Augustine's Use of Paul in *Confessions* XI

It's well known that Augustine's exploration of time's mysteries in Book XI of the *Confessions* relies on the creation account in Genesis for its Scriptural grounding. What scholarship has attended to less, thus far, is his use of Paul in the same book. For Augustine, time is indeed a cosmological issue, but not exclusively so. There's also an experiential dimension, which concerns our lived experience of time and the sense of disorientation we might feel within it, caught up as we are between future and past. It's this dimension of temporality that Augustine found alive and well in the letters of Paul. Philippians 3, specifically, gave him a vocabulary for expressing his sense that his soul was torn apart by temporality. Not just Genesis, then, but also the letters of Paul lie at the heart of Augustine's account of time as *distentio animi*.

In Philippians 3, we find Paul in a strikingly eschatological mood. In strong opposition to those who would continue to place confidence in "the flesh,"[1] he recommends turning away from such past practices to instead focus on the future. It's in Philippians 3:12-14 that we find his most blatant exhortation to forget the past and turn toward what is "ahead." As the NRSV renders it:

> **12** Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. **13** Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, **14** I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.[2]

[1] Phil. 3:4.

[2] According to the SBL New Testament, the Greek runs as follows: **12** Οὐχ ὅτι ἤδη ἔλαβον ἢ ἤδη τετελείωμαι, διώκω δὲ εἰ καὶ καταλάβω, ἐφ' ᾧ καὶ κατελήμφθην ὑπὸ Χριστοῦ. **13** ἀδελφοί, ἐγὼ ἐμαυτὸν οὐ λογίζομαι κατειληφέναι· ἓν δέ, τὰ μὲν ὀπίσω ἐπιλανθανόμενος τοῖς δὲ ἔμπροσθεν ἐπεκτεινόμενος, **14** κατὰ σκοπὸν διώκω εἰς τὸ βραβεῖον τῆς ἄνω κλήσεως τοῦ θεοῦ ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ. James J. O'Donnell (in his electronic edition of the *Confessions* at http://www.stoa.org/hippo/) gives Augustine's Latin for this passage as: *non quia iam acceperim aut iam perfectus sim, persequor autem si umquam comprehendam, sicut et comprehensus sum a Christo Iesu. Fratres, ego me non arbitror apprehendisse unum autem: quae retro sunt oblitus in ea quae ante sunt extentus secundum intentionem sequor ad palmam supernae vocationis dei in Christo Iesu*.

Given the context of Philippians 3, with its discussion of circumcision and even "mutilation,"[3] it seems that Paul is here trying to distance himself from the physicality of his own past spiritual practices. This self-distancing takes place by way of a turn to the eschatological "goal," which resides in a future that—in this passage, at least—is not precisely dated. The result is that Paul's current mode of existence can best be described as "straining toward" or perhaps "stretching out toward." Caught between an alienated past and an absolute future, the author does seem to be writing of his own kind of stretching of the soul.

This passage resonates at several points in *Confessions* XI. Paul's *skopos* (or 'goal') gets rendered into Latin (at least for Augustine) as *intentio*, which is a term that Augustine returns to throughout the *Confessions*, usually to signify a kind of focus or direction of the soul's activity.[4] The most substantial reference to Philippians 3, though, comes at XI.xxix.39. My translation is as follows:

> Look at how my life is a stretching-apart. Your right hand picked me up and brought me to my Lord, the human mediator. He mediates between you, who are One, and us, who are many. We are in many things and we pass through many things. And You brought me to Him, so that I might take hold of Him by whom I was already held, so that I might be gathered up from my aged days and chase after one thing, having forgotten all that has passed away—so that I might chase not after those things that are going to be and pass away, but after those things that are 'before;' so that I might be stretched out, not stretched apart; so that I might chase after that victory palm of the calling from above, not distractedly but intently. If I could win this palm, I would hear a voice of praise and contemplate your delight, which neither arrives nor passes away. Now, of course, my years are full of groans. You are my relief, Lord. You are eternal, my Father. But I am ripped apart in times. I have no idea what their order is. My thoughts and the innermost guts of my soul will be torn to shreds by unstable differences until I flow into you, purified and melted down by the fire of your love.[5]

