Augustinian Moral Consciousness and the Businessman

Grace Natoli

ABSTRACT. Augustine of Hippo (354–430 A.D.) meditated on the transcendent attributes of numbers that accountants so skillfully employ and on the attributes of moral rules. He thereby achieved a profound awareness of their Source in Truth. Nature is also governed by numbers; it is a “melody” that, again, woos one to its Source in Beauty. Whereas some businessmen meditate to clear their minds of clutter so as to make successful business decisions, Augustine persisted beyond the mere absence of clutter. Within the stream of his own consciousness he found a focal point that led to the experience of the presence of a transcendent God in his own deeper self. The “order of love” enables one to achieve balance and a higher freedom wherein one cannot do wrong and possesses the courage to work toward building an earthly city that is just and beautiful, one that facilitates Everyman’s penetration of his own depth.

KEY WORDS: higher freedom, intuitive flashes, lower freedom, moral lights, numbers, order of love, stream of consciousness, unchangeable, unity, wisdom

Introduction

Augustine of Hippo ((354 – 430 A.D.) was an African bishop, philosopher and theologian. Were he to return to earth here and now in America, he would feel disoriented. Our world is so different that more than ever he would find himself thinking about “becoming,” a term used often in the ancient world. The word designates a characteristic of reality as a vast changing flux of things coming to be and passing away. It denotes happenings, excitement, movement, evanescence, and impermanence and it is employed mainly in reference to the material realm. He would note with dismay that our culture seems to crave becoming and hopes to find happiness in it. He did, too, in his time, and in all likelihood today he would flee to a monastery of monks that he founded, the Augustinians, preferably in some quiet place in the country.

Musing with his monks, he would recall that he even experienced the painful flow of becoming in the lack of coherence in his own chaotic stream of consciousness when he complained that he was “scattered abroad in multiplicity.” He would remember that in contemplating the flow of time he found it difficult to bear with the evanescence of the present moment. For time moves from the past through the present and toward the future, but as it moves one is caught between the “no more” and the “not yet.” We cannot hold on to the past, but we cannot hold on to the present either. Even saying the word “present” is uncanny; by the time one has said “ent,” “pres” is in the past and soon enough “ent” is gone, too. And the future is “not yet.” Augustine felt himself suspended in nothingness, holding his breath and wondering who would hold his heart. Fortunately, God did and this was the sweetest experience; he discovered God as his Ground, as the Eternal Present.

A monk who had relatives in the business world might say that they were always glancing at their watches, too much in a hurry to make money to think about experiencing the Eternal Present...“Not too many of them do think about it,” the retreat master would comment. “There are some who meditate but that is because they want to clear their minds so that they can make profitable decisions”...And the librarian might point out that newspapers frequently carry reports of scandalous injustice wrought by unscrupulous CEO’s and their accountants.
Augustine might reply that they need to study the deeper, higher nature of the numbers they manipulate. Through the study of numbers metaphysics can be learned quite easily and the student stands a good chance of being wise and therefore virtuous. It’s a pity that people do not appreciate enough the beauty of numbers. They are within the stream of consciousness and they can even be used to rescue the mind when it feels overwhelmed by its constant succession of feelings, desires, duties, thoughts, and their related images, sensations, and perceptions, all of which seem to run into each other.

Visitors from Heaven do not generally stay around very long so Augustine could not further explain his thoughts. But one of his monks, who teaches philosophy, might decide to write an article about Augustine’s Moral Consciousness. True, different forms of meditation are provided by both East and West. (Other cultures refer to God as Jehovah, Brahman, Allah.) And each person has to find his own way, but Augustine can provide insights that the businessman might find helpful. And so the monk just might proceed as follows:

Numbers

The Pythagoreans in the 6th century B.C. formed a community dedicated to meditation on numbers, and their influence continued well into Augustine’s day. As a man of his time, he could resonate with pleasure to their teachings on numbers; indeed, even the Bible reinforced his reverence for them. God ordered all things in “measure, number and weight” in Wisdom 11, 21; and Ecclesiastes VII, 26 asserts the need of the heart to search out wisdom and number. Augustine therefore pointed out that all things that creep and fly and swim have forms; they have form because they have number, meaning they have numerical proportion. Otherwise they would not be. One need only take note of “the well regulated succession of the seasons, the fixed and definite course of the stars and the unvarying intervals maintained between them” to conclude that “measurement and number are in full control.” However, attention is then directed elsewhere. If we wish to become wise, we must focus “our whole souls with the greatest possible attention” away from the beauty of nature and “on what we are experiencing within our minds.”

We have numbers, each of us, within the privacy of our minds, but mysteriously they are also universal, available to everyone’s mind and true for all. They are also impersonal. Three plus four equals seven even if one snores, even if the entire human race snores. They are necessary, meaning that there is no way that three plus four could ever equal anything other than seven, for the mind has to bow to them, has to accept them. A bookkeeper would not dare to say to his employer that he’s tired of adding three plus four to equal seven and that just for a day he would like to be creative by adding them to equal eight. Numbers are permanent; they do not change as when one ingests food or drink for nourishment into one’s body. And they do not come to us through the physical senses, for what comes in contact with the senses is material, which is the realm of change. Numbers do not come into being and pass away for they are immaterial.

If one cannot accept that numbers are not known primarily through the physical senses, Augustine can proffer at least three points for further consideration.

Firstly, the laws, which govern the divisions and interrelationships of numbers, cannot be perceived through the senses. That is why one can spot an error in addition or subtraction; it is done with the aid of a mental light. One does not know how long the objects of the natural world will last, but that seven plus three do indeed add up to ten is patently true now and always to one’s mind.

Secondly, every number is properly designated and has value in terms of the number of times it contains unity. The number two contains unity two times; three contains it three times and ten contains it ten times. However, unity cannot be known by the senses for they can only contact material things that have innumerable parts. He explains that every object...has a right side and a left side, a top and a bottom, parts that are on one side and parts that are on the other side, and parts in the middle...no physical object is truly and simply one; nevertheless all these many parts could not be counted unless we could distinguish them one from another through our knowledge of unity.

When I seek unity in my physical environment and am sure that I am not finding it, then surely I know what I am looking for and not finding...Thus since I know