

# Christian Rhythm at the End of Antiquity (4<sup>th</sup> - 6<sup>th</sup> cent. AD) - part 5

Thursday 1 September 2016, by [Pascal Michon](#)

Sommaire

- [Rhythm as Memorial Synthesis -](#)
- [Rhythm as Regulation of \(...\)](#)
- [Rhythm as Distension of \(...\)](#)

[Previous chapter](#)

## Rhythm as Memorial Synthesis - Augustine's *De musica*, 6

This interest in the rhythmic judgment power, with which the soul has been endowed by God, then triggers a discussion of one of her faculties: memory. In his own way, Augustine here pays homage to the classical culture. The nine Muses, whose name was given to “music,” are the daughters of Mnemosyne, the Goddess of memory. But the role played now by memory is entirely new because it does not concern only exterior and social facts but also the inner life of the soul. From the perspective of human perception, he says, there is no rhythm without memory.

— **Master.** As for the reaction rhythms, which, far from obeying only their own impulse, are directed against the passions of the body, they fall under the control of the judgment rhythms, as long as memory can grasp and retain their intervals [*in quantum eorum intervalla potest memoria custodire*]. For we are absolutely incapable of appreciating any rhythm, which consists of intervals of time [*numerus namque iste qui intervallis temporum constat*], without the aid of memory. (*De musica*, 6.8.21, my trans.)

Without the active intervention of the memory, the succession of time-lengths which constitute physical and reaction rhythms, would appear as sheer juxtaposition, as these traces printed on water by a body which were mentioned above. Instead the soul uses memory to incorporate the successive sounds into one rhythmic phrase.

— **Master.** However brief a syllable may be from beginning to end, the beginning is heard at one moment, and the end at another. Thus, it stretches out to fullest length even in an interval of such short duration. It has a middle through which it goes from its beginning to its end. So, reason discovers that extension, whether in time or in space, is susceptible to be infinitely divided, and consequently there is no syllable of which one can hear both the beginning and the end. Thus, in the act of hearing the shortest syllable, if memory does not come to our aid in order to reproduce, when the end of the syllable resounds, the movement which has been effected on hearing the beginning, we shall have heard nothing. (*De musica*, 6.8.21, my trans.)

Just as the eyes project a luminous ray and envelop the things of the material world by an emanation of the soul, the memory “is a kind of light which spreads over the intervals of time and embraces them as far as it can,” embracing the successive moments of time within one single projection of the soul.

— **Master.** So, just as we find help for grasping the intervals between various points of space in the diffusion of the luminous rays, which the narrow pupils of our eyes emit into space while remaining so well related to our bodies that, although they are projected on the distant objects we see, they still receive the impulse of our soul, in the same way, [...] the memory is a kind of light which spreads over the intervals of time [*quod quasi lumen est temporalium spatiorum*] and embraces them as far as it can, if I may say so, extend its power and action. (*De musica*, 6.8.21, my trans.)

Except when the soul acts from her own inner rhythms, she depends on memory for the synthesis of the physical rhythms of the mundane music which strike the ears.

— **Master.** Apart from modifying the way to unfold of progressive rhythms [*exceptis proressoribus quibus etiam ipsum progressum modificant*], the judgment rhythms [*iudiciales illi numeri*] can only appreciate the rhythms which are set in intervals of time [*qui numeros in intervallis temporum sitos*] and which memory presents to them as a humble servant. (*De musica*, 6.8.21, my trans.)

This section of the dialogue is very famous and has attracted a lot of comments in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially in the Husserlian, Jamesian and Bergsonian traditions. Spitzer notes, for instance, that memory appears to Augustine as the faculty which ensures the synthesis of successive moments and compares, I should say equates, the concept of time which results from this view to the Bergsonian “*durée*” and to the Jamesian “flow of consciousness.”

A millennium before Bergson had given his explanation of the *durée intérieure* which can be grasped as a whole only by the simile of a poem, Augustine showed the part played by memory in the rhythm or musical apperception of the unit of a poetic line: his example is the characteristic Ambrosian line *Deus creator omnium* with its indication of space and world-wideness; sensitive as he is to succession in time, he shows how the understanding of the line is conditioned by memory (since the syllables in the moment are still retained by memory after they have ceased to sound). (Spitzer, 1963, p. 28)

He underlines the significance of memory for ensuring the “temporal-rhythmical grounds” both for the “self-consciousness of man” and the “intuition of the world harmony.” And this seems to him a patent prefiguration of the *durée intérieure*.