[3] Phil. 3:2-3.
[4] Cf. *Conf.* XI.ii.2.
[5] *Conf.* XI.xxix.39: *ecce distentio est vita mea, et me suscepit dextera tua in domino meo, mediatore filio hominis inter te unum et nos multos, in multis per multa, ut per eum apprehendam in quo et apprehensus sum, et a veteribus diebus conligar sequens unum, praeterita oblitus, non in ea quae futura et transitura sunt, sed in ea quae ante sunt non distentus sed extentus, non secundum distentionem sed secundum intentionem sequor ad palmam supernae vocationis, ubi audiam vocem laudis et contempler delectationem tuam nec venientem nec praetereuntem. nunc vero anni mei in gemitibus, et tu solacium meum, domine, pater meus aeternus es. at ego in tempora dissilui quorum*

We can hear Augustine playing Pauline notes throughout this passage. The most resonant lines come in the midst of what is (in Latin) a very long sentence. Augustine writes of forgetting the past and chasing after what is "before" (*ante*). He makes a point of clarifying that he doesn't mean some discernible event that's about to take place in the conceivable future. He's not talking about what comes and goes, the *futura* and *transitura*. Rather, he's aiming higher than the whole temporal plane. The effect of this is to make him "stretched out" (*extentus*) rather than "stretched apart" (*distentus*). What Augustine is gesturing towards here is an eschatological solution to the problem of our *distentio* in time.

From these lines, it's clear that Augustine's reception of Philippians 3:12-14 played a crucial role in his conception of temporality. What's less clear, however, is whether Augustine is using these lines in a way that is amenable to conventional readings of Paul. In this part of the letter to the Philippians, as noted above, Paul seems to be striking a rather personal chord, as he reexamines his fraught relationship with his own past. Augustine takes that Pauline rhetoric and makes it his own. He does so, though, in a way that isn't merely autobiographical, but instead bears upon temporality as we all experience it. In order to make a more general claim about time as *distentio animi*, Augustine has to, in a way, universalize the temporal logic we find in Philippians 3.

To properly appreciate this constructive adoption of Paul's rhetoric of forgetting and stretching-out, though, we should step back and take a longer look at what seems to be going in Philippians 3 itself. Without diving into the deep end of New Testament studies here, we can still safely say a few things about the context of Philippians. Paul seems to have written it from

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ordinem nescio, et tumultuosis varietatibus dilaniantur cogitationes meae, intima viscera animae meae, donec in te confluam purgatus et liquidus igne amoris tui.

prison to the community he'd already founded at Philippi.[6] This was his first church planted in Europe, which serves as a nice reminder for us of how far we have to go to arrive at fourth-century North African Christianity. Scholarly consensus allows a range of dates from the mid-50s to the early 60s CE for the letter's composition, depending on which prison Paul happened to be writing from at the time.[7]

The tone of the letter is joyous, even sanguine at first.[8] The initial two chapters emphasize that, despite present appearances, everything is indeed going to be all right, provided that the Philippians keep their eyes focused on what's truly important. The third chapter, though, breaks from that joyful tone in a fairly unmistakable way: "Beware the dogs!"[9] These are words no longer of comfort, but of vigilance. Paul then makes reference to various opponents of the community in Philippi. Though scholars have pointed out various possible identities for these opponents, it remains likely that Paul is most concerned about those eager to preserve traditions like circumcision as central to Christian life.[10]

Paul's strategy here is to first shore up his bona fides: he is a "Hebrew of Hebrews" and even a "Pharisee."[11] These claims give added force to his subsequent dismissal of traditional

[6] The exact location of the prison is still in dispute. James Dunn, in the *Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation* (ed. John Barton; Cambridge UP, 1998), 285, prefers Ephesus. Ronald F. Hock, in the *Harper Collins Bible Commentary* (ed. James L. Mays et al.; HarperOne, 1988), is skeptical of both Ephesus and Rome as options, while also gesturing toward Caesarea as a realistic possibility.

[7] See Hock, 1121-1122.

[8] The tone and terminology of Philippians has led to an ongoing discussion about whether it should be classed under the ancient genre of the 'friendship letter.' On this, see Todd D. Still, "More Than Friends? The Literary Classification of Philippians Revisited," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 39 (2012), 53-66.

[9] Phil. 3:2. The abruptness of this tonal shift has led some to discuss the possibility that our version of Philippians is in fact compiled out of two or even three distinct letters. Again, see Dunn, 286, who calls this an "unexpected interruption," as well as Hock, 1121-1122. For a more detailed treatment, see also Paul A. Holloway, "The Apocryphal 'Epistle to the Laodiceans' and the Partitioning of Philippians," *Harvard Theological Review* 91, no. 3 (July 1998), 321-325.

