

Augustine's *Confessions* I

The *Confessions* was written between 397 (the year of Ambrose's death, when Augustine would have been 42) and 401.

The principal theme of the *Confessions* (present from the beginning, but not presented as a conscious undertaking in Augustine's own life until Book 3) is **the quest for wisdom**, which **finds its completion in God**, who alone is able to overcome our resistance, our false and illicit loves (3.1.1) and our breaking of God's law (3.3.5)

The *Confessions* is

- perhaps Augustine's most important work and
- important to Western understandings of the inner life, including the experience of sin, conversion, divine grace and the soul's return to God.

Augustine's (rather selective) account of his life up until the death of Monica in 387 serves as a paradigm showing how **the lives of all human beings are guided by a divine grace that transcends their understanding yet orders their lives in accordance with God's own purposes** [see the beginning of the selection from *Retractationes* II,6 (32) on Boulding, p. 36).

This discovery calls forth from us desire for God and worship of God (cf. *Retr.* II, 6 (32) again: "arouse the human mind and affections toward him")

- The doxological purpose of the work can be seen in the opening of the work (1.1.1, p. 39):
 - It opens with a prayer (*Magnus es, domine*="Great are you, O Lord"; cf. 1.15.24 "Hear my prayer, Lord"), as Augustine himself observes in the *Retractions*.
 - It aims to turn the reader's attention to God and, from the outset, seeks to emphasize the distinction between
 - ♣ God (unrestricted wisdom and power) and
 - ♣ creatures (sin and mortality)(compare I.6.9; p. 44).
 - It emphasizes that God in his grace has previously supplied what is required for us to know and worship Him
 - 1.1.1; p. 39: "You arouse us so that praising you may bring us joy, because you have made us and drawn us to yourself...My faith calls upon you, Lord, this faith which is your gift to me..."
 - emphasizes God alone as the good which we seek and in whom we find our completion, our fulfillment and our happiness
 - 1.1.1; p. 39: "our heart is unquiet until it rests in you"
 - 1.5.5; pp. 41-42: "that you would come into my heart and inebriate it, enabling me to...embrace you, my only good...Is not the failure to love you woe in itself? Alas for me!"

- 1.13.21; p. 53: "O God, you are the light of my heart, bread for the inward mouth of my soul"
- The centrality of Augustine's **conversion** (not only an intellectual conversion [bk. 7] but also a moral conversion to the service of God [bk. 8]) was particularly novel and was to be extraordinarily influential on later writers.
 - There is a foretaste of this already in Bk. 1, e.g. I.5.6; p. 42: "say to my soul, *I am your salvation*. Let me run toward this voice and seize hold of you."

Books 1 and 2 follow Augustine through the conventional and accepted divisions of early life (together with the qualities or actions which are to be praised or blamed at each stage of the person's life)

- infancy (*infantia*=being unable to speak)
 - what is to be praised or blamed: *indoles* (inborn quality; usually more than just a disposition, but rather those natural abilities that rise to the level of talents or genius)
- boyhood (*pueritia*=from beginning to speak up until the seventeenth year)
 - what is to be praised or blamed: *disciplina* (one's training and what is reveals concerning one's customs and habits)
- adolescence (*adulescens*=from the fifteenth or seventeenth year up until at least 25 years of age, in these later years overlapping with *juventus*),
- youth (*juventus*=20-40 years old), with a certain amount of speculative commentary on the nature of these stages and a description of the sins to which he found himself liable.
 - what is to be praised and blamed in these later ages: *opera, id est factorum dictorumque contextum* (what they do, i.e. the connection of their words and deeds, including their exploits and achievements)

Book I opens with an introduction and a meditation upon how we can reconcile

- a. God's transcendence of the limits which created things have and
 - b. our ordinary ways of talking about God being present and acting
- (1.4.4; p. 41: "most hidden yet intimately present...you regret without sadness, you grow angry yet remain tranquil...you are never in need yet you rejoice in your gains, never avaricious yet you demand profits")

This tension is resolved by desire to have God (as Truth) *enter one's soul and speak to one*, so as to personalize the awesome mystery of God's salvation in a way that one's frail humanity can grasp.

- 1.5.6; p. 42: "The house of my soul is too small for you to enter: make it more spacious by your coming. It lies in ruins: rebuild it."
- 1.5.5; p. 41: "Through your own dealings merciful dealings with me, O Lord my God, tell me what you are to me. Say to my soul, *I am your salvation*. Say it so

that I can hear it. My heart is listening, Lord. Open the ears of my heart and say to my soul, *I am your salvation.*"

- 1.13.22; p. 54: "But now let my God cry more loudly in my soul...."

Infancy (1.6.7-12; pp. 42-47)

God as the source of

- life and nourishment (1.6.7; p. 43: "The comforts of human milk were waiting for me, but my mother and my nurses did not fill their own breasts; rather you gave me an infant's nourishment through them in accordance with your plan, from the riches deeply hidden in creation...Everything I need for health and salvation flows from my God.") and
- goodness, beauty and order (1.7.12; pp. 46-47: "From you derives all manner of being, O God most beautiful, who endow all things with their beautiful form and by your governance direct them in their due order").

