Belatedness: Augustine on Transformation in Time and History

Augustine of Hippo left behind a philosophy of time that was as memorable as his philosophy of history. His two most well-remembered works attest to that fact. In the *Confessions*, Augustine concludes his reflection on his own lifetime with a meditation on the obscure nature of time itself. In the *City of God*, meanwhile, he questions our capacity to read the signs of the times that seem to define our own era. In each case, Augustine is rather skeptical about humankind's ability to catch up with the present moment and interpret it as it passes by. There arises the strange sensation that we are somehow running late—that we always have to look back on what just happened in order to make any sense of it. This theme of belatedness stretches throughout Augustine's corpus, from his early confusion about temporal experience to his later call for humility in the face of history's tumultuous tides. According to Augustine, the difficulty we have making sense of our historical present grows organically out of a similar difficulty we face in our individual lives. The struggles afflicting social time and the troubles plaguing psychological time are two symptoms of the same condition.

That condition is what has been called belatedness. By studying it more closely, we can bring Augustine into conversation with a range of debates about the nature of temporal experience and the limits of humankind's historical self-awareness. Before being able to do so responsibly, however, we have to make sure that we are getting Augustine right on the matter of time. Excavating this core theme of belatedness, which lies beneath the arguments of both the *Confessions* and the *City of God*, will allow us to see how Augustine carves out a channel connecting the personal time of human experience to the historical time of human society.

As early as Book IV of the *Confessions*, Augustine argues that incarnate experience suffers from being "late" or *tardus*. It is this belatedness that lends a retrospective quality to our awareness of ourselves and of the world around us. This retroactivity of the human mind is, in turn, a result of

its placement in the flux of temporality. As we learn later, in Book XI of the *Confessions*, time is a confusing condition. Its most basic component appears to be the present, yet upon closer inspection the present instant turns out to be nothing at all. The present has no span, and if we lengthen it out so that it has duration, we find it to be infinitely divisible into past and future spans. Since Augustine can no longer rely on the present as a firm basis for temporal experience, he turns to memory, the mind's mechanism for retrospection. Only by holding on to impressions of the past can we attain any kind of stability amidst the rushing river of time. The present affords us no anchor. Augustine makes memory central not only in his explicit treatments of it in Books X and XI, but also in his implicit invocations of it throughout earlier, more autobiographical passages. In the account of his conversion in Book VIII, for example, we read of Augustine's struggle to experience an unimaginable turning point—*punctum temporis*—that would mark his transformation into a willing Christian. But it is only in retrospect, only belatedly, that he can look back and pinpoint such a decisive moment in his life, which is otherwise full of hesitation, anxiety, and indecision.

Just as the *Confessions* hinges on Augustine's conversion, so does the *City of God* revolve around a particular turning point. The pivotal moment is now Alaric's sack of Rome in 410 CE. To many, this event represented the beginning of a new era. For traditional polytheists, it might signal the failure of the rise of Christianity. For Christians, it could serve as the harbinger of the end times. Augustine rejects both interpretations, casting doubt on the idea that 410 CE was a meaningful turning point at all. Offering up his own periodization scheme, he delineates six ages of history leading up to an eschatological Sabbath. These eras are set apart by what he calls *articuli temporis*—the hinges or joints of time. These hinges are seen only retrospectively. The last pivotal moment before the end, adds Augustine, was the Incarnation. Our present age (*saeculum*) can no longer be divided up into eras based on the seemingly transformative events we witness. An age or an era can only be

retroactively posited. We contemporaries, who live through events like the Sack of Rome, are not equipped to identify it as one of time's joints. Only a god could do that.

On both the personal and social levels, Augustine argues that we find ourselves running late. This condition of belatedness affects our ability to pinpoint moments of personal change and events of historical transformation alike. One man's conversion and a city's tragedy come into view only in retrospect. In a similar way, the historian has to look back on the long development of Augustine's writings in order to discern the threads running through them. It is necessary to look even further back if we want to catch a glimpse of the foundations of Augustine's approach to transformation in time. The shape of my own project has been determined by the need to retrieve this foundation, so that we can observe how Augustine's interwoven interrogations of psychological and social time grew forth out of this fertile ground.