[10] On the possible identities of Paul's Philippian opponents, and on the motivating factors behind the letter in general, see (inter alia): Robert Jewett, "Conflicting Movements in the Early Church as Reflected in Philippians," *Novum Testamentum* 12, f. 4 (Oct. 1970), 362-390; A.F.J. Klijn, "Paul's Opponents in Philippians 3," *Novum Testamentum* 7, f. 4 (Oct. 1965), 278-284; and Fabian E. Udoh, "Paul's Views on the Law: Questions about Origin (Gal. 1:6-2:21; Phil. 3:2-11)," *Novum Testamentum* 42, f. 3 (July 2000), 214-237.

[11] Phil. 3:5.

circumcision in favor of a new kind of circumcision, one rooted in fidelity to the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This, then, is the context for his rhetorical flourish about forgetting what is behind and straining ahead for the prize. Though the later lines of Philippians 3 do lend themselves to contemplative interpretations—depending on what we think Paul means by "knowing" Christ—it remains likely that what Paul is purposefully forgetting here are certain practices of the law, which he used to value but now counts as "rubbish" or "trash."[12]

The first-century Paul studied by biblical scholars is, of course, not quite the same as the third- and fourth-century Paul that finds his voice in North Africa. By the 390s, when Augustine first turns seriously to Paul, there was already a long commentary tradition.[13] For the first few centuries, most important Pauline commentaries were in Greek, though the fourth century did see a marked growth in Latin readings of Paul. It was at least possible that Augustine could have shaped his approach to Paul through listening to Ambrose or reading Marius Victorinus, Jerome, and Rufinus. Even the Greek tradition might have broken through to him, via the transmission of Origen's take on Paul in Ambrose or Rufinus, especially. Eventually, the Latin interpretations of Paul that Augustine would most obviously define himself against would, of course, be those of Pelagius and Julian of Eclanum.[14]

[12] Phil. 3:8. The Greek σκύβαλα is harsher than we usually wish to render it. On "knowing" Christ, see Phil. 3:8 and 3:10. The reference in 3:8 seems to be to 'knowing about' Christ now and acting accordingly. The reference in 3:10, meanwhile, suggests a more eschatological sense of coming to know Christ through the eventual resurrection.
[13] The situation is summed up quite nicely by Thomas F. Martin, OSA, in *Augustine through the Ages* (ed. Allan D. Fitzgerald, OSA; W.B. Eerdmans, 1999), 626-627.
[14] Regarding Philippians specifically, look (for example) to *Contra Duas Epistolas Pelagianorum* I.8: *haec omnia, sicut dixi, potest uideri apostolus de sua uita commemorasse praeterita, ut illud, quod ait: ego autem uiuebam aliquando sine lege, aetatem suam primam ab infantia ante rationales annos uoluerit intellegi, quod autem adiunxit: adueniente autem mandato peccatum reuixit, ego autem mortuus sum, iam se praecepti capacem, sed non efficacem et ideo praeuaricatorem legis ostenderet. nec moueat quod ad philippenses scripsit, secundum iustitiam, quae in lege est, quod fuerit sine querella. potuit enim esse intus in affectionibus prauis praeuaricator legis et tamen conspicua opera legis inplere uel timore hominum uel ipsius dei, sed poenae formidine, non dilectione et delectatione iustitiae*. And see also the later *Contra Iulianum Opus Imperfectum* VI.36: *Per hominem ergo mors et per hominem resurrectio mortuorum; non hic ab homine mortem conditam, sed in homine apparuisse denuntiat, sicut et resurrectionem mortuorum non dicit ab homine factam, hoc est a Christo, sed in homine, sicut*

For the most part, though, Augustine seems to have been more interested in working out his own interpretation of Paul than relying too much on what came before, regardless of the level of respect he held for the Greek and Latin interpreters of the previous centuries. His approach to Paul from the *Ad Simplicianum* onward testifies well enough to that. But his use of Philippians 3 in the eleventh book of the *Confessions* doesn't seem to be immediately bound up with the controversies over Romans that tended to animate his later disputes. What these two distinct uses of Paul do share in common, though, is the murky background of Augustine's textual sources. Augustine's writings cite Scripture so continuously that it's often difficult to tell where his voice ends and a more authoritative voice takes over. At the same time, however, it's hardly ever clear where Augustine was getting his Scriptural texts. Though the versions Augustine consulted can be grouped broadly under the banner of the *vetus latina* tradition, that only tells us so much. It does helpfully clarify for us that Augustine made little or no use of Jerome's attempt at a standardized version, let alone of a fully collected Bible in our modern sense.[15] But to gesture at an old African edition of Scripture doesn't quite give us the whole range of renditions of Paul that Augustine may have had at his disposal.