We must note that the self-consciousness of man rests on temporal-rhythmical grounds: music

with its *durée réelle* becomes the field of investigation for the inner senses by which, and by which alone, world harmony and God can be intuited. (Spitzer, 1963, p. 32)

Although, he criticizes in passing their lack of interest in Augustine, he sees in Bergson and James a clear and unconscious reminiscence of the doctrine exposed in *De musica* and *Confessiones*.

It is in fact unbelievable that Bergson should have stated, for example in the survey which he gave of his philosophy in 1934, in *La Pensée et le Mouvant*, that “no” philosopher before him had looked upon time as anything else than a spatial succession of states without any liaison between them. [...] Independently of Bergson, William James discovered that, in a sequence of musical notes, each single one, as it appears to the listener’s mind, is affected by those before; thus the present phase of conscious life is shaped by the retention of phases past—and by extension in the future: “continuity and temporality are then two names for the same fundamental structure of conscious life,” which has the nature of a stream (hence the “stream of consciousness”). Again, just as in the case of Bergson, one is surprised at the lack of familiarity with Augustine revealed by the modern philosopher James. (Spitzer, 1963, n. 36, p. 159-160)

Surprisingly, Spitzer does not cite Husserl. Yet, the latter quotes, at the very beginning of his *Lectures on the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time* (1905 – 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1928), a now very famous passage of Augustine’s *Confessiones*, where he asks himself what time is.

What then is time? If no one asks me, I know what it is. If I wish to explain it to him who asks me, I do not know. (*Confessiones*, 11.14.17, trans. Outler)

The analysis of time-consciousness is an ancient burden for descriptive psychology and epistemology. The first thinker who profoundly sensed the enormous difficulties inherent in this analysis, and who struggled with them almost to despair, was Augustine (Husserl, 1991, p. 3).

In another essay from the same period entitled *Time in Perception* (1907), we find another reflection which is clearly reminiscent of *De musica*.

The perception of the sound in the perception’s ever new now is not a mere *having* of the sound, even of the sound in the now-phase. On the contrary, we find in each now, in addition to the actual physical content, an *adumbration* [...] If we focus reflectively on what is presently given in the actually present now with respect to the sound of the postilion’s horn, or the rumbling of the coach, and if we reflect on it just as it is given, then we note the *trail of memory* that *extends* the now-point of the sound or of the rumbling. This reflection makes it evident that the *immanent thing* could not be given in its unity at all if the perceptual consciousness did not also encompass, along with the point of actually present sensation, the continuity of fading phases that pertain to the sensations belonging to earlier nows. The past would be nothing for the consciousness belonging to the now if it were not represented in the now; and the now would not be now [...] if it did not stand before me *in that consciousness* as the *limit of a past being*. The past *must* be

represented in this now as past, and this is accomplished through the continuity of adumbrations that in one direction terminates in the sensation-point and in the other direction becomes blurred and indeterminate. (*On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time*, trans. John Barnett Brough, 1991, p. 290)

This relation between Augustine's analysis of memory and time and Bergson's, James' and Husserl's views on the subject has today become a cliché. But if we take a closer look at the matter, we may notice that there are actually significant differences.

First of all, for Bergson as well as for James—as far as I know, Husserl does not mention the issue but he is probably close on this subject with his contemporaries—the musical concept which is thoroughly analyzed and supports their critique of objective time is that of *melody*, not that of *rhythm*. As a matter of fact, it is maybe the main reason why neither Bergson nor James wanted their conceptions of time to be associated with that of Augustine. From a Bergsonian viewpoint, the segmentation of the flow of time into time-lengths could not be anything else but an abusive “spatialization of time.”

Whatever the perspective, Augustine's view on memory is severed from the previous discussions on rhythm which yet provide its framework. But one wonder whether a different philosophical approach could not make better sense of this link. I won't engage here in this discussion but it is clear that another interpretation of Augustine's view on rhythm, memory and time could be developed, for instance, from the anti-Bergsonian perspective elaborated in the 1930s by Bachelard. In his essays *L'Intuition de l'instant* (1932) and *Dialectique de la durée* (1936), Bachelard has laid down the foundations of a new research program which he has named *rhythmanalysis* and which, as one may know, has been revamped, a few decades later, by Lefebvre in his *Elements of Rhythmanalysis* (1992) on a quite different ground actually. Let it suffice to quote here an excellent and recent recapitulation of the opposition between Bergson and Bachelard concerning duration and rhythm.

