

Time as *Distentio* and St. Augustine's Exegesis of *Philippians* 3,12-14

When Augustine, in the eleventh Book of the *Confessions*, describes time, somewhat hesitantly, as a *distentio animi*, he cannot be offering a definition of time¹. He is using the metaphor *distentio* to evoke whatever accompanies or follows upon the cognitive act of measuring time². The distinction is fundamental, and failure to observe it has often obscured the connotations of *distentio* in Augustine. Thus, through anxiety to understand it in a definitional or quasi-definitional sense, the word is translated "extension" and explained as the equivalent of a Greek term from philosophical discussions of time—whether διάστημα or διάστασις, παράτασις or ἔκτασις³. This explanation is misleading, for a number of reasons. First, there is no evidence or indication that Augustine is translating or adapting a Greek discussion of time: therefore *distentio*

1. *Conf.* II, 23, 30: « uideo igitur tempus quamdam esse distentionem »; *ibid.* 26, 33: « inde mihi uisum est nihil esse aliud tempus quam distentionem: sed cuius rei, nescio, et mirum, si non ipsius animi. » Both forms, *distentio* and *distensio*, will be found in texts cited *infra*. Cf. art. *Distentio* in *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae* 5, 1, cols. 1516, 58 — 1517, 72. — H. M. LACEY, *Empiricism and Augustine's Problems about Time* in *Review of Metaphysics* 22 (1968), p. 219-45, argues convincingly that Augustine was not looking for a definition of time.

2. Cf. R. JORDAN, *Time and Contingency in St. Augustine*, in *Review of Metaphysics* 8 (1954-5), p. 414: « Time is a relation, with a foundation in successive states of finite or limited being, whose measurement is a cognitive act terminating in the 'distentio' of the mind. »

3. The Stoics defined time as κινήσεως διάστημα, *SVF* I, 93; 2, 509-10. When Plotinus speaks of time and the Hypostasis Soul, he says that "the spreading out (διάστασις) of life involves time", *Enneads* 3, 7, II, 41 (tr. A. H. Armstrong), ἔκτασις occurs at *Enn.* 3, 7, 6, 25. For other instances of ἔκτασις and παράτασις and some discussion of all these terms, see W. BEIERWALTES, *Plotin, über Ewigkeit und Zeit (Enneade III 7)*, Frankfurt, 1967, p. 207-8, p. 265-7. J. F. CALLAHAN'S attempt, in *A New Source for St. Augustine's Theory of Time* in *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 63 (1958), p. 437-59, to see in Basil, *Adv. Eunom.* I, 21 a source of Augustine's *distentio* is unconvincing.

need not be a translated term. Second, Augustine's views about the nature of time are not really clarified by speculation about the definitional force of *distentio*—more light is thrown on them by consideration of the role of memory and *attentio* in perception⁴. Finally, if we explain *distentio* as "extension" we must assume that in *Conf.* II, 29, 39 Augustine alters the meaning of the term to what may be called a moral sense, because there it means "distraction". But the question should at least be raised whether such an alternation in meaning has occurred. There can be no denying that *distentio* in *Conf.* II, 29, 39 conveys the sense of temporality as fragmentation and dispersal: the context, and other words used in the chapter (*dissilui, dilanantur*), make this clear. Might it not be the case that this experiential and consciously metaphorical meaning of the word determines Augustine's use of it elsewhere, including the two earlier instances in his account of time, and that its primary meaning, for him, is not "extension"? The purpose of this paper is to argue for this possibility.