It remains difficult to say, then, to what degree Augustine's reception of Paul can be classified as particularly 'African' or not. Given the focus of Philippians 3 on the place of the old law in the new life of the Christian, we might have expected Augustine to connect this passage more explicitly to debates about the works of the law, or even more specifically to the thorny issue of how Jewish traditions found a place (or failed to) in the context of North African

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ad Philippenses idem magister: Oboediens, inquit, factus est usque ad mortem, mortem autem crucis; propter quod et deus illum exaltavit et donavit illi nomen super omne nomen.

[15] As James J. O'Donnell puts it so memorably in his contribution to *Augustine through the Ages*, 99: "Augustine never saw a Bible." A Latin edition of the 'entire' Bible (as we might define that today) would have to await Cassiodorus in the sixth century. At *De Doctrina Christiana* II.xv.22, intriguingly, Augustine does allow a preference for the "Italian" version of certain holy writings. It is not immediately clear to what extent that hints at a general rule he followed when adjudicating between African and non-African renditions of Paul.

cities and their growing Christian communities. In certain other works of Augustine, he may indeed have invoked Philippians 3 to discuss just these kinds of ethical and practical issues. In Sermons 169 and 170, for example, he patiently walks his audience through Paul's words, pointing out to them the difference between a legalistic understanding of divine justice and an emphasis on the justice of Christ Himself.[16]

Most often, however, Augustine uses Philippians 3 for exhortatory ends. Something about Paul's metaphor of the footrace appealed to him, and so we see it cropping up again and again throughout a number of his works: not just the *Confessions*, but also the *Tractate on 1 John* and *De Trinitate*. Given its pastoral potential, it's no surprise that we also find it peppering a number of his sermons and narrations on the Psalms. Still, though these passages bear a striking resemblance to the words we have already quoted from *Confessions* XI, they stop short of turning Philippians 3 into a meditation on temporality itself. Look, for example, at his remarks on Psalm 38, where he begins to address Paul directly in the second-person:

> If the Apostle isn't perfect, am I perfect? Look at what he does. Pay attention to what he says. 'What are you doing, Apostle? You haven't apprehended it yet? You're not perfect yet? What are you doing? What are you encouraging me to do? What do you propose I should imitate or follow?' 'But one thing,' he says, 'having forgotten what's behind and having been stretched out toward what's ahead, I'm intently chasing after the victory palm of the heavenly calling of God in Jesus Christ.'

After invoking Philippians 3:12-14, Augustine next pauses to interrogate the word *intentio*, so crucial both here and throughout his reflections on temporality:

> 'Intently, according to intent,' he says—not yet 'according to completion,' not yet 'according to apprehension.' Let's not fall back when we've just jumped across. But let's also not stay where we've already arrived. Let's run! Let's stretch ahead! We're on our way. You're anxious about where you haven't gotten yet, but you're still not even immune to where you came from. 'Having forgotten

[16] Alicia Eelen provides a patient, erudite exploration of these two sermons and their pastoral use of Philippians 3 in "Augustine and Phil. 3:3-16: One Bible Fragment, Several Exegetical Approaches," *Sacris Erudiri* 50, no. 1 (May 2012), 227-263.

> what's behind,' he says, 'and having been stretched out toward what's ahead, I'm chasing after the victory palm of the heavenly calling of God in Jesus Christ—according to intent.' He's talking about a goal. 'But one thing:' that is, this one thing here: 'Lord, show us the Father, and that will be enough.'[17] 'But one thing:' or, as it's said in another Psalm, 'I have sought one thing from the Lord; that's what I need.'[18] Having forgotten what's behind, I've been stretched out towards what's ahead. I've sought one thing from the Lord. It's what I need: to live in the Lord's house for all the days of my life.[19]

Augustine's words here are meant to move us, but they may not be meant to make us reflect on movement and time more broadly. In *Confessions* XI, meanwhile, Augustine does want to link this sense of experiential urgency to those underlying cosmological conditions of human life.