For Bachelard, the issue is to orient the metaphysical polarity on singularity and discontinuity, rather than on uniqueness and continuity. On the one hand, Bergson intends to purify the intuition of time by the separation of space in temporal duration from the projection of duration into space. On the other hand, Bachelard proposes a discrete intuition of time that makes the spatiotemporal discontinuity converge with the complexity of rhythm. This intuition leads to a *rhythmanalysis* which integrates the natural and psychic irregularities into a complex and heterogeneous regularity, and results in a metaphysics of rhythm, which is at odds with the homogeneous model of the duration flow. The point of divergence consists rather in the fact that temporality is defined by Bergson by the succession of qualitative changes which intertwine without any distinction, whereas it is defined by Bachelard from the original distinction and the “thought” of discontinuous instants. (Polizzi, 2008, my trans.)

I shall return to these important issues in another volume. For the time being, I will restrict myself to a more historicist perspective and try to figure out what Augustine means from his own categories. For him, the duration of the soul is neither smooth nor, so to speak, granular, it is primarily “rhythmic” (*numerosa*). Even when she is considered on her own, i.e. apart from her relation to physical, perceptive and memorial rhythms, the soul moves according to silent “rhythmic

time intervals.”

— **Master.** The soul, even in silence and without any memory, moves in rhythmic time intervals [*agit aliquid anima per temporalia spatia numerosum*]? (*De musica*, 6.6.16, my trans.)

The question is: what are these “silent rhythms” like? We will see that the soul is, so to speak, doubly rhythmic: “*Anima numeris agatur, et numeros agat*” (*De musica*, 6.17.56). On the one hand, she is regulated by rhythms; but on the other hand, she produces by herself rhythms of various ethical qualities.

## **Rhythm as Regulation of the Soul - Augustine’s *De musica*, 6**

Augustine seems first to borrow the core of his speculation directly from Plato: in heaven “there is no time because there is no change.” Time was “made, regulated and measured” by God “in the image of eternity” as the perfectly regular return of the celestial bodies and constellations “according to the laws of regularity, unity and order” clearly shows. Since “the things on earth are subordinate to the things in heaven,” their rhythms “join, through the circle of their times, with the poems of the universe.” Hence, the silent rhythms which regulate the motion of the soul seem to simply emulate, within the limits set by the Fall, the heavenly rhythms pertaining to the music of the sphere.

— **Master.** What are superior things [*superiora*]? Should we not call so those in which a sovereign, permanent, immutable and eternal regularity [*aequalitas*] resides ? A regularity in which there is no time [*ubi nullum est tempus*], because there is no change [*quia nulla mutabilitas est*], but according to which the times are made, regulated and measured [*unde tempora fabricantur et ordinantur et modificantur*] in the image of eternity [*aeternitatem imitantia*], while the revolution of heaven [*dum coeli conversio*] turns back on itself [*ad idem redit*], brings the celestial bodies back to the same point [*coelestia corpora ad idem revocat*], and regulates their course, according to the laws of regularity, unity and order [*legibus aequalitatis et unitatis et ordinationis obtemperat*], by the succession of days, months, lusters and years, and the circular course of the constellations [*siderum orbibus*]. Thus the things on earth [*terrena*] are subordinate [*subiecta*] to the things in heaven [*coelestibus*], and by their rhythmic succession [*numerosa successione*] it is as if they join, through the circle of their times [*orbis temporum suorum*], with the poems of the universe [*quasi carmini universitatis associant* - “carmen” is a poem, song, as well as a tune]. (*De musica*, 6.11.29, my trans.)

The outer physical rhythms, and the inner progressive, reaction and judgment rhythms are clearly separate from the ideal Rhythms that “we recognize only as fleeting shadows.” Due to their immersion in the becoming, whether we observe them in space or time, i.e. as spatial intervals or time-lengths, they tend to deform and drag on, and therefore are often difficult to grasp. Nevertheless, since we do perceive and appreciate them, there must exist in heaven rhythmic Ideas or ideal Rhythms which all imperfect earthly rhythms replicate.