It will be appropriate to begin with a brief history of the word *distentio*. It is not a common word, and its use in non-Christian authors is confined to medical treatises, where it means a tension, a nervous spasm or convulsion, or a distortion, and is a translation of the Greek *σπάσμα, σπασμός* or *τέτανος*⁵. Other non-Christian authors appear to avoid it, using an equivalent term instead: thus Pliny the Elder speaks of "sufflatae cutis distentus" (*Nat. Hist.* 8, 138). Christian authors extend its usage. It can refer to the tension in the bowstring or the string of the lyre, as when Augustine mentions "in cithara neruos distentos", adding, "diuersa distensio diuersos edit sonos" (*Serm.* 243, 4)⁶. It can also be used of spatial extent or masses, particularly in rhetorically high-flown passages: "omnis ornatus caeli, omnis fecunditas terrae, diffusio maris, distentio aeris, fulgor siderum, claritas solis et lunae" (*Enarr. in ps.* 44, 4). So God is described as "ubique praesentem, et non spatiis distantibus, quasi aliqua mole vel distensione diffusum, sed ubique totum" (*Ep.* 187, 41)⁷. A further usage is illustrated in Paulinus of Nola: "distentio corporis animae sobrietatem necat" (*Ep.* 50, 13 = Augustine, *Ep.* 121, 13).

4. On memory's role in our perception of duration see *De musica* 6, 8, 21 and *Conf.* II, 27, 36-28, 38. Cf. É. GILSON, *Introduction à l'Étude de Saint Augustin*, 3rd ed., Paris, 1949, pp. 85-6, 253-4; A. SOLIGNAC's note in *Les Confessions VIII-XIII* (BA 14), Paris, 1962, p. 590.

5. CELSUS, *De medicina* 2, 1, 18: «propriae... dentientium... neruorum distentiones»; SCRIBONIUS LARGUS, *Comp.* 26: «dolores cum rubore et distentione oculi sicca»; *Ibid.* 89: «terna (sc. catapotia) uel quaterna in noctem dare ad inflationes in ipsa distentione».

6. Cf. AUGUSTINE, *Enarr. in ps.* 149, 8: «in tympano corium extenditur, in psalterio chordae extenduntur... nerui quanto plus fuerint extenti, tanti acutius sonant».

7. Cf. also *De Trin.* 5, 1, 2: «molis distensionem».

The most striking Christian use of the word, however, is as a translation of *περίσπασμός* in Latin versions of *Ecclesiastes* and later texts influenced by that work. Thus *Eccles.* 3, 10 is rendered "deus distensionem magnam dedit hominibus, ut distendantur in ea" in the *Itala*. Similarly, *Eccles.* 5, 13 is translated in the *Itala* as "pereunt in summa distentione ac sollicitudine". In both these cases the Vulgate substitutes *afflictio* for *distentio*, but Jerome can also use *occupatio*, and seems to have felt no compunction to use one single Latin word, accepting *occupatio* at *Eccles.* 8, 16, for example, in his *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, but using *distentio* in the same passage in his translation. When Jerome explains the translation *distentio* he says: "eo quod in varias sollicitudines mens hominis distenta lanietur" (*Comm. on Eccles.* 1, 13). Here he is echoing a usage of *distentus* well attested in classical authors, and meaning "preoccupied, busy, distracted". The comic poet Afranius writes "nunc est distentus animus ut negotiis" (fr. 73 Ribbeck). Cicero complains to his brother Quintus "distentus cum opera tum animo sum" (*Q. fr.* 3, 8, 3), and writes to Atticus "cum intellego te distentissimum esse qua de Buthrotiis qua de Bruto" (*Att.* 15, 18, 2). Pliny can speak of Trajan as "distentus imperi curis" (*Pan.* 86, 2). Although the *Oxford Latin Dictionary* suggests that these uses may be of the past participle of *distineo*⁸, one cannot be certain, and, in any case, the Jerome passage quoted shows that late Latin authors at least would relate *distentus* to *distentio* and certain uses of *distendo*. Furthermore, even in pre-Christian Latin it is often impossible to distinguish between the meaning of *distendo* and *distineo* in passages of Cicero, Livy, Seneca or Pliny⁹. Usage overrides etymology here, imposing a shared meaning "distract" or "strain by distraction" on the words in question.

