

Article

Hermeneutical Systematic Dimensions of the Debate on God as Timeless and/or Temporal

Adriani Milli Rodrigues 

Department of Theology and Christian Philosophy, Theological Seminary, Andrews University,
Berrien Springs, MI 49104-1500, USA; adriani@andrews.edu

Abstract: While the debate on God’s eternity as timeless and/or temporal is a fascinating topic in itself, especially in philosophical theology, the discussion of time and temporality has a hermeneutical systematic potential for the articulation of Christian theology. In this article, I explore the hermeneutical systematic dimensions of time and timelessness for Christian theology in Augustine’s *Confessions* (Book XI) in dialogue with contemporary articulations of divine timelessness and temporality, as delineated by Allan Padgett and William Craig. The study identifies how timelessness and temporality are hermeneutically and systematically shaped and serve as presuppositions for related concepts in anthropological and cosmological approaches that inform different views about the relationship of God with His creatures.

Keywords: time; timeless eternity; God; creation; anthropology

1. Introduction

The famous statement from James Barr underlining that “if such a thing as a Christian doctrine of time has to be developed, the work of discussing and developing it must belong not to biblical but to philosophical theology” (Barr 1969, p. 156) should not be used to restrict the debate on God as timeless or temporal to philosophical endeavors. While this discussion is particularly fruitful in the realm of philosophical theology per se,¹ there are relevant hermeneutical systematic dimensions of divine timelessness and/or temporality that could be further explored in the systematic articulation of Christian theology. In the 1980’s, Fernando Canale suggested that time and timelessness are “primordial presuppositions” in theological reasoning (Canale 1987). This suggestion has the potential to take a step further concerning the significance of God’s timelessness and/or temporality for the articulation of Christian theology. Instead of focusing on this topic as a theme in itself, which could be studied, for instance, in the context of a dialogue between science and theology, the idea of timelessness and/or temporality as a presupposition would rather take this discussion as a hermeneutical perspective for the systematic elaboration of Christian theology. In this case, God’s timelessness and/or temporality would not be explored as an end in itself but as hermeneutical presuppositions that involve a cluster of ideas and assumptions relevant to the systematic articulation of theology. To be sure, the dialogue with science would still be helpful. Nevertheless, its usefulness would not be limited to the discussion of time or timeless per se but to further clarify the hermeneutical implications of these notions for reflections on systematic theology.

In this article, I attempt to explore time/timeless hermeneutically in systematic theological reflection. More specifically, I take Augustine’s reflection on time in *Confessions*, which could be considered nowadays “the most celebrated among all ancient texts dealing with this topic” (Zachhuber 2002, p. 68).² I use this influential classic as a systematic springboard for dialoguing with contemporary accounts of divine timelessness and/or temporality, namely, accounts articulated by Allan Padgett and William Craig, from a hermeneutical perspective.



Citation: Rodrigues, Adriani Milli. 2024. Hermeneutical Systematic Dimensions of the Debate on God as Timeless and/or Temporal. *Religions* 15: 888. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15080888>

Academic Editor: Fábio Py

Received: 18 June 2024

Revised: 21 July 2024

Accepted: 22 July 2024

Published: 24 July 2024



Copyright: © 2024 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

My hermeneutical approach in this study is systematic in nature. I attempt to discern how the formulation of one idea, which can be philosophical and/or theological, serves as a presupposition or assumption to lead to other ideas and conclusions in the theories that I explore below. My first task is to reflect hermeneutically on time and temporality in Augustine's *Confessions*.

2. Hermeneutical Reflections on Time and Temporality in Augustine's *Confessions*

Time and/or temporality is the hermeneutical key used by Augustine to address the critical question raised throughout Book XI of *Confessions* (AD 397).³ The main topic of discussion in Book XI is God's creation of the world (Genesis 1:1), and the critical question raised by opponents in the text speculates what God was possibly doing before the creation of the world (see Book 11, Chapter X). The followers of Mani raised this question against Christians, who believed in *creatio ex nihilo* (McEvoy 1984, p. 553).⁴ In systematic theological terms, the discussion of Augustine is situated in the doctrine of God, more precisely, the actions of God before the creation of the world. While the doctrine of creation is not at stake in this question, this doctrine does serve as a point of reference for the question, and the answer given by Augustine further qualifies creation from the hermeneutical perspective of timelessness and temporality.

2.1. God's Timeless Eternity and Time

Even though the opponents' question is not explicitly about God's timelessness and/or temporality, the question is framed from a temporal standpoint since they ironically speak of potential divine actions *before* creation. Indeed, a sequential logic of *before* and *after* is a temporal logic. Augustine immediately identifies this hermeneutical assumption in the question, and in Chapter XI, he starts to elaborate on the eternity of God, which is hermeneutically informed by his presupposition of timelessness. To put it simply, he is clearly suggesting that the question raised by the opponents is flawed, as it is systematically incoherent with God's (timeless) eternity. Another systematic and hermeneutical step taken by Augustine is to give priority to God's nature (eternity) over his actions. In other words, if God's eternal nature is timeless, this should systematically inform and hermeneutically ground the understanding of his actions, particularly before creation.

