Towards a Lexical Clarification of ‘Time’
(Conf. XI.22–24)

Though time has concerned Augustine from the first words of Confessions XI, and indeed, from the first words of the Confessions, it is at XI.14 that he first asks: “What is time?” One of the decisive modulations in book XI, to which F.-W. von Herrmann is particularly attentive, is that of his time-question from the ‘what’ or essence (quid) to the ‘where’ or locus (ubi) of time. And this shift is adumbrated from very early in the time-investigation. Augustine already asks at XI.15.20: “Where is the time we call ‘long’?” I will argue that, and clarify why this is the basic articulation of his time-question, in Part III. Augustine’s time-question is most fundamentally a question of the condition of possibility of a space of time (spatium temporis), i.e. of dimensive time, and it is the question of time’s locus that leads him to ‘dilation.’

From his first, provisional insight into the locus of a space of time at Confessions XI.20.26, to the end of the time-investigation at XI.29.39, Augustine has been taken to locate time “in the soul” (in anima, XI.20.26),

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1 Aug. Conf. XI.1.1: numquid, domine, cum tua sit aeternitas, ignoras quae tibi dico, aut ad tempus vides quod fit in tempore?
2 Thus Lyotard (1998, 56/2000, 36): “Subject of the confessive work, the first person author is… the work of time (l’œuvre du temps).”
4 Von Herrmann 2008, 86–107, here 88: ‘It now becomes clear that the question ‘where’ contains the questions concerning the essence and existence of time… The question of where inquires about the place in which time has its essence and existence.”
5 O’Daly 1981, 172: “His initial question is modified and re-formulated from the start. He notes [at Conf. XI.15.18] that we speak of long and short time periods… how can a time-period have length, and how do we know its length?”
6 Aug. Conf. XI.15.20: ubi est ergo tempus quod longum dicamus?
7 Aug. Conf. XI.20 addresses the nominative plural of ‘time’ (tempora), and not the singular (tempus): there is a duplicity of ‘tempora’ in XI.20 and XI.27 that I disentangle in I3.2. But
or no less frequently, “in the mind.”8 As Ricœur underscores, this is taken to mean “in the soul alone,” before he repeatedly sharpens this formulation from time being in the soul (âme) to time being in the mind (esprit).10 On this still-dominant interpretation, time in the Confessions is not located ‘in’ the space of physical movement and rest, and by extension time, for Augustine, is not ‘in the world.’11 Or stated differently: time is ‘in the soul’ (or mind), but the soul (or mind)—in whatever sense it may be ‘in the world’—is not ‘in time.’

And yet, from the first paragraphs of Confessions I, Augustine insists that he was conceived and came into this life “in time” (in tempore, I.6.7),12 and that his life is lived “in this world-age” (in hoc saeculo, I.7.12).13 In the first paragraphs of Confessions XI, Augustine similarly confesses that he lives “in time” (in tempore, XI.1.1) and ‘in the world.’14 At Confessions XI.24–25, still confessing his ignorance of what time is (quid sit tempus nescio, XI.25.32), he is yet certain that all bodies move “in time” (in tempore, XI.24.31), and that his time-investigation is itself proceeding “in time” (in tempore ista dicere, XI.25.32). And most acutely, in the last paragraph of the time-investigation, Augustine laments that he lives “in times” (in tempora, XI.29.39).15

here, note how the use of tempora in XI.20—where Augustine locates tempora ‘in the soul’—serves to heighten the difficult sense of his lament at XI.29 that he lives in tempora.

8 Most recently, Wilcoxen 2013, 2: “Time exists ‘in the mind’—that is, in memory, perception, and expectation (conf. II.20.26).”


11 Cf. ARIST. Phys. IV.14 (223a): “The relation of time to the soul (ὁ χρόνος πρὸς τὴν ψυχὴν) deserves investigation, as does the question of why we conceive of time as immanent in all things (ἐν παντὶ δικαίοις ἐν δὲ χρόνος), i.e. in earth and sea and sky.”

12 AUG. Conf. I.6.7: me formasti in tempore; cf. IX.13.37: introduxisti me in hanc vitam . . . in hac luce transitoria.


14 AUG. Conf. XI.1.1: domine, cum tua sit aeternitas, ignoras quae tibi dico, aut ad tempus vides quod fit in tempore?; XI.2.4: . . . fecisti omnia, in quibus et me.

15 AUG. Conf. XI.29.39: ego in tempora.

The phrase in tempora has not appeared previously in the Conf., and is repeated only once: at Conf. XII.11.12, Augustine denies that the hyper-heavenly is “dilated in any times” (nec in tempora ulla distenditur). As I elaborate in Part II, the basic sense of Augustine’s phrase in tempora is in “this mute world” (XI.8.8).