Distentio in the sense found in *Ecclesiastes*, to refer to the cares and concerns of the *saeculum*, occurs in Cassian, who writes of *mundanae distentiones, cotidianae distentiones*¹⁰. Here the meaning clearly is "preoccupations or distractions causing anxiety". The word has the same force as *distentio* in *Confessions* II, 29, 39. Clearly Augustine is employing a Christian metaphor, even if there is no explicit use or echo of *Ecclesiastes* in his words. Elsewhere he uses the words related

8. Similarly, J. GIBB - W. MONTGOMERY, *The Confessions of Augustine*, Cambridge, 1908, p. 362, on *Conf.* II, 29, 39, seeing a possible allusion there to *Eccles.* 8, 16, suggest that *distentio* = «distractio» may derive from *distineo*, whereas *distentio* = «extension» derives from *distendo*. L. ALICI, *La funzione della 'Distentio' nella dottrina agostiniana del tempo*, in *Augustinianum* 15 (1975), p. 328, n. 7, makes wild assertions about the etymology of *distentio*: its relation to *distineo* as a «military technical term» (for which no evidence is given) cannot be demonstrated.

9. E.g. LIVY 9, 12, 10: «*distendit ea res Samnitium animos*»; SENECA, *Nat.* 4a, praef. 2: «*infelicem animum nunc superbia inflammas, nunc cupiditate distendimus*»; CICERO, *Planc.* 79: «*distineor et diuelli dolore*»; LIVY 9, 16, 6: «*duae factiones senatum distinebant*»; PLINY, *Pan.* 68, 2: «*securus tibi et laetus dies exit, qui principes alios cura et metu distinebat*».

10. E.g. CASSIAN, *Conl.* 7, 3, 3; 14, 9, 3; 24, 13, 4.

to *distentio* in the senses noted above. Thus he asks " nonne diuersae uoluntates *distendunt* cor hominis, dum deliberatur, quid potissimum arripiamus ? » (*Conf.* 8, 10, 24). Or, contrasting man's temporality with God's eternal unity and unchangeability, " neque enim sicut nota cantantis notumue canticum audientis expectatione uocum futurarum et memoria praeteritarum uariatur affectus sensusque *distenditur*, ita tibi aliquid accidit incommutabiliter aeterno » (*Ibid.* 11, 31, 41). Or, " dedita temporalibus uoluptatibus anima... multiplici atque aerumnosa cogitatione *distenta*... talis anima multiplicata est » (*Enarr. in ps.* 4, 9).

Augustine does not use *distentio* and related words in isolation. He uses these words as part of a group of evocative terms to emphasize the fragmentary, disunited and distracting condition of temporality. One such term is *effundo* : " uolentes enim gaudere forinsecus facile uanescent et *effunduntur* in ea quae uidentur et temporalia sunt " (*Conf.* 9, 4, 10). Another word is *multiplico*, which occurs in the *Enarr. in ps.* 4, 9 passage just quoted, and is itself an echo of *Ps.* 4, 7 : this can be seen in " nec uolebam *multiplicari* terrenis bonis deuorans tempora et deuorata temporibus, cum haberem in aeterna simplicitate aliud *frumentum et uinum et oleum* " (*Conf.* 9, 4, 10) as well as in " temporalium.. specierum mutiformitas ab unitate Dei hominem lapsum per carnales sensus diuerberauit et mutabili uarietate *multiplicauit* eius affectum " (*De uera rel.* 21, 41), where *Ps.* 4, 7 follows at once. In the case of *multiplico* we have a good example of the way in which the vocabulary of a Scriptural passage forms Augustine's language of temporality and becomes an adequate expression and enrichment of his experience of the human condition. We shall soon see a further illustration of this, for Augustine, characteristic process.