— **Master.** Memory does not only collect the material movements of the soul, whose rhythms [*de quibus numeris*] have been considered above. It also collects the spiritual movements of which I will only say a few words. The simpler they are, the less they demand words, the more they need a quiet mind [*serenae mentis*]. This regularity [*aequilatatem illam*], which sensible rhythms [*in sensibilibus numeris*] do not convey to us in its continuous and lasting perfection, and of which we recognize only a fleeting shadow, would never be for the soul an object of desire if it would not exist somewhere. But it cannot exist in the divisions of space or time, since the former may grow, the latter vanish. So where do you think it is? Answer me if you can. I am sure you won't imagine that it resides in the forms of the bodies in which you will discover, by the simplest examination, lack of regularity. Nor is it in the intervals of time [*in temporum intervallis*], for we do not always know whether they are too long or too short so that the ear cannot grasp their precise extent. I ask you, therefore, where this regularity [*illam aequalitatem*], on which we focus our mind, is found at last, when we strive to find in some bodies or movements of bodies a regularity [*aequalia*], which attentive examination makes us find imperfect. — **Student.** It is doubtless in the world that is superior to the sensible world. Yet, I do not know whether it resides in the soul or in that world which is superior to the soul. (*De musica*, 6.12.34, my trans.)

The master's lesson goes on by reminding the student of the Platonic doctrine of reminiscence. These Ideas of rhythm have been partly forgotten but we can still remember them because they have not been completely erased from our minds.

— **Master.** And if those rhythms are recalled by interrogating someone, do you think that they pass from the mind of the one who questions to the other one? Or, rather, that an internal movement takes place which makes the latter rediscover the ideas he had lost? — **Student.** I believe that this movement develops by itself. (*De musica*, 6.12.35, my trans.)

Naturally, these rhythmic Ideas pertain to God himself. They were created by him and are therefore immutable and eternal.

— **Master.** Well! Tell me now if the rhythms [*hi numeri*] discovered by this method seem to you variable! — **Student.** I am not sure. — **Master.** Are you refusing to admit that they are eternal? — **Student.** Far from it. I recognize them as such. [...] — **Master.** From what source then can the soul receive an eternal and immutable principle if not from an eternal and immutable God [*quod aeternum est et incommutabile, nisi ab uno aeterno et incommutabili Deo*]? — **Student.** I don't see any other believable doctrine. (*De musica*, 6.12.36, my trans.)

Since they are divine, these rhythmic Ideas are the fundamental criteria of beauty. Any beauty, not only "in the sounds which strike the ear, or in the movements of the bodies, but also in the forms which fall under the gaze," is eurhythmic because it presents us with an image of "the regularity we strive for."

— **Master.** These fine objects please us by the rhythm [*Haec igitur pulchra numero placent*] in which we recognize the regularity we strive for [*in quo iam ostendimus aequalitatem appeti*] and

this rhythm is not found only in the sounds which strike the ear, or in the movements of the bodies, but also in the forms which fall under the gaze, and which are more commonly called beautiful. Is there not in fact eurhythmic regularity [*An aliud quam aequalitatem numerosam esse arbitraris*], when in one body two members form a pair and correspond to each other, or a single organ [e.g. the eyes and nose] occupies an intermediate place, at equal distance of each side? — **Student.** That's my opinion. (*De musica*, 6.13.38, my trans.)

Thus, the rhythmic beauties, Augustine claims, are those with regular, similar and symmetrical features. Even in perfume, flavor and touch, but particularly in sound and picture, “wherever there is regularity and similitude, there is eurhythmy.”

— **Master.** Therefore, when we seek in these objects that which is in harmony with the measure of our nature [*convenientia pro naturae nostrae modo*], when we repel that which is disharmonious with us [*et inconvenientia respuimus*], although we understand well that they may be suitable to other beings, are we not charmed by a certain feeling of regularity [*quodam aequalitatis iure*] which reveals to us that, by virtue of hidden relations, there is symmetry between equal things [*paria paribus tributa esse*]? This is what can be observed in perfumes, flavors, and in touch. It is difficult indeed to analyze these sensations in depth, but it is very easy to experience them: for there is nothing in the visible things that does not please us without regularity and similitude [*quod nobis non aequalitate aut similitudine placeat*]. Now, wherever there is regularity and similitude, there is eurhythmy [*Ubi autem aequalitas aut similitudo, ibi numerositas*]. Indeed, is there nothing more regular, more similar, than one plus one [*nihil est quippe tam aequale aut simile quam unum et unum*]? Do you have any objection — **Student.** No, I agree entirely. (*De musica*, 6.13.38, my trans.)

In a way, Augustine continues here a long line of philosophers, starting with Plato, who regarded rhythm as an important ethical tool. As many pagan thinkers before him, he thinks that rhythm may help to educate and better the human beings.