It is noteworthy that Augustine's hermeneutical use of time and/or timelessness in the West to challenge the temporal logic of his opponents and ultimately disqualify the relevance of their question is somehow similar to previous Christological debates in the East that also took place in the fourth century. In these debates, orthodox responses to Arianism affirmed the eternity of the Son from a timeless generation standpoint "to refute the Arian claim that 'there was [a time] when the Son was not'" (Meyer 1999, p. 240). However, Augustine's hermeneutical use of time and/or timelessness in *Confessions* seems more explicit and elaborated in comparison to, for instance, the writings of Athanasius.⁵ On the other hand, his elaboration is not shaped with the tone of absolute assurance. Augustine appears to be sure about his conviction that God is timeless and that the created world is temporal, but he rather hesitates on how to explain specifically what time and timelessness exactly mean. In his aporias about time, he famously highlights in Chapter XIV that he thinks he knows what time is. But if someone poses this question (what is time?) to him, then he does not know how to explain it. Likewise, when Augustine (1886, p. 167) affirms divine timelessness in Chapter XIX, particularly underscoring that "nothing is future" for God, he alludes to Psalm 139:6, which is actually a passage (vv. 1–6) on God's omniscience, in order to exclaim that God's timelessness is well beyond his understanding and too far from his view. Instead of strictly adopting a rational philosophical discourse, Augustine confesses his ignorance to God and prays for understanding (see especially Chapters XXII and XXV).

Paradoxically, considering his spiritual and intellectual desire to know more about time and timelessness, Augustine explains more than seems necessary to address the critical question of the opponents (what was God doing before the creation of heaven and earth?).

Apparently, the answer could be logically restricted to the claim of God's timelessness, and this claim appears to be largely articulated in Chapters XI–XIII. In Chapter XI, Augustine (1886, p. 167) postulates that nothing passes away in God's timeless eternity. Rather, "the whole" is always present to God. His timeless eternity is "an ever-present eternity" (Augustine 1886, p. 168). In Chapter XIII, he qualifies God's creation of the heavens and earth as the creation of time. From this perspective, time could not pass before the creation of heaven and earth since before creation, "there was no time" (Augustine 1886, p. 168). On the basis of this timeless conception of eternity, the hermeneutical effect in the doctrine of God, according to Augustine's theological systematization, is that it does not make sense to speak of God's action *before* creation, because *before* and *after* become a reality only with the creation of time, which accompanies the creation of heavens and earth. Therefore, time is something created by God rather than a feature of His nature. To use Augustine's words in Chapter XIV, "no times are co-eternal with Thee" (Augustine 1886, p. 168).

2.2. Time and Anthropology

As I mentioned above, Augustine already articulated in Chapter XIII the ontological hermeneutical perspective that responds to the critical question that appears throughout Book XI. He repeats this same answer at the end of the Book, in Chapter XXX. However, between Chapters XIII and XXX, which is seemingly the largest portion of Book XI, he extensively elaborates on the idea of time. Perhaps Augustine is more intrigued by the reality of time than the idea of timelessness. Or, alternatively, he assumes that the understanding of divine timelessness benefits from a contrastive elaboration of the concept of time. Be as it may, the connection established by Augustine between the creation of the world and the creation of time would seem to suggest that he will elaborate on the notion of time from a cosmological standpoint. But he surprisingly avoids this route. Instead, he prefers to speak about time from the perspective of anthropology. As McEvoy (1984, p. 550) emphasizes, "Augustine's view of time becomes a vital element in his theory of the human subject". To use the language of systematic theology, presuppositions about the ontology of time hermeneutically qualify the doctrine of creation and especially the doctrine of humanity. While the connection with creation would prevent Augustine's theory of time from becoming completely subjective, that is, defined in terms of human perception or awareness of time, his focus on anthropology does make his notion of time more subjective than objective. Systematically speaking, however, the initial connection of time with the doctrine of creation entails a significant hermeneutical effect on theological anthropology, namely, the idea that human beings share the experience of temporality with creation, not with the eternal (timeless) God. And if temporal life does not have the nature of God as the point of reference for understanding what temporal experience truly is, then the referent in creation is humanity itself.

Interestingly, the move from cosmology to anthropology in the reflection on time distinguishes Augustine, who largely followed Neoplatonism,⁶ from the Greek tradition (Zachhuber 2002, p. 72). As McEvoy (1984, p. 558) stipulates, Plato and Aristotle included cosmological dimensions in their views of time, particularly in terms of the motions and measurements of celestial bodies.⁷ Zachhuber (2002, p. 77) maintains that with the move to anthropology, more specifically the human soul, Augustine attempts to avoid the Greek cosmological idea of a world soul in the discussion of time. If this assessment is sound, the hermeneutical use of timelessness and time in Augustine's theology involves a complex relationship with the Greek tradition. The notion of timeless eternity is certainly aligned with Neoplatonism, while the Augustinian temporality of creation would be somehow distinguished from Greek cosmology. Thus, even though his hermeneutics of time focuses on the doctrine of humanity, it also paradoxically touches on the doctrine of creation, given its contrast to the Greek tradition. Augustine (1886, p. 171) states that he had "heard from a learned man that the motions of the sun, moon, and stars constituted time". The bishop of Hippo does see a point in this in light of Genesis 1:14, according to which the celestial bodies serve as signs for days, seasons, and years. Yet, he is unconvinced of a cosmological

theory of time. Conversely, Augustine (1886, p. 171) seems to allude to Joshua 10:12–13 when he says that “at the prayer of one the sun stood still in order that he might achieve his victorious battle, the sun stood still, but time went on.” Moreover, he argues that we are able to measure time not only when bodies are moving but also when they stand still at rest (Augustine 1886, p. 172). For these reasons, the bishop of Hippo thinks that it is not the movement of cosmological bodies that defines time but the perception and measurement of the human soul (Augustine 1886, p. 168).