My first chapter begins, then, by mapping out some classical precursors to Augustine's comments on time. Plato's remark, in *Timaeus* 37d, that time is the "moving image of eternity" provides a counterpoint to the radical distinction between eternal rest and temporal instability we find in Augustine. More relevant still is Aristotle's discussion of time in Book IV of the *Physics*. There he describes the paradox of the instantaneous now by likening it to a point on a line. A line, Aristotle tells us, is a continuum, and as such it cannot be explained as an agglomeration of points set side-by-side. The point, it turns out, is merely a limit posited by a measuring mind in order to artificially separate out spans of the continuum (segments of the line). The now, Aristotle suggests, is also a retroactively posited limit-point, rather than a proper phase of time. Already in the *Physics*, then, we find suspicion about the status of the present and a sense of the retroactivity of the human mind in time.

Next, in my second chapter, I move on to the problem of the present as Augustine himself expresses it in Book XI of the *Confessions*. The non-being of the present is not, for Augustine, some

mathematical curiosity. It is an aspect of the disordered condition of our human life, stretched out as we are between past and future, without any recourse to the security of a present moment. *Distentio animi* is the name he gives here to this stretching-apart of the soul. If Aristotle gets credit for first expressing the paradox of the present, then still we must wait for Augustine to express the existential consequences of such a paradox. Belatedness—the feeling that we can never catch up to the present in which we think we live—is perhaps the paramount consequence.

This belatedness, as I make clear in my third chapter, is not a solely psychological matter. It also bears upon the place of humanity within the cosmic order, which is itself undergoing a kind of flux. We find hints of this cosmological belatedness in Augustine's account of the arising and passing away of things in Book IV of the *Confessions*. Yet it is only by reading Book IV after reckoning with time in Book XI that we can see how the earlier passages anticipate so much of the later argument. It is in this fourth book, remember, that we find Augustine telling us that incarnate experience is too late to see the beautiful order behind the birth and decay of all things. Human temporal experience is subject to a kind of delayed effect. The occasion for this reflection—the death of Augustine's unnamed friend—communicates its stakes. Belatedness is not the product of idle contemplation, but a living torment to those who live in a temporal world.

The first three chapters, then, bring us from the paradox of the present to the resulting belatedness of experience. In my fourth chapter, I turn to conversion as the exemplar of a turning point in one person's lifetime. Already, Augustine has joined Aristotle in challenging the integrity of the point in time. So where does that leave us with turning points like conversion? Is a turning point really a point? Or might it have duration? Here we can learn much from Augustine's recounting of his own conversion in Book VIII of the *Confessions*. There he speaks, with not a little anguish, of the moment of personal transformation as a point in time—a *punctum temporis*—that draws ever closer without quite arriving. If we think of conversion as a point, then perhaps it too can only ever be

retroactively posited. And this is indeed what we find when we look ahead to another work of Augustine's, *The Gift of Perseverance*, where he cautions us to attribute true conversion to people only after they have died—if indeed we ever can arrive at such a judgment.

After discussing the temporality of personal transformation, my last three chapters outline the parallel problem of historical change. This is where the *City of God* looms large. Augustine's rejection of all hasty interpretations of present crises (like the Sack of Rome) coincides with the fact that he found historical periodization to be a fundamentally retrospective exercise. The *articuli temporis*, the joints of time, could only be discerned much later. Again the necessity of delay intervenes. Augustine's understanding of the *saeculum* teaches us that it is always unwise to attempt to diagnose one's own place in history. Such knowledge about history might even have to be deferred until the end of time itself. Only then might historiographical certainty arise. While Augustine is not willing to give up on the project of periodization altogether, he is at least interested in limiting its scope. This limitation is but another effect of the belatedness of humanity in time—not just on the level of personal experience, but now also on the plane of history.

If we want to learn from Augustine as he brings the troubles of psychological time to bear upon the struggles of historical time, we should not artificially separate these aspects of his thought from each other. The paradoxes of the *Confessions* may already be of interest to philosophers, while the social commentary of the *City of God* might speak to political theorists. Yet unless we read these works together, we will never be able to appreciate Augustine's contribution to the ongoing conversation about how we orient ourselves in time, both as individuals and as a society.