Inborn qualities (*indoles*): Note the disorder of desire discernible already in infancy (1.6.8; pp. 43-44); compare

- 1.7.11; pp. 45-46 where this point is made more explicit and self-absorbed desire culminates in anger/rage/refusal to tolerate any rivals to the self;
- 1.7.12; p. 47, citing Ps. 51.

Note also the questions raised here concerning absence of memory

- 1.6.7; p. 43: "I do not know where I came from"; cf. 1.7.12 on the period of infancy itself ("I do not remember passing through it").
- In 1.6.7 and 1.6.9 the question of the origin of the soul and whether, as the Platonists and Origen had suspected, the soul might have pre-existed the body and had a previous life.

Boyhood (1.8.13ff.; pp. 47ff.)

Learns to use signs to communicate his desires by means of speech (contrast 1.6.8 on infancy), *grasping at words* as he had previously grasped at food and other basic wants.

- Memory allows one to link (conventional) sign and referent, allowing
 - language to exist (1.8.13; pp. 47-48) and
 - for one to recall the past and, without fear, to find God acting there (2.7.15; p. 71)
- Ultimately, this ability to master and use language promotes and secures a sense of *individuality* (1.13.20; p. 53: "I have a mind to myself") that leads to *willfulness* and seeking personal glory (1.10.16; p. 50).

Training (*disciplina*): Note how the *stubbornness of the will* continues into his boyhood in the area of education, with Augustine portraying himself as willful, disobedient and unteachable,

- learning only under compulsion (1.12.19; p. 52; compare 1.13.20; p. 53: "What other reason could there be for this than the sinful, inane pride in my life...") and

- attracted only to frivolous tales (I.13.22; p. 54) and grammatical and rhetorical niceties rather than to God's eternal laws (1.18.29; p. 58).
- Compare the critique of literary studies in 1.13.20-21; p. 53; cf. 2.3.6; p. 65). Desire and emotion are directed toward what is spectacular and affecting, even if the subject matter is hardly morally suitable (as in 1.16.25-26; p. 56; 1.18.28-29; pp. 58-59) and encourages one only to seek the favor of others (1.19.30; p. 59).
- Not encouraged toward baptism, one acts as one will (I.11.18; p. 51), even lying and stealing to get what one wants (1.19.30; pp. 59-60)

Augustine partially transcends this by learning to pray to the unseen God for aid (1.9.14; pp. 48-49) but

- falls away to focus on trivial, created things (1.13.21; p. 53): "while I myself was abandoning you to seek the last dregs of your creation") and
- begins to steal what he desires (1.19.30; p. 59) and
- seeks to dominate others by fraudulent means (1.19.30; p. 59).

Despite this, traces of God's goodness, order and presence remained (1.20.31; p. 60: "Even then I existed, I lived and experiences; I took good care to keep myself whole and sound and so to preserve the trace in me of your profoundly mysterious unity, from which I came. By means of my inner sense I coordinated my sensible impressions, and in my little thoughts about little things I was delighted in truth. I was unwilling to be deceived, I had a lively memory, I was being trained in the use of words, I was comforted by friendship, and I shrank from pain, groveling and ignorance" — Augustine acknowledges these things as gifts freely given out of God's goodness for his preservation and well-being.

Note how the sufferings associated with his childhood education are traced back to our being "sons of Adam" (1.9.14 and compare the first paragraph of 1.9.15 and the time unreflectively spent by adults in futile, unproductive games in the second paragraph of 1.9.15 and in 10.16 and 12.19).

Note also the deferral of baptism (even in the face of sickness--often deferred until one was in one's 30's or even on one's deathbed so as to avoid post-baptismal sin) and the acceptance instead of the catechist's message concerning the basic truths of the faith, together with the signing of the forehead with the cross and the taste of salt (1.11.17).

- Catechumens were considered members of the church community even though they lacked the decisive step of baptism.
- But note Augustine's question in 1.11.18 about whether this two-tier system actually bred indifference and nominalism.

Here the repudiation of God's ordering causes the soul to become disordered, which Augustine regards as

- a fitting punishment (1.12.19: "gave me my just desserts by means of my sin itself. Matters are so arranged at your command that every disordered soul is its own punishment.") and

- leading on to death (13.20: "as I died away from you, O God, who are my life").

Book II: Adolescence

*Note the analogies to the prodigal son throughout this book (2.2.2: "I was wandering away from you, yet you let me go my way"; note also the feeding of the pigs and the material at the end of the book and compare 3.6.11; p. 82).

- The end of Book I already suggests this theme; cf. 1.15..24; p. 55: "I long for you to grow sweeter to me than all those allurements I was pursuing."