Human Perception and Measurement of Time

Considering that perception and measurement are key concepts in Augustine’s anthropological account of time, the bishop of Hippo first needs to conceptually articulate what time is in order to later explain how it is anthropologically perceived and measured. If timeless eternity describes a whole present, time conversely refers to a transient reality that passes away. In this explanation, Augustine outlines what is known as presentism, that is, only the present exists.⁸ As he points out, “the past now is not, and the future is not as yet” (Augustine 1886, p. 168). The ontological inexistence of the past and future times has hermeneutical implications for anthropology. First, only the present can be perceived by the human soul. Nevertheless, can we measure the passing of time if past and future do not exist and, therefore, cannot be perceived? At the same, we do qualify an event in the past as very far or not too far. In other words, we are able to compare the temporal position, so to speak, of different events in the past. Similarly, we usually say that an event in the future is close or distant. This use of spatial language for temporal events implies some kind of measurement. But, again, how can we measure something that does not exist anymore (past) or yet (future)?

Augustine’s (1886, p. 173) answers to these questions focus on the human mind. The past, the present, and the future exist in the mind in the form of memory, consideration/perception, and expectation, respectively. Inasmuch as past events, by definition, at some point existed in the present, human perception was able to record their passing images in memory.⁹ On the other hand, events in the future can be mentally anticipated in the present in the form of expectation, particularly on the basis of present elements perceived as signs or causes of what is going to happen (Augustine 1886, p. 169). In both cases, my mental references to the past and the future take place in the present. The bishop of Hippo gives the example of his childhood, which is in the past (and, therefore, does not exist anymore), but he can behold its image mentally (drawing it from memory) in the present (Augustine 1886, p. 169). Similarly, future events “can be foretold from things present which now are, and are seen” (Augustine 1886, p. 170).

Based on this account of human temporal perception, which involves the present construction of memories and the expectation of future events, Augustine explains how the mind measures time. Instead of measuring the time of the events themselves, what is actually measured are the mental impressions fixed in our memory (Augustine 1886, p. 173). Therefore, the measure of time is, in fact, a mental measure that organizes in the present the memories of past things and the expectations of future events in a sort of spatial logic of sequential events.

2.3. Human Temporality and God’s Timelessness

The overall impression of Book XI, therefore, is that Augustine did not only answer the critical question of what God was doing *before* the creation of the world, but he mainly explained how the (anthropological) experience of temporality happens once the world was created. To put it in another way, the bishop of Hippo spent more time explaining his conception of human (created) temporality than his notion of divine timelessness. However, it should be noted that what is anthropologically explained about created temporality is somehow mirroring the timelessness of God. To be more specific, the definition of God’s timelessness is close to what the human soul/mind is able to do with created temporal experience. Inasmuch as past and future events do not exist ontologically, temporal

life is transient and unable to ontologically experience the whole of reality as present. Nevertheless, the past, the present, and the future do exist as a whole (or at least almost as a whole) in the human soul/mind. Indeed, it is this whole of reality as present that makes possible the measurement of time, going back to the past of memory or moving forward to the future of expectation. In short, to have the whole of reality as present is precisely what defines God's timeless eternity in Augustine. Thus, this reflection on temporality hermeneutically informs how the human soul is able to mentally mirror the reality of what is conceived as divine timelessness. This connection between temporality and timelessness, where the former is a shadow of the latter, is actually in line with the Platonic/Neoplatonic tradition, as expressed in the famous statement that time is the moving image of (timeless) eternity.¹⁰ Ultimately, what Augustine hermeneutically provides in his elaboration of timelessness and temporality in Book XI is seemingly an account of *imago Dei* in the human soul,¹¹ following a Neoplatonic perspective, in which the human experience of temporality emulates what is defined as divine timelessness.

Yet, in this emulation, measurement, which is a key aspect of (human) temporality, does not relate to timelessness. In contrast to the absolute ontological simultaneity of timelessness, measurement works with chronological (and not merely logical) sequences of events and even compares the chronological extension of different sequences. One could argue that measure is not necessary in the realm of timelessness because the inexistence of past and future (presentism) would be only a problem (if this is considered a problem) for temporal creation, in which reality passes away in a chronological fashion. In a timeless reality, it could be argued that the past, present, and future exist simultaneously, without chronological movement or extension. This would exclude the need for measurement and even make the distinction between past, present, and future meaningless. In my estimation, this ontological conception is puzzling. Hermeneutically speaking, how is the reality of creation not co-eternal with God in the timeless realm if, for Him, there is no chronological distinction between the events? As I have indicated above, one of Augustine's main intentions in his qualification of time as a created reality was to avoid the implication that time would be co-eternal with God since only God, and not creatures, are truly eternal. However, I find it difficult to make this important ontological and theological distinction between God and His creation without the chronological reality of *before* and *after* in an alleged timeless realm. If Augustine is right in affirming that there is no future reality for God, was His creation never a chronological future for Him in any sense? From a hermeneutical and systematic point of view, while Augustine's concern was to show the opponents that there is no point in asking what a timeless God was doing before the creation of the world, I should raise the concern of what we make of the reality of creation from the hermeneutical perspective of a timeless God. Perhaps it would be less problematic to speak of God having memories and expectations in light of biblical narratives and statements, without reducing these conceptions to merely an upward projection of the limited human experience of temporality to God (anthropomorphic language), but rather seeing human experience as a downwards partial reflection of God's own transcendent experience.¹² Whereas I think such elaboration could and should be made, this potential articulation would take us beyond the limited scope of the present article. Additionally, for the purposes of the article, it would be helpful to see how the hermeneutical concepts I have raised reading Book XI of *Confessions* could be related to contemporary discussions on time and timelessness, inasmuch as they would enrich the hermeneutical reflection on time and timelessness that has emerged from our reading of Augustine. This is my task in the next section.

