, in short, has indeed brought us out of Egypt; but as yet has us still wandering about the Sinai Peninsula" [13] (p. 78).
- ⁵ The example of uttering this after being drilled by a dentist was already used in 1938 by C.D. Broad in his second volume of *An Examination of McTaggart's Philosophy* [14] (p. 118).

6 Thus, $PnFnp$ is interchangeable with “ p now” i.e., the plain p , where n stands for time-units [13] (p. 66). Prior preferred the Polish notation of Łukasiewicz to the that of Russell and Whitehead’s *Principia Mathematica* (cf. [2], pp. v, 3–9). Prior would later reconsider whether “now” is always redundant [15] (pp. 171–193); [7] (pp. 42–43 n 2).

7 At the end of his article “Egocentric Logic”, Prior formalizes his position [15] (pp. 237–240).

8 Prior discusses the “wait-and-seeishness” character of certain statements regarding the future (cf. [13], pp. 101–108).

9 Thomas Clemmons has provided a stellar overview of Augustine’s earlier discussions on the subject [18] (pp. 3–16).

10 “mutari atque variari”.

11 “totum esse praesens”.

12 “nullum vero tempus totum esse praesens”.

13 “What is said overall in Conf. XI on the analysis of time does not solve the problem of the connection between eternity and time; overall, as in the first line, Augustine emphasizes the distance” [21] (p. 289).

14 Plotinus, likewise, begins with defining eternity before time [22] (III, 7.1–2). Interestingly, Augustine mentions neither Plato, Aristotle, Sextus Empiricus, Plotinus, nor Seneca in [19], XI.

15 “Quid est ergo tempus?”.

16 “Si nemo ex me quaerat, scio; si quaerenti explicare vellim, nescio” [19] (XI, 14.17).

17 Cf. [23], 17.

18 “Longum fuit illud praesens tempus”.

19 “Nam si extenditur, diuiditur in praeteritum et futurum: praesens autem nullum habet spatium”.

20 “quod non est”.

21 “Quaero, pater, non affirmo”.

22 At times, he addresses the human soul (e.g., [19] (XI, 15.19)).

23 “ex aliquo procedit occulto”.

24 Lenka Karfíková characterizes *Confessiones* as a “work of memory” capturing personal identity through narration [24] (p. 175). Plato speaks about all learning being a process of recollection [25] (81d–82a), and Augustine was familiar with the paradox of only being able to seek what we partially already know [19] (X, 18.27–19.28).

25 “tempora sunt tria, praesens de praeteritis, praesens de praesentibus, praesens de futuris”.

26 Cicero distinguishes between memoria, intelligentia, and providentia [21] (p. 350).

27 “It implies no conflict between *lived time* and *measured time*” [21] (p. 347).

28 “Ex illo ergo, quod nondum est, per illud, quod spatio caret, in illud, quod iam non est”.

29 “implicatissimum aenigma”.

30 “Inde mihi visum est nihil esse aliud tempus quam distentionem: sed cuius rei, nescio, et mirum, si non ipsius animi”.

31 “Time, then, according to Augustine, is the time of the observed thing (there would be no time without passing things), but only in the form of an impression that a passing thing leaves in the soul. The impression is distension of the soul itself—that is, distension of its attention into a memory and an expectation” [24] (p. 187).

32 In *Essays Religious*, Prior discusses Augustine’s view of predestination [26] (pp. 175–176, 224).

33 Prior credits Findlay with being “In a sense the founding father of modern tense-logic” [3] (p. 1) and for teaching him “almost all that I know of either Logic or Ethics” [29] (p. xi). Some debate has revolved around the question of why Prior would credit Findlay as the founder when Prior’s reason for doing so seemingly rests on a small footnote of Findlay’s article. David Jakobsen demonstrates that there is more to this story than a single reference [30]. The footnote of Findlay, who also thoroughly utilizes Augustine in formulating his position [28] (pp. 222–229), is the following: “The calculus of tenses should have been included in the modern development of modal logics. It includes such obvious propositions as that x present \equiv (x present) present; x future \equiv (x future) present \equiv (x present) future; also such comparatively recondite propositions as that (x) . (x past) future; i.e., all events, past, present and future, will be past” [28] (p. 233 n 17).

34 Findlay’s article also discusses *Confessiones*.

35 This, of course, is just a metaphor that should not be taken literally.

36 It is, however, interesting that Augustine does not further develop his theory of Book XI in *Trin.*, *Gn litt.*, or *civ. Dei*. For discussions about Augustine’s dependence on earlier philosophers (cf. [21], pp. 109–159) and theologians (cf. [33], pp. 63–81).

37 “secretissime et praesentissime . . . immutabilis, mutans omnia”.

38 “tota ubique”.

39 On the contrary, human beings can only partake in immortality [35] (XIII, 9.12). Augustine also entertains the possibility that our knowledge shall be simultaneous in the resurrection no longer passing from one thing to another [35] (XV, 16.26).

40 Augustine’s view of divine immutability is therefore less “strict” and metaphysically developed than thomistic simplicity. For Augustine, unchangeability, not simplicity, seems to be the most fundamental description.

41 “Truly, God does not come to know things in time he did not know beforehand” [34] (IV, 9.17)—“Neque enim Deus temporaliter cognoscit quod ante non noverat”.

42 “cuncta praeterita et futura tempora superari”.

43 “ubique totum, sine tempore sempiternum”.

44 “sine ullo tempore”.

45 “occultam aeternitatem semper praesentis”.