As many Platonic theoreticians, he finds the criteria for such betterment in the traces of the superior rhythmic rules that one may find in his own soul and that also pervade the rhythmic beauties one may encounter. Rhythm is clearly a means of regulation.

Moreover, he shares with many of his pagan predecessors an old ethical conception which is opposite to that more common among the moderns. As Foucault remarks in his *History of Sexuality* (1984, French ed., vol. 3, p.157 sq.), for the Ancients, the body is not always responsible for the troubles of the soul; instead, some drives, which belong to the soul herself, put her astray and make her wrongly use the body. Guilty desire, i.e. “concupiscence,” comes from within the soul herself. The problem then for her is to free herself from her attraction for “the things in time.”

— **Master.** Let us have God within our heart [*habentes in intimo Deum*], who offers to our love only immutable and eternal beauties. In such a way, the things in time [*haec temporalia*] present themselves to us without engaging us in their bonds. The objects outside the body move away without causing us pain. The body itself decomposes without suffering, or without too vivid

suffering, and is restored to its original nature in order to receive a new form. A multitude of troubles and sorrows arises from the attention which the soul gives to the body, from its attachment to a unique and peculiar work, in defiance of the universal law. (*De musica*, 6.14.48, my trans.)

Rhythms, even the most material and sensible among them, are therefore ethically neutral. They are “beautiful in their own way” and only naive love for them is blameworthy because they make the soul forget that only “regularity and order” are important in them.

— **Master.** It is not the rhythms—which are inferior to reason and beautiful in their own way [*numeri qui sunt infra rationem et in suo genere pulchri sunt*—but the love of inferior beauty that degrades the soul. When she does not love in this kind of beauty the regularity [*in illa non modo aequalitatem*] of which we have spoken sufficiently according to the plan of this work, and the order [*sed etiam ordinem diligit*], losing then her own order [*amisit ipsa ordinem suum*], the soul is at once severed from the higher order to which she belongs. Yet she is not expelled from the universal order, for she reaches then to the appropriate rank and place where a perfect hierarchy calls the souls which have been so degraded. To subject oneself to order or to be subjected by the ties of order are two very different things. The soul submits herself to order, when she commits herself entirely to that which is above her, I mean to God, and loves the other souls as her sisters. (*De musica*, 6.14.46, my trans.)

All evidence gathered in this section show that the “silent rhythms” of the soul are first reflections of the divine rhythmic regulation. However, because Augustine is a Christian, or better yet, a devoted Christian, he introduces in this quite common ethical perspective significant subsidiary elements which change somehow its overall meaning.

## **Rhythm as Distension of the Soul - Augustine's *De musica*, 6 and *Confessiones* (397-400 AD)**

First of all, by re-actualizing and enjoying the earthly traces of the ideal Rhythms, the soul must turn and rise towards God. Whereas previous thinkers, even neo-Platonists, were interested in political or ethical life in this world, Augustine is above all interested in the afterlife in the Beyond. Thus, if a Christian must care for rhythms, it is not to become a full citizen in a more or less democratic city-state, nor to prepare himself to public service in an aristocratic republic, nor to enjoy life among a limited circle of friends, nor to engage in a bureaucratic career in an imperial state, nor even to try to live in a mystical harmony with the great living cosmos. It is only, if I may say so, to prepare himself to eternal life. That is why one must “relate all movements and rhythms of human activity to this end.” If rhythm is used otherwise than to obtain “purification,” it becomes meaningless.

— **Master.** The divine Scripture, in a host of books of incomparable authority and holiness, warns us to love God our Lord, with all our heart, with our whole soul, with all our minds, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. If, therefore, we relate all movements and rhythms of human activity to this end [*Ad hunc igitur finem si omnes illos humanae actionis motus, numerosque referamus*], we shall undoubtedly be purified [*sine dubitatione mundabimur*]. Do you agree? — **Student.** Certainly. (*De musica*, 6.14.43, my trans.)



Secondly, whereas previous thinkers, especially neo-Platonists, developed their ethics within the framework of cosmic doctrines of time, Augustine builds his own ethics from a radically new temporal perspective which radically transforms the role attributed to the soul and therefore its rhythms.

This new doctrine of time which is fully exposed in Book 11 of the *Confessiones* (397-400 AD). From chap. 14 up to the end of the Book, Augustine deploys a long meditation on time where he elaborates further the ideas presented in *De musica*.