3. Hermeneutical Reflections on Time and/or Temporality in Allan Padgett and William Craig

Among many scholars who explore the topic of time and timelessness from a theological standpoint,¹³ I select the names of Allan Padgett and William Craig. The reason for this selection is that they attempt to deal with the issues of timelessness and time and even

seem to combine ideas from these two frameworks of thought as they speak about God's nature. To be sure, I am not necessarily suggesting with this selection that the combination of frameworks is necessarily the best approach in this discussion. However, I do suspect that their approach gives us a rich object of hermeneutical analysis because they attempt to deal with two frameworks of thought that are not easily (and perhaps cannot ever be) reconciled. If we take, for instance, the book *God & Time: Four Views* (Ganssle 2001), Padgett and Craig are situated between the positions defended by Paul Helm ([absolute] divine timelessness) on the one side and Nicholas Wolterstorff ([unqualified] divine temporality) on the other. Whereas Padgett and Craig wrote specific works on God and the themes of timelessness and temporality,¹⁴ I use their more succinct discussions in *God & Time*, considering that they are already in dialogue in the book.

3.1. Presentism

It is noteworthy that both Padgett and Craig assume presentism in their understanding of time. In opposition to the stasis view of time, Padgett (2001, p. 96) speaks of the process view of time, in which “only present things are fully real”, in contrast to past things that “used to be real” and future things that “will be real”. Following this perspective, he affirms the reality of temporal passage from past to present to future and even underscores that God is able to undergo temporal passage (Padgett 2001, p. 126). Similarly, Craig (2001d, p. 149) subscribes to the “metaphysical doctrine of presentism”, according to which “the only time that exists is the present time”. He calls this a “dynamic theory of time” and argues that this theory does justice to the reality of temporal becoming (Craig 2001d, p. 179). On the other hand, Craig (2001d, p. 65) claims that a static view of time (stasis theory of time), as defended by Paul Helm in his formulation of God's absolute timelessness,¹⁵ hermeneutically implies that God and the temporal universe are co-eternal, given the lack of a temporal passage of past–present–future.

3.2. Time as a Created Reality

Padgett and Craig are also in agreement with Augustine concerning the notion of time as a created reality. From a hermeneutically systematic perspective, if time is conceived as part of creation, God must be necessarily distinguished from it, which would seemingly require the notion of divine timelessness. However, while Padgett and Craig affirm this distinction and the resulting idea of God's timelessness, as Augustine clearly did, they also find room to speak of a qualified sense of divine temporality, paradoxically unlike Augustine. It must be noted, nonetheless, that Padgett and Craig qualify the limited sense of divine temporality in different ways. More specifically, Augustine articulates his view of divine temporality in contrast to creation, whereas Padgett and Craig formulate a conception of divine temporality precisely due to creation. In other words, in Padgett, divine temporality is necessarily independent of and distinct from creation, while in Craig, God becomes temporal after creation.

Padgett (2001, p. 93) stipulates that time “came into existence with the physical universe”. Inasmuch as time is part of creation and, therefore, had a beginning, “God must be beyond time as we know it, in some sense”. From this standpoint, God is (relatively) timeless. He is not absolutely timeless because his timelessness is qualified by the contrastive reference to our created time (Padgett 2001, p. 107). Ambiguously, this relative timelessness, which is timeless only if our created time is in view, can also be called divine temporality, provided that this temporality is vigorously distinguished from the created temporality of the world. It is in this sense that it is possible to use the language of “God's time”, which is different from our time (Padgett 2001, p. 109). Padgett (2001, p. 106) stipulates that God's own temporality is defined by the very being of God and not by our temporality. In addition, he concedes that God changes, provided that this does not refer to His essential attributes but is rather described relationally, which amounts to a change in terms of conditional change in His response to others, depending on their attitude, as in the case of human repentance (Padgett 2001, p. 109).

According to Craig (2001d, p. 130), Genesis 1:1 constitutes “the beginning of time”. Furthermore, he mentions various biblical passages that use the expression “before time” (Prov 8:23 LXX; 1 Cor 2:7; 2 Tim 1:9; Titus 1:2–3; Jude 25) to make his point that time had a beginning (Craig 2001d, p. 131). Craig (2001d, p. 153) maintains that time has to be conceived relationally; that is, it does not exist as a thing in itself in isolation from other things or events. He seems to draw this conclusion, particularly from the idea that time came into existence with the creation of the universe. As another implication, if time had a beginning with creation, the eternal God must be timeless, “at least ‘before’ creation” (Craig 2001d, p. 132). Nevertheless, Craig proposes that God became temporal once time began at creation (Craig 2001d, p. 140). This divine becoming, however, is not defined as an “intrinsic change” in essence or attributes. Instead, he is thinking along the lines of “extrinsic change”, inasmuch as God is having after creation a relationship with the world that He did not have before (Craig 2001d, pp. 140–41). In his words, “at the moment of creation, God comes into the relation of *sustaining* the universe or, at the very least, of *coexisting with* the universe, relations in which he did not stand before” (Craig 2001d, p. 141). More specifically, Craig assumes that a real and meaningful relationship between God and creation entails temporality. If time began with the creation of the world, “God entered time at the moment of creation in virtue of his real relationship with the created order” (Craig 2001d, p. 154). Therefore, Craig’s position eventually amounts to two phases in the life of God, one timeless and the other temporal. From this perspective, timelessness and temporality would be a contingent feature of God (Craig 2001d, p. 176). Paradoxically, God is “timeless without the universe and temporal with the universe” (Craig 2001d, p. 156).