Further members of this group of evocative words used by Augustine are *dissilio*, *dilatio*, and (*in*)*gem(isc)o*. *Dissilio*, which can literally mean " burst apart ", as in Virgil, *Aen.* 12, 740-1 " mortalis mucro... ictu/dissiluit ", is a vivid metaphor, used by Augustine in a moral sense : " turpis anima et *dissiliens* a firmamento tuo... dedecus appetens " (*Conf.* 2, 4, 9). Augustine describes his psychological condition after Monica's death : " sauciabatur anima et quasi *dilaniabatur* uita " (*Ibid.* 9, 12, 30). Finally, when saying that he will withdraw from externals and enter into himself, he writes that he will " *gemens* inenarrabiles *gemitus* in peregrinatione mea et recordans Hierusalem extento in eam sursum corde " (*Ibid.* 12, 16, 23). And man, he says, lives by hope, " quae retro oblitus, in ea, quae ante sunt, extenditur, et *ingemescit* grauatus " (*Ibid.* 13, 13, 14). Significantly, of these terms, *gemitus* (" anni mei in gemitibus "), *dissilio* (" in tempora dissilui ") and *dilatio* (" tumultuosis uarietatibus dilaniantur cogitationes meae ") all occur in *Conf.* 11, 29, 39, where, together with *distentio*, they illustrate Augustine's use of a related verbal nexus.

Now in the passages from *Conf.* 12, 16, 23 and 13, 13, 14 quoted in the preceding paragraph the words *extento* and *extenditur* evoke man's " strai-

ning towards " the promise of the heavenly Jerusalem. They are positive terms, the expression of faith and hope. In both passages there is a clear verbal echo of a Scriptural text—*Philippians* 3, 14. The *Philippians* text is also central in *Conf.* 11, 29, 39, where phrases of vv. 12-14 occur. There, too, the word *extentus* is found, and it is the positive complement of *distentus*, and the counterpart of *intentio*: " non distentus, sed extentus, non secundum distentionem, sed secundum intentionem ". Just as in the case of *Ps.* 4, 7 the *Philippians* text contributes to Augustine's language of temporality and conditions it. If we turn to other occasions when Augustine quotes or echoes this text¹¹, we see that it recurs as a leit-motif when he broaches the theme of man's calling to the eternal and liberation from the temporal, the reaction of faith to the disturbing fragmentation of temporality¹². In the so-called Ostia vision it evokes the *ascensio* of Augustine's and Monica's souls: " et praeterita obliuiscetes in ea quae ante sunt *extenti* quaerebamus inter nos... qualis futura esset uita aeterna sanctorum » (*Conf.* 9, 10, 23). And (*Ibid.* 25) " sicut nunc extendimus nos et rapida cogitatione attingimus aeternam sapientiam super omnia manentem ". In *De doctr. christ.* 1, 34, 38 Paul is called *extentus*, it is said, to teach us " ne rebus temporalibus... haereamus infirmiter ". Elsewhere *extentus* emphasizes the anticipatory state of the Christian in this life: " non se diceret extentum, si iam peruenisset. Extenditur enim animus desiderio rei concupitae, non laetitia consecutae " (*Enarr. in ps.* 39, 3). Or " in ea quae ante sunt *extenti*, quae appetitio est aeternorum " (*Enarr. in ps.* 89, 5). These themes are forcefully expressed in the following passage:

« praeterita non nos delectent, praesentia non nos teneant... ne praesentibus implicemur a futura meditando; *extendimus* nos in ea quae ante sunt, obliuiscamur praeterita. Et quod modo laboramus, quod modo *gemimus*, quod modo suspiramus, quod modo loquimur, quod ex quantulacumque parte sentimus, et capere non possumus, capiemus, perfruemur in resurrectione iustorum " (*Enarr. in ps.* 66, 10).

Finally, in *Sermo* 255, 6, 6, the themes are developed at length, with much emphasis on the contrasts *distentus* | *extentus*, *distentio* | *extentio* (*intentio*) in exegesis of the *Philippians* text. Augustine shows care in his distinction between the positive, Pauline term and the pejorative one: " unum nos extendat, ne multa distendant et abrumpant ab uno "

11. G. MADÉC, *Léon Brunschvicg et Saint Augustin*, in *Recherches Augustiniennes* 6 (1969), p. 151, n. 36, lists several occurrences of *Philipp.* 3, 11-14 in Augustine.