I shall leave aside the beginning of the discussion which concerns two theological issues which have no direct bearing on our subject: *Genesis* states that God made the universe, but this statement suggests that there was a time *before* the creation of the universe. That would mean that God exists temporally and is therefore limited by time. Another vexing point concerns the “And God said” (*Gen*, 1.3) passage in *Genesis*. Augustine explains that if all human speech exists in time, with even a single word having a beginning and an end, the divine Word could not have been like temporal speech: God’s Word is always being said, and has no beginning and no end.

Concerning the time on earth, Augustine starts by deconstructing the common view of time as a real flow. He argues that the past and the future do not *actually* exist: all we have is the present moment.

It is manifest and clear that there are neither times future nor times past. Thus it is not properly said that there are three times, past, present, and future. Perhaps it might be said rightly that there are three [present] times: a time present of things past; a time present of things present; and a time present of things future. For these three do coexist somehow in the soul, for otherwise I could not see them. The time present of things past is memory; the time present of things present is direct experience; the time present of things future is expectation. (*Confessiones*, 11.20.26, trans. Outler, my mod.)

But when we break that moment down into the smallest instance, we cannot define what the present moment really means. This present moment cannot have space—for it is time—nor can it have duration, for once it has happened it is gone into the past.

If anyone asks me, “How do you know this?”, I can answer: “I know because we measure. We could not measure things that do not exist, and things past and future do not exist.” But how do we measure present time since it has no extension? It is measured while it passes, but when it has passed it is not measured; for then there is nothing that could be measured. (*Confessiones*, 11.21.27, trans. Outler, my mod.)

From this Augustine concludes that time doesn’t really exist on earth, even though it seems to, since it can be discussed and measured.

Looking up again towards heaven, Augustine then wonders whether time could be constituted and

measured by the movements of the cosmic bodies. But his answer is also in both cases negative. We do not measure time by the circuit of the sun but the circuit of the sun by the time. Moreover, he argues, “the motions of the heavenly bodies” do not “constitute time” by themselves.

I once heard a learned man say that the motions of the sun, moon, and stars constituted time; and I did not agree. For why should not the motions of all bodies constitute time? What if the lights of heaven should cease, and a potter's wheel still turn round: would there be no time by which we might measure those rotations and say either that it turned at equal intervals, or, if it moved now more slowly and now more quickly, that some rotations were longer and others shorter? [...] I shall, therefore, not ask any more what it is that is called a day, but rather what time is, for it is by time that we measure the circuit of the sun, and would be able to say that it was finished in half the period of time that it customarily takes if it were completed in a period of only twelve hours. [...] Let no man tell me, therefore, that the motions of the heavenly bodies constitute time. (*Confessiones*, 11.23.29-30, trans. Outler)

Having examined both earthly and heavenly kinds of time, Augustine's discussion seems, thus, to arrive to a dead end. But in a surprising about-face, he then suggests the possibility that time is something that we experience as a kind of “distension of the soul.”

From this it appears to me that time is nothing other than [distension]; but [distension] of what I do not know. This is a marvel to me. The [distension] may be of the [soul] itself. [*Nihil esse aliud tempus quam distentionem: sed cuius rei, nescio, et mirum, si non ipsius animi*]. (*Confessiones*, 11.26, trans. Outler, my mod.)

I am borrowing here Patrice Cambronne's translation of *distentio* as “distension,” which I find better than Outler's as “extendedness.” Jacques Darriulat beautifully explains the complex active connotations of the word in Latin. “Distension” means “extension” or “deployment” but it has also a violent side which evokes the soul tearing herself away from time. “This distension opens in time a non-temporal interval.”

Let us recall that *distentio* means in Latin “extension,” “deployment”: *distendere aciem* means “to deploy one's line in battle.” To translate, therefore, *distentio* by “distension,” which evokes the idea of suffering and not that of opening or effusion, is perhaps a contradiction. One must recognize, however, that *distendere* has also the meaning of “to torture, to torment,” and that *distentio* also refers in the medical vocabulary to a convulsion or a contraction. According to a note in Augustine's *Works* (I, Paris, La Pléiade, n. 1, p. 1051) relating to this passage of the *Confessions*, the Latin *distentio* was meant to translate the Greek *diastasis*, found in Plotinus (*Enneades*, 11.41): “*Diastasis oun zôês khronon eikei*.” The word evokes in Greek also the violence of a rupture (in medicine: tearing, convulsion, dislocation) and the measure of a harmony (musical interval). Plotinus' quote states that “the life of the soul, by dissociating itself, occupies time.” The continuation of his meditation shows that this is not a fall but rather an extension of existence which opens up to “an incessant progress to the infinite” and thus illustrates the famous formula of *Timaeus* according to which “time is an image of eternity” (1.46-47). This distension opens in time a non-temporal interval which is the proper place where the memory operates.