This paradoxical idea would seem to be summarized by the idea that, according to the divine will and purpose, creation divides the life of God into two phases: timeless before creation and temporal after creation. However, Craig is aware that the language of *before* cannot be associated with the realm of timelessness (Craig 2001d, p. 156). This is why Craig (2001d, p. 186) does not use this language of God being timeless *before* creation (“I speak of God’s existing timelessly *sans* creation, not *before* it”) but rather indicates that “God is causally, but not temporally, prior to creation”. Even though I think I understand the plausible intentions behind this statement, it is very difficult for me to hermeneutically picture how God would exist without creation in the alleged phase of his timeless life if there is no chronological differentiation between them. But I am not going to pursue this critical analysis here. It suffices to say in the present section of the article that this debate leads to the topic of time and measurement.

3.3. Time and Measurement

The idea of measuring time is another significant point of contact with Augustine in the discussion prompted by Padgett and Craig. Nonetheless, whereas the bishop of Hippo articulates the notion of measurement anthropologically, Padgett and Craig seem to think more broadly in terms of cosmology and physics. They do not elaborate on human memory and expectation to discuss time measurements as Augustine did.

Overall, Padgett and Craig touch on the issue of the human experience of time as they affirm a dynamic rather than static view of time. For instance, Padgett (1992, p. 6) speaks of the “experience of process” in reference to “the human experience of past, present and future”. He argues that “no philosopher would deny that process is a universal aspect of human experience” (Padgett 1992, p. 96), as “Universal human experience leads to something like the process view” of time (Padgett 1992, p. 120). Yet, Padgett (1992, p. 3) does not elaborate on “the many problems associated with time and with our experience of it” since he does not intend to “enter into all the fascinating areas of the philosophy of time”. Similarly, Craig (2001c, pp. 130–43) mentions the phenomenological discussion of the human experience of past, present, and future in his defense of a dynamic conception of time. He refers to Husserl’s account of time consciousness, according to which human beings remember the past and anticipate the future on the basis of their consciousness of the present (now). While we experience events in the present, human beings are able to

deal with the past and the future in different ways. Moreover, we experience temporal becoming; that is, the human experience of the world is described as “a continuous flux” (Craig 2001c, p. 139), which also involves the experience of waiting.¹⁶

Therefore, despite these references to the anthropological experience of time, Padgett and Craig do not articulate the notion of time measurement from an anthropological standpoint, as Augustine did. Perhaps Padgett and Craig want to avoid the risk of reducing time to anthropological subjectivity, as Augustine’s approach seems to entail. From a broader perspective, Achten et al. (2002) suggest a threefold conception of the dimensions of temporality, relating it to human beings, the world, and God. More precisely, they call these dimensions *endogenous* time (involving human perception, inner experience, and the cycles of the human organism), *exogenous* time (described in terms of cosmological/nature time and social/historical time), and *transcendent* time (referring to religious and/or even mystical views of time). Potentially, a dialogue with the accounts delineated by Padgett, Craig, and Augustine could broadly articulate distinct views on the hermeneutics of temporality, perhaps taking into account different dimensions of time, especially considering their remarks on the measurement of time.

Padgett (2001, p. 105) argues that time is characterized by duration, which is supposed to be measured. However, the measurement of time is never absolute but relative to frames of reference. In other words, time is measured according to created regularities in the world (Padgett 2001, p. 107). Following this perspective, Padgett qualifies God as timeless (with reference to our time) or having another form of temporality in order to distinguish Him from creation and not reduce Him to created physical frames of reference and measurements. In contrast to creation, the eternal God is infinite and, therefore, immeasurable. He is not contained within time. According to Padgett, God is timeless (or has His own time) in the sense that He cannot be physically measured by our time. In short, God’s own time is infinite and has no measurement. A hermeneutical and systematic effect of these assumptions about divine timelessness (or a non-measured divine temporality) and that our created time is essentially characterized by measurements is that, echoing Augustine, “there is no *amount* of time that passed before creation. Temporal measure (hours, days, millennia) depends on created things and structures (laws of nature). Before creation, no amount of time passed” (Padgett 2001, p. 108–9). Hence, Padgett (2001, p. 109) concludes, “time as we know it—that is, a time with change and measure—did not take place before creation”.

Similarly, Craig (2001d, pp. 158–59) proposes that there is no “metric of time” prior to creation. This means that there are “no intervals of time at all”, “no earlier and later”, and “no temporal becoming, nothing but the eternal ‘now’”. Craig (2001d, p. 115) even emphasizes that among the other three views presented in the book *God & Time: Four Views*, Padgett’s position on God’s eternity “most closely resembles” his own. In fact, he underscores that he could even agree with Padgett that “God’s time is distinct from the sensible measures that stand in for time in the physical sciences” (Craig 2001d, p. 119). At the same time, Craig (2001d, p. 184) considers Padgett’s language to describe God’s own time prior to creation, namely, “undifferentiated precreation time”, as inappropriate. Craig criticizes the use of the term *time* in this expression. In his words, “It has no past, present or future within it nor any instants or intervals earlier or later than one another. It looks like a state of timelessness to me!”

3.4. Brief Comparisons with Augustine

In summary, Padgett and Craig share with Augustine the assumptions of presentism, time as a created reality, and the focus on the measurement of time. With these shared assumptions, they echo Augustine in the conclusion that it would not make sense to speak of a sequence of events or divine actions before the creation of the world. This conclusion avoids the idea that time is co-eternal with God. However, the approach followed to reach this conclusion is systematically different. While Augustine adopted an anthropological approach to articulate his view of measuring time, Padgett and Craig dialogue mostly with

contemporary science and frame their accounts of time from a cosmological perspective, so to speak.