46 According to Augustine, the Platonists are the philosophers nearest to the Christian way of thinking [36] (VIII, 5), and he even say that they would have become Christians if they had lived in his time ([37], 4.7), though becoming increasingly critical of Platonism later in life (cf. [38], pp. 106–107). Plotinus was known to have the most thorough understanding of Plato [36] (IX, 10). Though clearly being an original thinker, Plotinus viewed himself as someone who merely explained and commented on Plato’s thoughts [39] (xlvii). The divine graded triad consist of The One (the First, the Good) in complete unity followed by the Intellectual Principle (ὁ νοῦς, the primal thinker) constituted in stable act upon which the Soul (the All-Soul, the principle of life) follows [22] (II, 9.1; III, 3.3). The human soul must devote itself to the intellectual principle [22] (I, 2.4) liberating itself from this low sphere [22] (II, 3.9) through contemplation [22] (I, 2.6). For Plotinus, things on the low end of the ontological scale are characterized by diversity, multiplicity, and confusion whereas ideal forms and the divine consist in unity, harmony, and coherence [22] (I, 6.2). Thus, the evil is described as being contrary to existence [22] (I, 6.6) and as lacking goodness either to some degree or absolutely [22] (I, 8.5). In this earthly sphere, matter is constantly changing [22] (II, 4.3) and by its alienation from the intellectual realm it can be characterized as non-existent and non-being [22] (II, 4.16, III, 6.7). Humanity is midway between the gods and beasts and can chose to ascend to the former or descend to the latter [22] (III, 2.8). The end of contemplation is θεωρία [22] (III, 8.1) developing Aristotle’s concept of it being the highest activity of humans leading to complete happiness [40] (X, 1177a1–1178b1). Advancing from nature to the Soul to the Intellectual Principle through contemplation a person becomes more intimate with the object contemplated [22] (III, 8.8) reaching greater unity and becoming closer with The One, of which nothing can be affirmed since The One transcends all descriptions—even existence, life, and essence [22] (III, 8.10). It was within the Soul’s nature to create the cosmos. To question this implies a beginning in the eternal and is like asking why a creator creates (Enn. II. 9.8). Time and eternity are two entirely separate things, since time belongs to the realm of process. As Plato said, time is the moving image of eternity, and, therefore, Plotinus gives a definition of eternity before he reflects on the nature of time [22] (III, 7.1–2). Eternity is an unbroken whole without parts, a unity without intervals, and changeless, motionless life in an eternal now [22], (III, 7.2–3). Time belongs to the lower, though not lowest, levels having descended from eternity [22] (III, 7.7). Plotinus is especially preoccupied with discussing and criticizing Aristotle’s treatment in *Physics* [41] (IV); [22] (III, 7.7–10). In establishing the cosmos, the Soul laid eternity aside and made the world a servant to time, thus time is the Soul’s life in movement [22] (III, 7.11). Time is a thing within itself present everywhere within the cosmos but could evaporate if the Soul returned to its primal unity [22] (III, 7.12–13). Though similarities are obvious it is debated whether Augustine had read *Ennead* III, 7. The origin of temporality is explained from an ontological source in the Plotinian Soul, which Augustine has no need for [33] (79–80), and, in Augustine’s view, history is vastly more significant [18] (5).

47 “Deus meus ubique praesens est, ubique totus”.

48 “What is ‘I am who am’ if not ‘I am eternal’? ‘What is ‘I am who am’ if not ‘I am not able to change?’” [42] (VII)—“quid est, [ego sum qui sum], nisi, aeternus sum? quid est, [ego sum qui sum], nisi, qui mutari non possum?”

49 Among these [34,43], the last of which contains his most developed thinking and, thus, will be taken as most normative for his view of time (cf. his comments in [44] I, 10.1–3; I, 18). The first two commentaries antedates *Confessiones*. Creation is also treated in [19], XI–XIII and [36], XI–XIII.

50 “ante principium temporis non erat tempus”. Augustine frequently uses principium for Christ, wisdom, mediator, etc. (cf. [45], 75).

51 “caelum intellectuale”.

52 “involucris primordialibus in tempore evolvitur”.

53 “quod tempus sine aliqua mobili mutabilitate non est”.

54 “procul dubio non est mundus factus in tempore, sed cum tempore. Quod enim fit in tempore, et post aliquod fit, et ante aliquod tempus; post id quod praeteritum est, ante id quod futurum est; nullum autem posset esse praeteritum, quia nulla erat creatura, cuius mutabilibus motibus ageretur. Cum tempore autem factus est mundus, si in eius conditione factus est mutabilis motus”.

55 “trium temporum”.

56 The same applies for the created world: “For he [God] is such that in comparison with him things that are, are not” [47] (134.4)—“Ita enim ille est, ut in eius comparatione ea quae facta sunt, non sint”.

57 Leftow considers whether the meaning of this could be “. . . that one object has more intense, full, or genuine existence than another, or that one assertion of existence is better founded than another” [1] (81).

58 “pride is the mother of all heretics” [46] (II, 8.11)—“est mater omnium haereticorum superbia”. In contrast, humility exalts the mind and reaches higher insights since it understands God to be the superior [36] (XIV, 13).

59 Both “creatio ex nihilo” and “creatio continua” are traditional dogmas of Christian faith.

- 60 Augustine uses “space” for time elsewhere: “three years and six months is a short space [of time]” [36] (XX, 13)—“trium annorum et sex mensium brevissimum spatium est”.
- 61 “ut nec ulla explicari locutione possit nec ulla ratione vitari”.
- 62 “If you understand it, it is not God” / “Si enim comprehendis, non est Deus” [48] (CXVII, III).

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