There, he's able to maintain this exhortative function while also mingling Paul's words in with his own vocabulary about temporality. "*In ea quae ante sunt extentus*" and "*secundum intentionem*" do have a certain rhetorical power all on their own; but when placed in juxtaposition to Augustine's claim that his life in time is a *distentio*—a tearing-apart—they gain added existential weight. Augustine's use of Paul in Book XI, then, goes beyond not only what we might expect from the context of Philippians itself, but even beyond Augustine's own use of the passage elsewhere. Encouragement to keep on moving forward is one thing; the acknowledgment that, caught up as we are in the torrent of time, we have no other choice but to tumble forward toward the end is quite another.

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[17] Words not to Philippi but of Philip, in John 14:8. This reference to seeing the Father serves to foreground the eschatological implications of both the Johannine and Pauline passages invoked here.

[18] Psalm 27:4.

[19] The Latin for both of the above quotations from *Enn. Ps*. runs as follows: *si perfectus non est apostolus, ego perfectus sum? uide quid agat, adtende quid dicat. quid ergo agis, apostole? nondum adprehendisti, nondum perfectus es? quid agis? ad quam actionem me hortaris? quid mihi imitandum sequendum que proponis? unum autem, inquit, quae retro sunt oblitus, in ea quae ante sunt extentus, secundum intentionem sequor ad palmam supernae uocationis dei in christo iesu; secundum intentionem, nondum secundum peruentionem, nondum secundum adprehensionem. non relabamur unde iam transiliuimus, nec remaneamus in illis in quae iam uenimus. curramus, intendamus, in uia sumus; nec tam sis securus ex eis quae transisti, quam sollicitus pro eis ad quae nondum peruenisti. quae retro, inquit, oblitus, in ea quae ante sunt extentus, secundum intentionem sequor ad palmam supernae uocationis dei in christo iesu. ipse est enim finis. unum autem, hoc est illud unum: domine ostende nobis patrem, et sufficit nobis. unum autem, quae et una dicitur in alio psalmo: unam petii a domino, hanc requiram. quae retro oblitus, in ea quae ante sunt extentus. unam petii a domino, hanc requiram, ut inhabitem in domo domini per omnes dies uitae meae*. The English translation is mine.

All of this, finally, raises broader questions about what it means to read Augustine as a 'North African' thinker. Near the beginning of his essay on the approach to Paul taken by an earlier North African of note—Tertullian—Andrew MacGowan wrote:

> Thus while Tertullian has a sense of Paul as a character, he does not view the apostle primarily as a person whose intention and spirit must be sought or one whose writings are waiting for exegesis of undisclosed meaning. Rather, Paul is an existing positive reality, a given, underpinning and exemplifying orthodoxy as well as a source from which to draw its defense.[20]

Some of Augustine's references to Paul could be described in similar terms. This would seem to hold especially true of his anti-Pelagian works. But *Confessions* XI is up to something rather different. Within the context of his exploration of temporality, Augustine's invocation of Paul may indeed turn into a search for "undisclosed meaning." In that case, Paul as a human exemplar recedes, while the question of human experience in general comes to the fore.

And yet, for all that, Augustine's reception of Paul remains North African. It's still shaped extensively by the African Latin translations he was working with, even if we cannot rule out interpretations of Paul that he might have picked up from across the Mediterranean. But a nagging question refuses to go away: does Augustine's "universalization" of Pauline temporality also have the effect of "universalizing" the eleventh book of Augustine's *Confessions*, rendering it a text that's somehow no longer recognizably 'North African?' By reading Paul's passage as if it were devoid of historically entangled, contextually complex connections (say, between Paul and his past practices), does Augustine somehow neutralize his own connections to his North African context?

That would seem like an unsatisfying conclusion, especially since so many of Augustine's other writings are explicitly devoted to interacting with his intimate surroundings.

[20] Andrew MacGowan, "God in Christ: Tertullian, Paul, and Christology," in David E. Wilhite and Todd D. Still, eds., *Tertullian and Paul* (Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013), 2-3.

Think here not only of the Donatists, but of Faustus, the monks at Hadrumetum, or even Augustine's extended treatment of the North African Apuleius in the *City of God*. The *Confessions*, too, is shot through with references to his North African background and the specific qualities that made North African Christianity what it was. Monica's character arc expresses this quite vividly, while Augustine's own journey is in some sense a coming-to-terms not only with the intellectual heights of Christian thinking, but also with the reality of Christianity in his homeland. So the task that now awaits us is this: to find a way of reading North African Christian authors—not just Augustine, of course—in a way that lets their texts reach out beyond their lived context, while at the same time refusing to sever the connective tissue that links both author and text to the context that conditioned both.