It is noteworthy that the difference between these approaches seems to reverse the hermeneutical effects of their projects. In Augustine, the anthropological measurement of time in the soul emulates God's eternal timelessness and, therefore, informs the theological conception of *imago Dei*. From this perspective, it could be broadly said that the anthropological measurement of time in the soul brings human beings closer to the reality of God. On the other hand, Padgett's and Craig's discussions on the measurement of time in the physical world are strongly contrasted with their notions of the eternal timelessness of God. The temporal created world and its measurements are absolutely different from God's timelessness eternity. Nonetheless, in their cosmological approach, they are willing to qualify the idea of timelessness in such a way that it could even describe a non-measurable form of time (Padgett) or a contingent divine attribute that does not hinder God from becoming temporal in order to have a real relationship with creation (Craig). In other words, their approach makes the language about God or the becoming reality of God relationally closer to the created world. In both approaches, definitions of divine timelessness are accompanied by attempts to discern a relational connection between God and his temporal creation.

4. Concluding Thoughts

As observed in Augustine's classical approach and Padgett's and Craig's contemporary approaches, the assumptions of presentism, time as a created reality, and the discussion of the measurement of time are relevant notions in the hermeneutical debates of God's timelessness and/or temporality. Additionally, this study indicated that the discussion of God's timelessness and/or temporality involves other dimensions of time, such as the dynamics of cosmological and anthropological dimensions, if a relationship between God and his creation is envisaged.

Even though a proper evaluation of these approaches goes beyond the scope of the present article, a few points have been highlighted throughout the article that could be systematically addressed in future studies. In my remarks on Augustine, while I find it interesting the anthropological discussion of temporality in connection with memory and expectation, I underscored that the complete absence of chronological distinctions between past, present, and future in the conception of divine timelessness makes it difficult to deny that creation is co-eternal with God, which is a problematic implication for the doctrine of creation in Christian theology. To be sure, I am aware that advocates of divine timelessness could answer that God is logically rather than chronologically prior to creation. However, as I said, this seems ontologically puzzling. I am not convinced that logical priority is sufficient for the distinction between God and creation without a chronological demarcation of *before* and *after*. Again, if Augustine is right in affirming that there is no future reality for God, was His creation never a future for Him in any chronological sense?

It is from this perspective that the proposals articulated by Padgett and Craig potentially enrich the hermeneutical reflection of time and timelessness, inasmuch as they attempt to account for, in different ways, the reality of temporality in their discussions about God and the world. Yet, they still believe that timelessness is still a useful concept, to some degree, for the distinction between God and creation, as they agree with Augustine that chronological time is only a feature of creation. My impression, however, is that the hermeneutical perspective of the present study, which heuristically informs our discussion of time and timelessness about different formulations of ontological presuppositions and systematic implications, could also be used to raise a set of new questions that point to alternative directions in this discussion. For instance, this hermeneutical reflection could stimulate the discussion of the following questions. First, in what ways could the anthropological approach be articulated in a non-neo-platonic fashion? More specifically, how could the phenomenological ideas of memory, perception, and expectation, respectively referring to past, present, and future, be formulated in a temporal understanding (basically involving

the reality of *before* and *after*) of the relationship between God and human beings, particularly considering portions of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament potentially relevant to this discussion? Second, how could the anthropological (as shaped by the discussion of the previous question) and cosmological approaches be systematically integrated? What if time as a created reality and the problems of having time measures applied to God are still affirmed but further nuanced in a way that time is also seen as a characteristic of divine eternity (God as eternally able to experience sequentiality), making a chronological distinction between God and creation? In this case, measures (including personal memory and anticipation) would still be used in our discourse about God, provided that they serve as a valid frame of reference to speak about Him (under the assumption that the reality of God is somehow compatible with the reality of creation) without the pretension to limit God to cosmological and anthropological measures.

Arguably, the constructive task of these two main questions is supposed to critically engage with the hermeneutical and systematic concerns raised by Augustine, Padgett, and Craig. This means that the heuristic reflection provided in the present study is intended to hermeneutically prepare the ground for a constructive task. In this sense, the hermeneutical exercise provided in this article is hopefully useful for a systematic focus of future discussions on God as timeless and/or temporal.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article. Further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Notes

