

Confessions - Book XI - Chapter XXVI

by St. Augustine

Transcript

33. Does not my soul most truly confess to thee that I do measure intervals of time? But what is it that I thus measure, O my God, and how is it that I do not know what I measure? I measure the motion of a body by time, but the time itself I do not measure. But, truly, could I measure the motion of a body--how long it takes, how long it is in motion from this place to that--unless I could measure the time in which it is moving?

How, then, do I measure this time itself? Do we measure a longer time by a shorter time, as we measure the length of a crossbeam in terms of cubits?[444] Thus, we can say that the length of a long syllable is measured by the length of a short syllable and thus say that the long syllable is double. So also we measure the length of poems by the length of the lines, and the length of the line by the length of the feet, and the length of the feet by the length of the syllable, and the length of the long syllables by the length of the short ones. We do not measure by pages--for in that way we would measure space rather than time--but when we speak the words as they pass by we say: "It is a long stanza, because it is made up of so many verses; they are long verses because they consist of so many feet; they are long feet because they extend over so many syllables; this is a long syllable because it is twice the length of a short one."

But no certain measure of time is obtained this way; since it is possible that if a shorter verse is pronounced slowly, it may take up more time than a longer one if it is pronounced hurriedly. The same would hold for a stanza, or a foot, or a syllable. From this it appears to me that time is nothing other than extendedness;[445] but extendedness of what I do not know. This is a marvel to me. The extendedness may be of the mind itself. For what is it I measure, I ask thee, O my God, when I say either, roughly, "This time is longer than that," or, more precisely, "This is twice as long as that." I know that I am measuring time. But I am not measuring the future, for it is not yet; and I am not measuring the present because it is extended by no length; and I am not measuring the past because it no longer is. What is it, therefore, that I am measuring? Is it time in its passage, but not time past [praetereuntia tempora, non praeterita]? This is what I have been saying.

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