12. F. E. CRANZ, *The Development of Augustine's Ideas on Society before the Donatist Controversy*, in *Harvard Theological Review* 47 (1954), p. 298, 291-2, notes in passing Augustine's use of *Philipp.* 3; 12-14 in statements of this theme, mentioning (*ibid.* 291 n. 125) some passages.

(*loc. cit.*)¹³. When he uses *distendo* and *distentio* he does so advisedly, here and elsewhere. The associations of disease, distortion, distraction, anxiety are decisive. Just as he can express the amazing, almost grotesque life of the memory by calling it *uenter animi* (*Conf.* 10, 14, 41)—adding that, although it would be *ridiculum* to suppose that the memory and the digestive processes were alike, “*nec tamen sunt omni modo dissimilia*”—so he can call the phenomenon of time-consciousness a *distentio animi*, the distressing experience of “*deuorans tempora et deuoratus temporibus*” (*Conf.* 9, 4, 10). Even those uses of *distentio* which might seem reducible to “extension” prove, on examination of their context, to have more colourful, dramatic undertones. *Distentio* is used of time in *Enarr. in ps.* 99, 5, when Augustine evokes the magnitude and life of the *uniuersa creatura*, in the same rhetorical vein in which he speaks of the “*diffusio maris, distentio aeris*” at *Enarr.* 44, 4. When he says of the *caelum caeli* that “*nulla uice uariatur nec in tempora ulla distenditur*” (*Conf.* 12, 11, 12) the surrounding language is once again emotionally charged and enthusiastic in tone: *distendo* is a lively word, as in “*nolo te per multa distendas*” (*C. Cresconium* 3, 82, 94). If the reading *distentiones* at *De vera rel.* 40, 75 is correct¹⁴, it would be suitably vivid in that context of *dolores, morbi* and *distortiones membrorum*.

Augustine finds *Phillip.* 3, 12-14 a fruitful text for a number of reasons. First, the phrase *unum autem* in v. 14, which he mistakenly construes with *sequor*¹⁵, allows him to refer to the unity/plurality contrast basic to his understanding of time and eternity. He can make similar use of the phrase *unum... necessarium* in *Luke* 10, 42, and of the *Ps.* 62, 4 passage quoted at the beginning of *Conf.* 11, 29, 39: “*melior est miseri-*

13. At *Enarr. in ps.* 113, *sermo* 1, 7, 14, Augustine uses *extendo* in a pejorative sense: “*in saeculum extenditur*”. But here he is speaking of a pre-conversion state, cf. the Pauline passage, *ibid.* 10-11. A. RIGOBELLO, *Intentio — Extensio — Distentio: Modello ermeneutico della Antropologia Agostiniana*, in *Scritti in onore di Carlo Giacon*, Padova, 1972, p. 141, expresses well the usual contrast in Augustine: «*il tempo della distentio, della dispersione, del puro divagare di immagini e concetti senza pervenire a vera conoscenza*» contrasts with «*il tempo della intentio-extensio, della unificazione della coscienza nei suoi aspetti morali e conoscitivi*». ALICI, *art. cit.* (*supra*, n. 8) expands some of Rigobello's points, discussing different levels of meaning of *distentio*, but without close analysis of Augustine's vocabulary. The same lack of interest in Augustine's use of language is apparent in other work on *distentio*, e.g. M.-F. SCIACCA, *Forme e Momenti del tempo secondo i livelli della libertà. La 'distentio' agostiniana*, in *Augustinus* 13 (1968) [= *Strenas Augustinianas P.V. Capánaga oblatas*, 2], p. 397-407; P. DE HAES, *Tijd als 'distentio animi'* *Nota's bij een tekst van S. Augustinus*, in *Collectanea Mechliniensia* 41 (1956), p. 615-621.

14. Cf. *CC* 32 A, p. 236, 19 and *apparatus criticus*. At *Conf.* 12, 15, 22 *distentio* is grouped with such terms as *vices temporum, spatium aetatis volubile, vicissitudo temporum*.