- ¹ See, e.g., [DeWeese \(2004\)](#); [Schmücker et al. \(2022\)](#).
- ² For studies on time in Antiquity, see [Callahan \(1948\)](#); [Sorabji \(2006\)](#).
- ³ For studies about time in Augustine, see [Doody et al. \(2021\)](#); [van Dusen \(2014\)](#); [Morgan \(2022\)](#); [Teske \(1996\)](#); [Zinan \(2022\)](#); [Lloyd \(1999\)](#); [Knuuttila \(2014\)](#); [Enskat \(2011\)](#); [Kennel \(2019\)](#); [Hernandez \(2016\)](#); [Morrison \(1971\)](#); [Manning et al. \(2013\)](#); [Nordlund \(2015\)](#); [Wilcoxon \(2016\)](#); [McGrattan \(2016\)](#); [Minguzzi \(2014\)](#); [Carter \(2011\)](#); [Pranger \(2001\)](#); [Ravicz \(1959\)](#); [Pelikan \(1986\)](#); [Quinn \(2018\)](#); [Rogers \(1996\)](#); [Hill \(1997\)](#); [Suter \(1962\)](#); [McEvoy \(1984\)](#). See also [Wetzel \(1995\)](#).
- ⁴ [McEvoy \(1984, p. 553\)](#) points out that this question was also raised in Greek circles, among Epicureans and Stoics, and even among Platonists.
- ⁵ According to [Meyer \(1999, p. 240\)](#), Athanasius follows the Origenian conception of the Son's eternity. For further studies on this topic, see [Widdicombe \(2001\)](#); [Tzamalikos \(2006\)](#).
- ⁶ See [Zwollo \(2018\)](#).
- ⁷ [McEvoy \(1984, p. 550\)](#) references Plato, *Timaeus* 37D–38C; Aristotle, *Physics* VIII 260a21; 267b6–9, 24–25.
- ⁸ See [Bourne \(2006\)](#); [Ciuni et al. \(2013\)](#); [Armitage \(2023\)](#).
- ⁹ For studies on memory in Augustine, see [Hochschild \(2012\)](#); [Grove \(2021\)](#).
- ¹⁰ See [Sallis \(1999, pp. 78–80\)](#); [Achtner et al. \(2002, pp. 70–72\)](#).
- ¹¹ [Hochschild \(2012, p. 168\)](#) discerns “a veritable analogy between memory as the experience of *distention* and divine eternity”. See also [Knotts \(2021, p. 95\)](#); [van Dusen \(2014, p. 49\)](#).
- ¹² This would be an approach similar to what [Peckham \(2016, pp. 218–45\)](#) calls “theopathic language”, rather than the approach of anthropomorphic or anthropopathic language.
- ¹³ See, e.g., [Helm \(2001, 2010\)](#); [Leftow \(2018\)](#); [DeWeese \(2004\)](#); [Mullins \(2016\)](#); [Peckham \(2021, pp. 73–110\)](#). See also [Peckham \(2019, pp. 69–108\)](#).
- ¹⁴ See [Craig \(2001a, 2001c\)](#); [Padgett \(1992\)](#).
- ¹⁵ See [Helm \(2001\)](#). See also [Helm \(2010\)](#).
- ¹⁶ See also [Craig \(1999a, 1999b, 2000, 2001b\)](#).

References

- Achtner, Wolfgang, Stefan Kunz, and Thomas Walter. 2002. *Dimensions of Time: The Structures of the Time of Humans, of the World, and of God*. Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans.
- Armitage, David. 2023. In Defense of Presentism. In *History and Human Flourishing*. Edited by Darrin M. McMahon. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 44–69.
- Augustine of Hippo. 1886. The Confessions of St. Augustin. In *The Confessions and Letters of St. Augustin with a Sketch of His Life and Work*. Edited by Philip Schaff. Translated by J. G. Pilkington. vol. 1, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, First Series. Buffalo: Christian Literature Company.
- Barr, James. 1969. *Biblical Words for Time*, 2nd (revised) ed. London: SCM Press.
- Bourne, Craig. 2006. *A Future for Presentism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Callahan, John Francis. 1948. *Four Views of Time in Ancient Philosophy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Canale, Fernando. 1987. *Toward a Criticism of Theological Reason: Time and Timelessness as Primordial Presuppositions*. Andrews University Seminary Doctoral Series 10. Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press.
- Carter, Jason W. 2011. St. Augustine on Time, Time Numbers, and Enduring Objects. *Vivarium* 49: 301–23. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Ciuni, Roberto, Kristie Miller, and Giuliano Torrenco, eds. 2013. *New Papers on the Present: Focus on Presentism*. Munich: Philosophia. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Craig, William L. 1999a. Tensed Time and Our Differential Experience of the Past and Future. *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 37: 515–37. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Craig, William L. 1999b. The Presentness of Experience. In *Time, Creation, and World Order*. Edited by Mogens Wegener. Aarhus: Aarhus University Press.
- Craig, William L. 2000. Incoherence of the Mind-Dependence of Becoming. In *The Tenseless Theory of Time: A Critical Examination*. Dordrecht: Springer, pp. 167–77. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Craig, William L. 2001a. *God, Time, and Eternity: The Coherence of Theism II: Eternity*. Dordrecht, Boston and London: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Craig, William L. 2001b. On Wishing It Were Now Some Other Time. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 62: 1–8. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Craig, William L. 2001c. *Time and Eternity: Exploring God's Relationship to Time*. Wheaton: Crossway.
- Craig, William L. 2001d. Timeless and Omnipresence. In *God & Time: Four Views*. Edited by Gregory E. Ganssle. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, pp. 129–86.
- DeWeese, Garret J. 2004. *God and the Nature of Time*. Ashgate Philosophy of Religion Series. Hampshire and Burlington: Ashgate.
- Doody, John, Sean Hannan, and Kim Paffenroth, eds. 2021. *Augustine and Time*. Lanham: Lexington Books.
- Enskat, Rainer. 2011. Augustine's Theory of Time. In *Religion Past and Present Online*. Leiden: Brill. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Ganssle, Gregory E. 2001. *God & Time: Four Views*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press.
- Grove, Kevin G. 2021. Augustine on Memory. In *Oxford Studies in Historical Theology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Helm, Paul. 2001. Divine Timeless Eternity. In *God & Time: Four Views*. Edited by Gregory E. Ganssle. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, pp. 28–91.
- Helm, Paul. 2010. *Eternal God: A Study of God Without Time*, 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hernandez, William Alexander. 2016. St. Augustine on Time. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 6: 37–40.
- Hill, John Spencer. 1997. Inner Time: Augustine and Bergson. In *Infinity, Faith, and Time: Christian Humanism and Renaissance Literature*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, pp. 78–87. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Hochschild, Paige E. 2012. *Memory in Augustine's Theological Anthropology*. Oxford Early Christian Studies. Oxford: Oxford University Press. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Kennel, Maxwell. 2019. Periodization and Providence: Time and Eternity between Nietzsche's Zarathustra and Augustine's Confessions. *Telos* 188: 103–26. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Knotts, Matthew W. 2021. The Inner Word and the Outer Word: Time, Temporality, and Language in Augustine and Gadamer. In *Augustine and Time*. Edited by John Doody, Sean Hannan and Kim Paffenroth. Laham: Lexington Books.
- Knuuttila, Simo. 2014. Time and Creation in Augustine. In *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*. Edited by David Vincent Meconi and Eleonore Stump. Cambridge Companions to Philosophy. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 81–97. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Leftow, Brian. 2018. Time and Eternity. In *Cornell Studies in the Philosophy of Religion*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Lloyd, Genevieve. 1999. Augustine and the "Problem" of Time. In *The Augustinian Tradition*. Edited by Gareth B. Matthews. Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 39–60. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Manning, Liliann, Daniel Cassel, and Jean-Cristophe Cassel. 2013. St. Augustine's Reflections on Memory and Time and the Current Concept of Subjective Time in Mental Time Travel. *Behavioral Sciences* 3: 232–43. [\[CrossRef\]](#) [\[PubMed\]](#)
- McEvoy, James. 1984. St. Augustine's Account of Time and Wittgenstein's Criticisms. *The Review of Metaphysics* 37: 547–77.
- McGrattan, Dominic. 2016. Augustine's Theory of Time. *The Heythrop Journal* 57: 659–65. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Meyer, John R. 1999. Athanasius' Son of God Theology. *Recherches de Théologie Ancienne et Médiévale* 66: 225–53. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Minguzzi, Ettore. 2014. Augustine of Hippo's Philosophy of Time Meets General Relativity. *KronoScope: Journal for the Study of Time* 14: 71–89. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Morgan, Jason M. 2022. McTaggart's A and B Series and the Time Epistemologies of St. Augustine, Nāgārjuna, and Stephen Hawking. *Kritike* 16: 22–40. [\[CrossRef\]](#)