Admittedly, we cannot grasp the past—for it has no existence—but we can consider the memories of the images or sensations we had in the past. The same for the future. We cannot seize it directly but we can imagine or desire it. The soul has the power to extend herself (*distentio*), by the ministry of memory and imagination, towards past and future. Time is thus not a feature or property of the world, but a property of the soul. In other words, time results from acts of attention of the soul which allow either recollection of the past or anticipation of that which is still to come.

These views are so famous and have attracted so many erudite and brilliant comments that one hesitates to discuss them once again. A first point may however attract our rhythmological attention. The so-called “interiorization of temporality” in fact does not imply any interest in temporality *per se*. It is often said that, whereas the becoming was rejected by Platonic thinkers in favor of an immobile perfect world, Augustine found the path to salvation in the becoming itself. But this assertion is ambiguous and unclear. This becomes obvious if we compare Augustine to the moderns. Contrarily to Bergson, James or Husserl who will be fascinated by the continuous flowing of the mind, but also unlike Bachelard who will insist, for his part, on the discrete succession of instants which compose duration, Augustine does not value time for itself. Quite the opposite: as most of ancient thinkers except Democritean, Epicureans and a few others, his only objective is to escape from duration and becoming in order to reach an immobile, serene and quiet life. Augustine belongs to a world that has become foreign to us and which must be studied first through its own categories, before being discussed from our own. Unlike for us, moderns, the issue for Augustine is not how to conceive of the being in the becoming, or the mind in the duration, or the consciousness in the flow of time, but on the contrary, how to help the soul to escape from becoming, duration and time. As Darriulat notices, the “distension of the soul” (*distentio animi*), which for Augustine constitutes time, paradoxically (for us) opens up an essentially “non-temporal interval” within the temporal flow itself. The “silent rhythms” pertains therefore, at least partially, to this “distension of the soul.”

However, we may notice that the presentation of this particular power to constitute time—and to escape from it—is supported by the introduction of a metric argument. The soul, more precisely the memory—but also the imagination—becomes the productive center of human time through a discussion on rhythm of poetry.

*Deus Creator omnium*—This verse of eight syllables alternates between short and long syllables [...] What is it, then, that I can measure? Where is the short syllable by which I measure? [*Quid ergo est, quod metior?*] Where is the long one that I am measuring? Both have sounded, have flown away, have passed on, and are no longer. And still I measure, and I confidently answer—as far as a trained ear can be trusted—that this syllable is single and that syllable double. And I could not do this unless they both had passed and were ended. Therefore I do not measure them, for they do not exist anymore. But I measure something in my memory which remains fixed [*sed aliquid in memoria mea metior, quod infixum manet*]. (*Confessiones*, 11.27.35, trans. Outler, my mod.)

When Augustine argues that we measure the time by “the impression that things make on [us] as they pass by” and that “remains after they have passed by,” that we do not measure “the things

themselves which have passed,” in modern language, that time is subjective and not objective, he supports his claim by an analysis of the perception of a succession of syllables.

It is in you, O [soul] of mine, that I measure the [intervals of time] [*In te, anime meus, tempora metior*]. Do not shout me down that [they exist][objectively]; do not overwhelm yourself with the turbulent flood of your impressions. In you, as I have said, I measure the [intervals of time] [*In te, inquam, tempora metior*]. I measure as time present the impression that things make on you as they pass by and what remains after they have passed by—I do not measure the things themselves which have passed by and left their impression on you. This is what I measure when I measure [intervals of time] [*ipsam metior, cum tempora metior*]. Either, then, these are the [intervals of time] or else I do not measure time at all [*Ergo aut ipsa sunt tempora, aut non tempora metior.*] (*Confessiones*, 11.27.36, trans. Outler, my mod.).

The introduction of poetic rhythms into the discussion has two significant consequences. At a general level, it implies to consider time not any more on an ontological or naturalistic basis, as in Greek philosophical thought, but on a linguistic and anthropological ground, as in Jewish religious creed. Time is not to be conceived as real flow or as movement of heavenly bodies, but it must be linked with the power to utter words which is in human beings as a reflection of God’s Word.

