

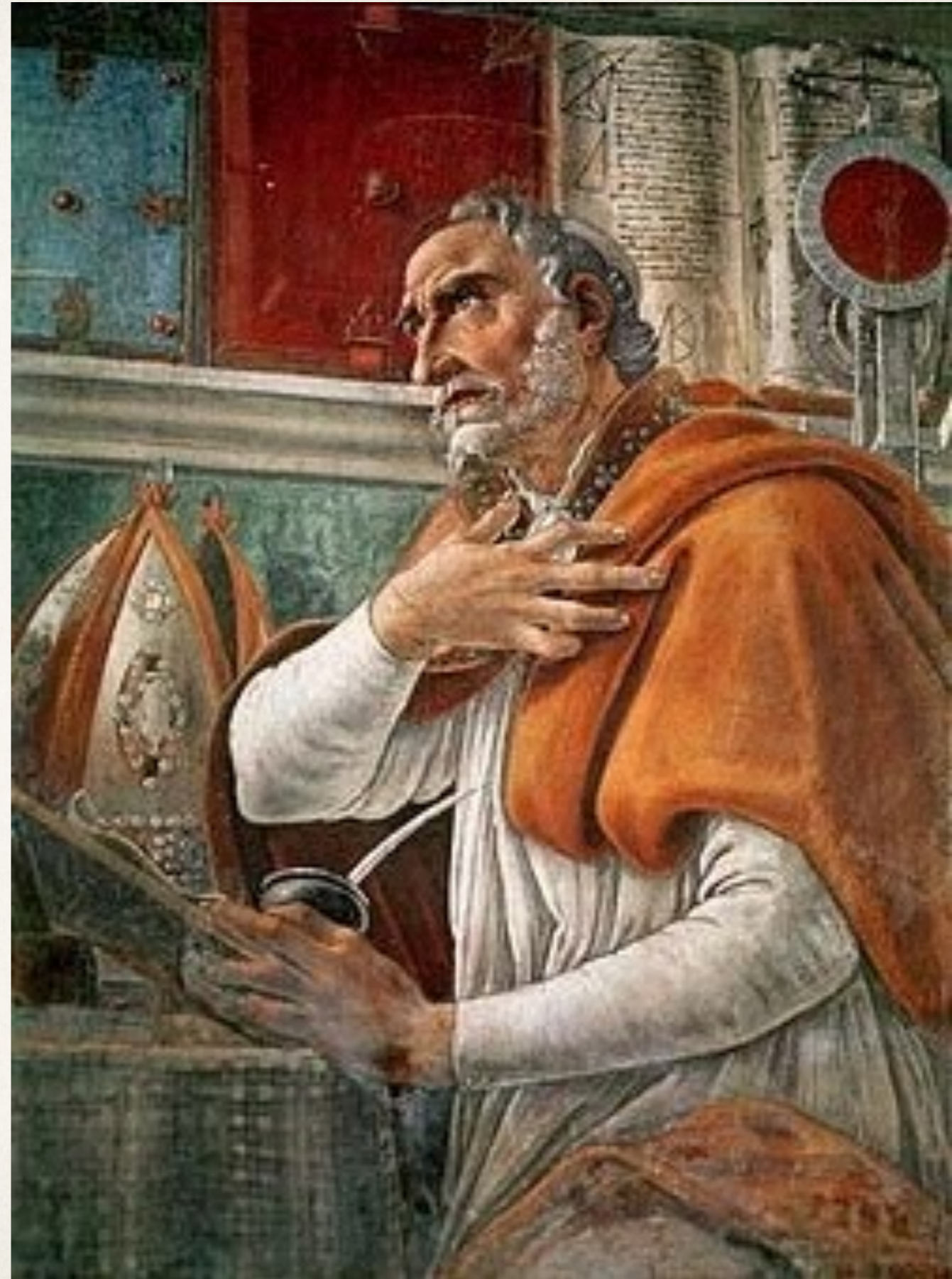
# *St. Augustine on the Mystery of Time*

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The ideas that follow are from book 11 of Augustine's *Confessions*

# The Flow or Passage of Time

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We typically think of **time** as consisting of the **past, present,** and **future**. We think of the **flow of time** in terms of a passage from the future, through the present and finally into the past.

Note the **asymmetry with space**. While “here” can co-exist with “there”, the present “now” cannot co-exists with the past or the future. We can only experience the present, but we can experience the “here” and “there”.

*Why cannot we experience the past or the future?*

A plausible answer is that the past and the future do not exist, otherwise we would be able to experience them.

*But does the present exist, after all?*

# The Puzzle About the Flow of Time

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- ❖ The past does not exist: it does not exist anymore
- ❖ The future does not exist: it does not exist yet
- ❖ The present does not exist: it tends to non-existence

*How can we experience the flow of time if past, present and future do not exist? Of what do we experience the flow?*

# A Further Complication: Measuring Time

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# The Puzzle About Measuring Time

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- ❖ The past does not exist: it does not exist anymore
- ❖ The future does not exist: it does exist yet
- ❖ The present does not exist: it has no space, no extension

*How can we measure time if past and future do not exist and the present has not extension? Of what do we measure that it is longer or shorter?*

# Augustine's Answer

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**QUESTION:** When we say that an interval of time is short or long, what do we measure as being short or long?

**PUZZLE:** We cannot measure the past because the past no longer exists, and what does not exist cannot be short or long. We cannot measure the future either because the future does not exist yet, and again, what does not exist cannot be measured. Finally, we cannot measure the present either because the present has no extension at all. But if we cannot measure the present, the past or the future, what do we measure when we measure time?

**ANSWER:** Time only exists in the mind. We measure the *expectation* of an event, which can be long or short. We measure the *memory* of an event, which also can be long or short.