- Morrison, John L. 1971. Augustine's Two Theories of Time. *New Scholasticism* 45: 600–10. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Mullins, Ryan T. 2016. *The End of the Timeless God*. Oxford Studies in Analytic Theology. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Nordlund, Thomas. 2015. The Physics of Augustine: The Matter of Time, Change and an Unchanging God. *Religions* 6: 221–44. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Padgett, Allan G. 1992. *God, Eternity and the Nature of Time*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Padgett, Allan G. 2001. Eternity as Relative Timelessness. In *God & Time: Four Views*. Edited by Gregory E. Ganssle. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, pp. 92–128.
- Peckham, John C. 2016. *Canonical Theology: The Biblical Canon, Sola Scriptura, and Theological Method*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans.
- Peckham, John C. 2019. *The Doctrine of God: Introducing the Big Questions*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Peckham, John C. 2021. *Divine Attributes: Knowing the Covenantal God of Scripture*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.
- Pelikan, Jaroslav. 1986. *The Mystery of Continuity: Time and History, Memory and Eternity in the Thought of Saint Augustine*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia.
- Pranger, Marinus B. 2001. Time and Narrative in Augustine's "Confessions". *The Journal of Religion* 81: 377–93. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Quinn, John M. 2018. The Concept of Time in St. Augustine. In *Studies in Philosophy and the History of Philosophy*. Edited by John Ryan. Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, vol. 4, pp. 75–127. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Ravicz, Marilyn Ekdahl. 1959. St Augustine: Time and Eternity. *The Thomist* 22: 542–54. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Rogers, Katherin A. 1996. St. Augustine on Time and Eternity. *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 70: 207–23. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Sallis, John. 1999. *Chronology: On Beginning in Plato's Timaeus*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Schmücker, Marcus, Michael Williams, and Florian Fischer. 2022. *Temporality and Eternity: Ten Perspectives on God and Time*. Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter.
- Sorabji, Richard. 2006. *Time, Creation and the Continuum: Theories in Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Suter, Ronald. 1962. Augustine on Time with Some Criticism from Wittgenstein. *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 16: 378–94.
- Teske, Roland J. 1996. *Paradoxes of Time in Saint Augustine*. Milwaukee: Marquette University Press.
- Tzamalikos, Panayiotis. 2006. *Origen: Cosmology and Ontology of Time*. Leiden and Boston: Brill.
- van Dusen, David. 2014. *The Space of Time: A Sensualist Interpretation of Time in Augustine, Confessions X to XII*. Leiden and Boston: Brill, vol. 6.
- Wetzel, James. 1995. Time after Augustine. *Religious Studies* 31: 341–57. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Widdicombe, Peter. 2001. *The Fatherhood of God from Origen to Athanasius*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Wilcoxon, Matthew A. 2016. Augustine's Theology of Time. *The Heythrop Journal* 57: 666–77. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Zachhuber, Johannes. 2002. *Time and Soul: From Aristotle to St. Augustine*. Chronoi Series 6; Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Zinan, Zhang. 2022. An Interdisciplinary Anthropological Approach to Augustine's Theory of Time. *Cuestiones Teológicas* 49: 1–19. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Zwollo, Laela. 2018. *St Augustine and Plotinus: The Human Mind as Image of the Divine*. Leiden and Boston: Brill.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.