

Confessions - Book X - Chapter Xvi

by St. Augustine

Transcript

24. When I name forgetfulness, and understand what I mean by the name, how could I understand it if I did not remember it? And if I refer not to the sound of the name, but to the thing which the term signifies, how could I know what that sound signified if I had forgotten what the name means? When, therefore, I remember memory, then memory is present to itself by itself, but when I remember forgetfulness then both memory and forgetfulness are present together--the memory by which I remember the forgetfulness which I remember. But what is forgetfulness except the privation of memory? How, then, is that present to my memory which, when it controls my mind, I cannot remember? But if what we remember we store up in our memory; and if, unless we remembered forgetfulness, we could never know the thing signified by the term when we heard it--then, forgetfulness is contained in the memory. It is present so that we do not forget it, but since it is present, we do forget.

From this it is to be inferred that when we remember forgetfulness, it is not present to the memory through itself, but through its image; because if forgetfulness were present through itself, it would not lead us to remember, but only to forget. Now who will someday work this out? Who can understand how it is?

25. Truly, O Lord, I toil with this and labor in myself. I have become a troublesome field that requires hard labor and heavy sweat. For we are not now searching out the tracts of heaven, or measuring the distances of the stars or inquiring about the weight of the earth. It is I myself--I, the mind--who remember. This is not much to marvel at, if what I myself am is not far from me. And what is nearer to me than myself? For see, I am not able to comprehend the force of my own memory, though I could not even call my own name without it. But what shall I say, when it is clear to me that I remember forgetfulness? Should I affirm that what I remember is not in my memory? Or should I say that forgetfulness is in my memory to the end that I should not forget? Both of these views are most absurd. But what third view is there? How can I say that the image of forgetfulness is retained by my memory, and not forgetfulness itself, when I remember it? How can I say this, since for the image of anything to be imprinted on the memory the thing itself must necessarily have been present first by which the image could have been imprinted? Thus I remember Carthage; thus, also, I remember all the other places where I have been. And I remember the faces of men whom I have seen and things reported by the other senses. I remember the health or sickness of the body. And when these objects were present, my memory received images from them so that they remain present in order for me to see them and reflect upon them in my mind, if I choose to remember them in their absence. If, therefore, forgetfulness is retained in the memory through its image and not through itself, then this means that it itself was once present, so that its image might have been imprinted. But when it was present, how did it write its image on the memory, since forgetfulness, by its presence, blots

out even what it finds already written there? And yet in some way or other, even though it is incomprehensible and inexplicable, I am still quite certain that I also remember forgetfulness, by which we remember that something is blotted out.

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