

Confessions - Book XI - Chapter Xxvii

by St. Augustine

Transcript

34. Press on, O my mind, and attend with all your power. God is our Helper: "it is he that hath made us and not we ourselves." [446] Give heed where the truth begins to dawn. [447] Suppose now that a bodily voice begins to sound, and continues to sound--on and on--and then ceases. Now there is silence. The voice is past, and there is no longer a sound. It was future before it sounded, and could not be measured because it was not yet; and now it cannot be measured because it is no longer. Therefore, while it was sounding, it might have been measured because then there was something that could be measured. But even then it did not stand still, for it was in motion and was passing away. Could it, on that account, be any more readily measured? For while it was passing away, it was being extended into some interval of time in which it might be measured, since the present has no length. Supposing, though, that it might have been measured--then also suppose that another voice had begun to sound and is still sounding without any interruption to break its continued flow. We can measure it only while it is sounding, for when it has ceased to sound it will be already past and there will not be anything there that can be measured. Let us measure it exactly; and let us say how much it is. But while it is sounding, it cannot be measured except from the instant when it began to sound, down to the final moment when it left off. For we measure the time interval itself from some beginning point to some end. This is why a voice that has not yet ended cannot be measured, so that one could say how long or how briefly it will continue. Nor can it be said to be equal to another voice or single or double in comparison to it or anything like this. But when it is ended, it is no longer. How, therefore, may it be measured? And yet we measure times; not those which are not yet, nor those which no longer are, nor those which are stretched out by some delay, nor those which have no limit. Therefore, we measure neither times future nor times past, nor times present, nor times passing by; and yet we do measure times.

35. Deus Creator omnium [448]: this verse of eight syllables alternates between short and long syllables. The four short ones--that is, the first, third, fifth, and seventh--are single in relation to the four long ones--that is, the second, fourth, sixth, and eighth. Each of the long ones is double the length of each of the short ones. I affirm this and report it, and common sense perceives that this indeed is the case. By common sense, then, I measure a long syllable by a short one, and I find that it is twice as long. But when one sounds after another, if the first be short and the latter long, how can I hold the short one and how can I apply it to the long one as a measure, so that I can discover that the long one is twice as long, when, in fact, the long one does not begin to sound until the short one leaves off sounding? That same long syllable I do not measure as present, since I cannot measure it until it is ended; but its ending is its passing away.

What is it, then, that I can measure? Where is the short syllable by which I measure? 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 any more. But I measure something in my memory which remains fixed.

36. It is in you, O mind of mine, that I measure the periods of time. Do not shout me down that it exists [objectively]; do not overwhelm yourself with the turbulent flood of your impressions. In you, as I have said, I measure the periods of time. 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 periods of time. Either, then, these are the periods of time or else I do not measure time at all.

What are we doing when we measure silence, and say that this silence has lasted as long as that voice lasts? Do we not project our thought to the measure of a sound, as if it were then sounding, so that we can say something concerning the intervals of silence in a given span of time? For, even when both the voice and the tongue are still, we review--in thought--poems and verses, and discourse of various kinds or various measures of motions, and we specify their time spans--how long this is in relation to that--just as if we were speaking them aloud. If anyone wishes to utter a prolonged sound, and if, in forethought, he has decided how long it should be, that man has already in silence gone through a span of time, and committed his sound to memory. Thus he begins to speak and his voice sounds until it reaches the predetermined end. It has truly sounded and will go on sounding. But what is already finished has already sounded and what remains will still sound. Thus it passes on, until the present intention carries the future over into the past. The past increases by the diminution of the future until by the consumption of all the future all is past.[449]

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