15. For his mistake, see *Sermo* 255, 6, 6. The Greek $\epsilon\nu \delta\epsilon$, translated in the *New English Bible* “*All I can say is this*”, was properly translated by MARIUS VICTORINUS: «*unum adhuc tamen*», *Lib. ad Philipp.* 3, 13-14 (1221 C-D) p. 104, 4 ff. Locher).

cordia tua super uitas". In his exegesis of this passage he will explain why the Psalmist uses the plural *uitas*: "multae sunt uitae humanae, sed Deus unam uitam promittit... unam uitam donas, quae praeponatur omnibus nostris" (*Enarr. in ps.* 62, 12).

A second reason for Augustine's repeated echoing of the *Philipp.* passage is the phrase in v. 14 which his translation renders *secundum intentionem*¹⁶. The role of *intentio* or *attentio*, a *vis animae* essential to perception, is stressed by Augustine in early treatises and persists into the later *De trinitate*¹⁷. It has been argued that it may be a translation into Neoplatonic terms of the Stoic account of cognitive perception¹⁸. Whether or not this is so, *intentio* is for Augustine an indispensable activity of the immaterial soul's consciousness. In discussing our awareness of duration in *Conf.* 11, 28, 38 he will use the related concept of *attentio*. But he can also employ the term *intentio* in the sense of "contemplation". In the famous passage in *Conf.* 10, 6, 9, where he questions the created world and it tells him "non sumus deus tuus", he seeks higher and finds God through understanding the world as His handiwork: "interrogatio mea *intentio* mea et responso eorum species eorum".

Finally, as has been shown above, the *Philippians* passage provides Augustine with the term *extentus*, a positive counterpart to *distentus* and *distentio*¹⁹. His meditation in *Conf.* 11, 29, 39 has a Scriptural nucleus: the phenomenon is not isolated in Augustine. Often the words of a Scriptural text which he admires become almost technical terms for him: the text evokes the idea and is a means of expressing and developing it. Such is the case with *Idipsum*, *primitiae spiritus* or *Romans* 1, 20 in *Confessions* alone²⁰. In these examples it is possible to see a Pauline-Neoplatonic synthesis, but with *extentus* we are on simpler ground. Here Augustine's reading, sensibility and experience combine to evolve a theme with deep Scriptural roots. He will turn to the word *distentio* because it is a strong, fresh and novel term, adequate to his awareness of temporality²¹.

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16. The Greek κατά σκοπόν is translated "ad destinatum" in the Vulgate. It clearly means "towards the goal".

17. *De an. quant.* 33, 71; *De musica* 6, 5, 10; *De Trin.* 11 *passim*, 12, 2, 2.

18. Cf. J. ROHMER, *L'intentionnalité des sensations chez Saint Augustin*, in *Augustinus Magister* 1 (Paris, 1954), p. 491-498.

19. The quite exceptional nature of Augustine's exploitation of the Pauline text is shown by comparison with less personal, generalized uses of the same text in e.g. TERTULLIAN, *De resurrect. mort.* 23, 7-9; *De pudicit.* 6, 2; *Ad uxor.* 1, 3, 6; MARIUS VICTORINUS, *Lib. ad Philipp.* 1220 C - 1222 C, p. 102, 17 - 105, 13 Locher.

20. For *Idipsum* see SOLIGNAC, *op. cit.* (*supra* n. 4), p. 550-2. For *primitiae spiritus* see J. PÉPIN, « *Primitiae spiritus* ». *Remarques sur une citation paulinienne des « Confessions » de Saint Augustin*, in *Rev. de l'Hist. des Relig.* 140 (1951), p. 155-201, and SOLIGNAC, *op. cit.*, p. 552-5. On *Rom.* 1, 20 see P. COURCELLE, *Recherches sur les Confessions de saint Augustin*, 2nd ed., Paris, 1968, p. 162-5, p. 175-8.

21. A version of this paper was read to a symposium on Late Roman Studies at Lancaster University on 30 October 1976. I am grateful to the Director of the *Thesaurus Linguae Augustinianae* at Eindhoven/Holland for valuable information.