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 time. He is using the metaphor *distentio* to evoke whatever accompanies or follows upon the cognitive act of measuring time. 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 ἔκτασις. 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*

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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 *distantio*—more light is thrown on them by consideration of the role of memory and *attentio* in perception. Finally, if we explain *distantio* 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 *distantio* in *Conf. II*, 29, 39 conveys the sense of temporality as fragmentation and dispersal: the context, and other words used in the chapter (*dissilui, dilaniuntur*), 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 *distantio*. 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 convolution, or a distortion, and is a translation of the Greek *σπάσμα*, *σπασµός* or *τέτανος*. Other non-Christian authors appear to avoid it, using an equivalent term instead: thus Pliny the Elder speaks of "sufflatae cutis distantus" (*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 nervos distantos", adding, "diuersa distantio diversos edit sonos" (*Serm. 243*, 4). It can also be used of spatial extent or masses, particularly in rhetorically high-flown passages: "omnis ornatus caeli, omnis fecunditas terrae, diffusio maris, distantio aeris, fulgor siderum, claritas solis et lunae" (*Enarr. in ps. 44*, 4). So God is described as "ubique praesentem, et non spatii distantibus, quasi aliqua mole vel distensione diffusum, sed ubique totum" (*Ep. 187*, 41). A further usage is illustrated in Paulinus of Nola: "distantio corporis animae sobrietatem necat" (*Ep. 50*, 13 = Augustine, *Ep. 121*, 13).

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5. CELSUS, *De medicina* 2, 1, 18: "propriae... dentientium... nervorum distantiones"; SCRIBONIUS LARGUS, *Comp. 26*: "dolores cum rubore et distantione oculi sicca"; *Ibid. 89*: "tarna (sc. cataporia) uel quaterna in noctem dare ad inflations in ipsa distantione".

6. Cf. AUGUSTINE, *Enarr. in ps. 149*, 8: "in tympano corium extenditur, in psalterio chordae extenduntur... nervi quanto plus fuerint extensi, tantu 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 παρισσαμοσ in Latin versions of Ecclesiastes and later texts influenced by that work. Thus Eccles. 3, 10 is rendered "deus distensionem magnum dedit hominibus, ut distendantur in ea" in the Ital. Similarly, Eccles. 5, 13 is translated in the Ital. as "perseunt in summa distantiae 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 distantia lanietur" (Comm. on Eccles. 1, 13). Here he is echoing a usage of distensus 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 Bathroitiis qua de Bruto" (Alt. 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, one cannot be certain, and, in any case, the Jerome passage quoted shows that late Latin authors at least would relate distensus 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 Pliny. 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 distensiones, cotidianae distensiones. Here the meaning clearly is "preoccupations or distractions causing anxiety". The word has the same force as distentio in Confessions 2, 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. 11, 29, 39, seeing a possible allusion there to Eccles. 8, 16, suggest that distentio = "distraction" may derive from distineo, whereas distantio = "extension" derives from distendo. L. Alci, La funzione della 'Distentio' nella dottrina agostiniana del tempo, in Augustinianum 15 (1975), p. 328, n. 7, makes wild assertions about the etymology of distantio: 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: "distantiis ea res Samnitium animos"; Seneca, Nat. 4a, praef. 2: "infeliced animum nunc superbia inflamus, nunc cupilitate distendimus"; Cicero, Planc. 79: "distineor et diuellor dolore"; Livy 9, 16, 6: "duea factiones senatum distinebant"; Pliny, Pan. 68, 2: "securus tibi et laetus dies exit, qui principes alios cura et metu distinebat".

10. E.g. Cassian, Cont. 7, 3, 3; 14, 9, 3; 24, 13, 4.
to *distentio* in the senses noted above. Thus he asks "nonne diversae voluptates *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 notumque canticam audientes expectatione uocum futurum et memoria praeteritarum variatur affectus sensusque *distenditur*, ita tibi aliquid accidit incommutabiliter aeterno" (Ibid. II, 31, 42). 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* : "ulentes enim gaudere forinsecus facile nanescunt 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 *multiplicavit* 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*, *dilanio*, and *(in)gem(isco)*. *Dissilio*, which can literally mean "burst apart", as in Virgil, *Aen.* 12, 740-1 "mortalis mucro... ictu/dissiliuit", is a vivid metaphor, used by Augustine in a moral sense: "tupris 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 Hierusalenm 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 *ingenescit grauatus*" (Ibid. 13, 13, 14). Significantly, of these terms, *gemitus* ("anni mei in gemitibus"), *dissilio* ("in tempora dissilui") and *dilanio* ("tumultuos 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 extendus is found, and it is the positive complement of distentus, and the counterpart of intentio: "non distentus, sed extendus, 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 obliiscentes in ea quae ante sunt extendi quae rebus inter nos... qualis futura esset uita aeterna sanctorum" (Conf. 9, 10, 23). And (Ibid. 25) "sicut nunc extendimus nos et rapidas cogitationes attingimus aeternam sapientiam super omnia manentem". In De doctr. christ. 1, 34, 38 Paul is called extendus, it is said, to teach us "ne rebus temporalibus haereamus infirmiter". Elsewhere extendus emphasizes the anticipatory state of the Christian in this life: "non se diceret extenditum, 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, obliiscamur praeterita. Et quod modo laboramus, quod modo gemimus, quod modo suspiramus, quod modo loquimur, quod ex quantulacumque parte sentimus, et capere non possimus, capiensem, perfuemur 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|extendus, 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 dissettand et abruptant ab uno"
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 *uener 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 "deorans tempora et deoratus 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 *universa creatura*, in the same rhetorical vein in which he speaks of the "diffusio maris, distentio aeras" at *Enarr. 44, 4*. When he says of the *caelum caelestis* that "nulla uoce variatur 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 correct*14*, it would be suitably vivid in that context of *doiores, morbi* and *distortiones membrorum*.

Augustine finds *Philipp. 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**18*, 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-

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*13. At Enarr. in ps. 113, serm. 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: Modulo ermeneutico della Antropologia Agostiniana, in Soritti 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". *Atici, 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 (1958) [= Sirenas Augustinianas P.V. Capdànega obidat, 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 volupte*, *vicissitudo temporum.*

*15. For his mistake, see Sermo 255, 6, 6. The Greek Ἐστὶ δὲ, 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, 3, 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. The role of intentio or attentio, a uis animae essential to perception, is stressed by Augustine in early treatises and persists into the later De trinitate. It has been argued that it may be a translation into Neoplatonic terms of the Stoic account of cognitive perception. 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. ii, 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 responsio eorum species eorum”.

Finally, as has been shown above, the Philipp. passage provides Augustine with the term extentus, a positive counterpart to distensus and distentio. His meditation in Conf. ii, 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 i, 20 in Confessions alone. 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 temporality.

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16. The Greek κατὰ σκορότυ 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.
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. i, 3, 6; Marius Victorinus, Lib. ad Philipp. 1220 C - 1222 C, p. 102, 17 - 105, 13 Locher.
21. A version of this paper was read at 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.