At a local level, it triggers a transformation of the conception of the soul itself. Commentators often cite Book 10 where memory is presented as a kind of storage of disparate memories, a collection of images, sounds, odors, tastes and feelings. Fascinated by the comparison with Rousseau and Proust, “the scent of lilies” and that of “violets,” one underlines “the fields and spacious halls of memory, where are stored as treasures the countless images that have been brought into them from all manner of things by the senses” (*Confessiones*, 10.8.12). Memory is where one can “meet and recall oneself.”

Similarly all the other things that were brought in and heaped up by all the other senses, I can recall at my pleasure. And I distinguish the scent of lilies from that of violets while actually smelling nothing; and I prefer honey to mead, a smooth thing to a rough, even though I am neither tasting nor handling them, but only remembering them. All this I do within myself, in that huge hall of my memory. For in it, heaven, earth, and sea are present to me, and whatever I can cogitate about them—except what I have forgotten. There also I meet myself and recall myself. (*Confessiones*, 10.8.13-14, trans. Outler)

As we know, this conception of memory has inspired countless writers and philosophers throughout Western history. However, one should note that, in Book 11, memory is not any longer considered as mere storage of memories but is endowed with the power to unify a rhythmic line, whether in music, dance or poetry. Memory constitutes the human time not only because it enables us to retain traces of the past but because it helps us to recognize, appreciate and unify a series of time-lengths. Memory is rhythmic. The core of human constitution of time is therefore rhythmic. Time exists on earth not because of the circuits in heaven but because the human being has been endowed with an inner capacity to recognize and appreciate rhythm, especially rhythm in language. Indeed, Darriulat recalls that the first mention in Western history of silent reading was made by Augustine (*Confessiones*, 6.3) and concerned his mentor Ambrose. This completely new experience must have

had a great impact on his reflection concerning the flow of the soul in time and the dynamic that supports it.

We can now come back to our question. The “silent rhythms” of the soul seem to reflect a second direction in Augustine’s thought. As a matter of fact, if we observe them in an eschatological perspective, we can notice that they tend to escape from sheer metrics. Contrarily to what some moderns may have reproached Augustine for, they are explicitly opposed to “exaggerated monotony” and “false harmony,” i.e. based on sheer calculation of proportion. There are not strictly measured and numbered anymore and pertain, so to speak, to a kind of *intuition of the ear*.

— **Master.** Why do we like sometimes to put at the end of a verse two short syllables instead of one long? Is it not a demand of the ear? What is met here is not a regular rhythm [*nec in his aequalitatis numerus*], since the measure is the same with a long or two brief, it is a relation of order [*sed ordinis vinculum*]. It would take too long to study in the rhythms of times [*in numeris temporum*] all that relates to this issue. In a word, the very ear rejects forms which are approved by the eyes, either because of their exaggerated monotony, or because of their beginning on the off-beat, and other analogous defects in which it condemns not irregularity, since the symmetry of the parts subsists, but a false harmony. (*De musica*, 6.14.47, my trans.)

Augustine finishes his treatise with a strange evocation of the condition of the soul after death. Maybe as a consequence of the belief in the reincarnation of body and soul after the Final Judgment, the whole paragraph is devoted to the *numeri*, i.e. the rhythms which will rise in her, just as they rose during her earthly life when she was meditating “in connection with an easy and habitual movement of the body like a walk or a psalmody.” Even in Paradise, rhythms will be present in the soul. When we will “see God and the pure truth, *face to face*, without the slightest trouble, some rhythms with which we move the bodies” will again rise in her.

— **Master.** If often, when our thought aims, with deep attention, at immaterial and immutable things, something raises in us by chance, in connection with an easy and habitual movement of the body like a walk or a psalmody [*sive deambulantes, sive psallentes*], some temporal rhythms [*numeros temporales*] that vanish without our knowledge, although they would not exist without an effort of our activity, if, finally, when we are absorbed into our vain imaginations, we also produce rhythms without being aware of them, how much higher and lasting will this state of the soul be when our corruption assume incorruptibility and our mortality immortality? [...] What happiness we will feel, when seeing only God and the pure truth, *face to face* as it has been said, without the slightest trouble, some rhythms with which we move our bodies [*numeros quibus agimus corpora*] will rise within us? One cannot believe, indeed, that the soul finds her happiness in the goods which owe her their existence, without being able to find it in those that make her good by herself. (*De musica*, 6.15.49, my trans.)

[Next chapter](#)