A Present Impression of my Non-Existent Past Thoughts
(or My Philosophy Paper)

In the writing “Confessions,” St. Augustine establishes a well-founded basis for
the analysis of time. Through careful examination of the world around him, he
investigates the facets of time. Scientific discoveries throughout the centuries have worn
away the foundations of some of his conclusions, but many of his ideas still contain
value. As a seemingly modest person, St. Augustine leaves a few questions about time
unanswered. As part of my own philosophy, the definition of time can be divided into
time in reference to science and time in reference to human consciousness, each of which
finds basis in at least one of St. Augustine’s beliefs. Though containing some 3rd century
false beliefs, “Confessions” successfully stimulates the future philosopher and creates a
well-thought basis for developing a definition of time.

First, St. Augustine presumes facts commonly accepted during his time period
and within his religion. The most obvious and important presumption St. Augustine
makes is the existence of God. With his belief in God comes his belief in the existence of
objects, possibly time, that are not within the realm of the world in which we live. Also,
he assumes there are ideas that will only be understood by God and He determines if a
human is able to receive such knowledge. During the course of the reading, St.
Augustine makes reference to a battle where the sun had stopped. St. Augustine assumes
it is a miracle or an intervention of God, and thus accepts it as a true occurrence (p. 301).
He also presumes as fact the biblical creation of the world. Since nothing existed except
Him in the beginning, He must have also created time and is omniscient with regards to
the past, present, and future. Since God is eternal, He exists outside the realm of time
and all of his actions do not correspond with time (p. 297). For example, saying that He
never did or always does something is incorrect (p. 304). In essence, His actions are beyond our comprehension. The previous presumptions alter his argument, but many of the references to God in “Confessions” are comparable to when a person talks himself through an arduous task and have little value in St. Augustine’s main arguments.

Secondly, St. Augustine analyzes three unique times: past, present, and future. He quickly assumes during the third paragraph that, since past is present time gone and future is present time yet to be, neither must exist. He also questions the existence of present time since it is just the passage of the future into the past, which again are both non-existent. As a way to analyze this problem more thoroughly, he examines the meaning of when people say that time is long. He starts the argument by examining the fact that since past and future surely do not exist, a long time must be a long present time. St. Augustine proposes that one-hundred years might possibly be a long present time, but since during the first year of that one-hundred year span the one year would be present the following ninety-nine would be the future, the one-hundred year span must not be present. He continues recursively until he determines that, no matter how small he divides present time, it can always be divided again until it contains no extension. So, he concludes present time must not have any extension and therefore only exists in its passing into not being, but he is very dissatisfied with this conclusion and examines the argument further (p 298).

St. Augustine next examines the human mind’s interaction with present time. Realizing now that present time cannot be in itself long and the past and future cannot exist, he examines their apparent existence and extension in the human mind. Since the past was once present time, images developed in memory at that exact time. When a
person remembers a past event, the actual past event is not instilled in his memory, but merely a likeness of that event which is in present time and therefore can be discussed and examined. As for a person predicting the future, St. Augustine states that a person has the ability to expect certain events through the process of planning at the present. Also, by examining certain present conditions such as memories of past events and concepts, future events can be foretold. For example, as I write this paper, the deadline does not exist because it is in the future, but I do know of its potential existence because the syllabus I hold at present and the words of the professor, which are presently in my memory. In addition, at the time that one reads this paper, the deadline will again be non-existent. Only the likeness of the deadline will exist presently in memory. Further, St. Augustine claims that any prediction of the future that does not follow rational thought must be as a result of God’s intervention. St. Augustine concludes now that he has clearly verified the non-existence of past and future (p. 299).

Following this argument, St. Augustine ponders whether time corresponds with the motion of bodies and the possibility that present time may actually have substance. He disagrees with the idea that the heavenly bodies are time, arguing that even if all the heavenly bodies stopped and an object like a potter’s wheel still moved, time would still exist. It would simply change from being measured as the rotation of heavenly bodies around Earth to the rotation of the potter’s wheel. St. Augustine affirms the fact that if the sun completed its orbit in just one hour instead twenty-four, then it would have to go around twenty-four times to be a day and a person would state that the sun is twenty-four times faster. St. Augustine is trying to distinguish between the movement of the sun

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1 As a result of being written in the 3rd century, the proposition presumes that Earth is the center of the universe. As the argument progresses, it becomes evident that this assumption does not discredit the argument.
around the Earth and time, which he asserts is a separate entity, independent of the sun. He proposes that even if the sun stopped, as he believes had happened in a battle, time would still continue. In general, bodies will move at different speeds and even rest, but time can still independently measure the duration of any of these movements or lack of movement. Though he is not fully convinced, he supposes that since time is independent, as he has just discovered, it must have some kind of extension (p. 301).

As a last part of his argument, St. Augustine tries to discover how humans are able to measure time and to finally learn without discretion whether present time has extension. Assuming present time does exist, St. Augustine reads the words: “Deus creator omnium”\(^2\) to introspectively analyze how he determines that certain syllables are longer than others (p. 303). He claims that as he is concluding with the first syllable and starting the second syllable, it would be impossible the compare the two syllables since the first syllable does not exist anymore and the second syllable has yet to exist. Therefore, the comparison of the actual syllables is impossible. However, as both syllables occur at some unique present times, they have the ability to impress an image on the mind. It is through this method that the human mind is able to measure the length of time taken by each syllable. Since at the present time there is the impression onto the mind, present time must have some type of extension (p. 303).

St. Augustine concludes his arguments with a closer analysis of the mind’s relationship with time. He states, “the mind expects, attends and remembers: what it expects passes, by way of what it attends to, into what it remembers (p. 303).” He also contemplates how the future can be exhausted and the past enlarged if neither exists. Again, he turns to the fact that it is the mind which expects and remembers and not time.

\(^2\) God, the creator of all.
As he recites a psalm, the expectation of the rest of the psalm is slowly diminished and his memory of the psalm increases, but the future does not get shorter or the past longer since neither exits. What relates to the psalm also relates to a human life and to all of human history (p. 304).

St. Augustine roughly divides the actual time and time with reference to the human mind, but presently we can create a more clear-cut division between the two different types of time. First, St. Augustine’s claim that time is independent is questionable. When he proposes that time is independent from motion, he only considers the motion of large bodies and assumes that static objects exist. Static objects do not exist because everything is always moving with respect to something else and, in essence, changing. Change is time. The fact that I know time exits is because of the change in the environment around. If time is stopped, change and consequently movement are stopped. The reverse is also true. As time is change and change exists in our finite world then time is thus finite. In response to St. Augustine’s analysis of the seemingly infinite division of shorter and shorter time, picture dropping a rock. As it falls, the rock repeatedly falls half the distance from its previous location and the ground. Seemingly, this rock would appear to be falling infinitely, but instead it does hit the ground. Since a partition in time can be divided in half continually, it must also reach an end. Whether that end is zero or some quantum number is left for future analysis and, as St. Augustine so eloquently did when he left the rest of his argument to the will of God, I will not force answers to questions that currently exist outside the reach of my current knowledge and even, as I believe, outside the field of philosophy. Time has become an actual substance of this world just as light and space has and thus analyzed more specifically by science
and mathematics. Pertaining to God, since the study of time has shifted to scientific analysis, God no longer is directly related to time.³

Though actual time has been adopted by science, the mind’s relationship to time is still within the field of philosophy. Much of St. Augustine’s thoughts on the mind’s relationship with time are still justified. The past does only exist in our memory and the future only exists in our expectations, but the development of the idea of consciousness has made the mind’s involvement at the present time more well-defined, though not dissimilar from St. Augustine’s ideas. When we say that a long time has passed, it means our conscious mind has focused on the time at hand more closely than if we would say that a short time has passed. During sleep when the mind slips from a conscious state, time rapidly escapes us. The same effect also seems to occur when we are very young and do not have a well-established conscious mind yet. Therefore, without our conscious mind, we would be oblivious to time. Instead of stating that a human attends to the present, as St. Augustine does, it is better to say that he is conscious of the present.

In conclusion, St. Augustine explains his ideas clearly, concisely and with an ease that helps prevent him from creating any blatantly false remarks reflecting his time period. He steps one by one through the facets of time and its relationship with other beings of the universe. Presently, many of his ideas about the mind’s interaction with time remain sensible opinions. St. Augustine believed that humans could learn much about the surrounding world, but toward that end, he implies he should not delve too deep into a problem against God’s will. He maintains patience and humility, and sets an

³ Do not mistake this remark with a proof that God does not exist. Even if humans discovered that nothing in this world is directly linked to God, He may still exist. He is by definition incomprehensible to humans and so how can we even find something related to Him since related objects are also more than likely inconceivable. I will stop at that, as this idea is a paper topic in and of itself.
example that philosophers should always build foundations for future generations who may have the grace of God and other resources to go further.