The recollection of the bitterness associated with his sins helps Augustine's to appreciate the sweetness of God's presence and divine grace.

- The discussion in 2.1.1 of sins as disintegrating the self is particularly interesting (turning away from the one God to pursue a multitude of lesser things causes the soul to go to pieces).
- 2.1.1 also introduces the theme of disordered carnal loves and the chastisements they bring.
- Contrast 2.2.3; p. 63: "Yes, I could have listened more attentively...and made myself a eunuch for the kingdom of heaven. In this I might have waited more contentedly for your embrace."

In 2.4.9; pp. 67-68, this disordered self-assertion leads Augustine to will in opposition to the divine law, stealing "simply to enjoy the theft for its own sake...we derived pleasure from the deed because it was forbidden...there was no motive for my malice, except malice," which shows the extent of the soul's corruption and descent into decay (see the end of the section).

- 2.6.2; p. 70: "...I plucked them only for the sake of stealing, for once picked I threw them away...it was only the criminal act that lent it savor...when I ask what it was that gave me pleasure in the theft, I find nothing of fair, seductive form at all, my theft lacked even the sham, shadowy beauty with which vice allures us."
- 2.6.14; p. 71: "Was I in truth a prisoner, trying to simulate some form of crippled freedom, attempting a shoddy parody of omnipotence by getting away with something forbidden? To do what was wrong simply because it was wrong—could I have found pleasure in that?"
- Compare 3.3.5; p. 78: "loving my own ways and not yours, relishing the freedom of a runaway slave."

5.10 considers the power of our attraction to sensible beauty and ways in which this can divert one's attention from God and divine law and turns people against each other through pride, competition for worldly benefits and the desire to dominate others (compare III.16). Thus through immoderate desire that arises from the love of lesser goods and the desire to gain possession of them, the one people are fragmented into many competing individuals.

- 9.17: "a seduction of the mind hard to understand, which instilled into me a craving to do harm for sport and fun. I was greedy for another person's loss..."

- Compare 3.8.16; p. 87: "defiantly enjoying private alliances and feuds, as dictated by their own likes and dislikes. This is what happens when anyone abandons you, the fountain of life, the One, and in self-sufficient arrogance chooses to love a part of it only, a bogus 'one'."

Contrast the slightly different approach to thinking about the origin of sin in the counterfeit beauty and false promises of the vices of pride ("you are...most high above all things") and ambition ("you are worthy of honor beyond all others. Fornication seeks the gratification which can only be found in God in lower, impure things.

- In 22.8.16; pp. 72-73, Augustine considers whether the theft of pears was due to vainglory ("the camaraderie with my fellow-thieves...that gang-mentality too was a nothing...If the object of my love had been the pears I stole and I simply wanted to enjoy them, I could have done it alone...But since my pleasure did not lie in the pears, it must have been in the crime committed in the company of others who shared in the sin...")
- 2.9.17; p. 73: "what an exceedingly unfriendly form of friendship that was! It was a seduction of mind hard to understand, which instilled into me a craving to do harm for sport and fun. I was greedy for another person's loss without any desire on my part to gain anything."
 - Compare the discussion of mockery as gratuitous evil in Boulding, p. 43n.33 and compare the "malicious amusement" ("deceiving and laughing at other people") of the "wreckers" in 3.3.6.

God's grace is to be credited for healing the soul and making possible our return to God and embracing of the virtues (7.15); "through loving humility, we find our way back to you," no longer "living some advantage of our own better than yourself" (3.8.16; pp. 87-88). This makes it possible for the various individuals to be joined together once again in a unity of mind and thought.

Book III: Youth

Goes to Carthage "enamored with the idea of love....In love with loving, I was casting about for something to love,...I was inwardly starved of that food which is yourself, O my God" (3.1.1).

Note the conjunction of disordered, carnal loves with the pleasure subsequently taken in the grief and sufferings of other in theatrical shows.

- 3.2.2-3; p. 76: "the sadness itself is the pleasure...so it is possible to enjoy sad feelings."

A higher ideal of truth set forth in Cicero's *Hortensius* (3.4.7). This is where the quest for wisdom starts, "though the name of Christ did not occur there."

His distaste for the Scriptures (5.9; the style of the Old Latin being much inferior to Cicero), however, leads to his decline into the materialistic heresy of the Manichaeans, which claimed to expound the truth, though it was limited to discussing myths about the created elements of this world and not the transcendent God who is the Truth.

(3.6.10; compare Augustine's addiction to astrology in 4.3.4ff.). The Manichaeans possessed only a semblance of truth, not recognizing yet that God's existence is spiritual, God's just law is eternal, and evil is only a diminishment of the good.

- 3.8.16; p. 87: **Note the three kinds of sins following from this.

God gives us love and, from that, humility, purifying us of our evil dispositions (16).

Book IV: Augustine's Association with the Manichaeans

The death of his friend troubles Augustine (IV.4.7; note the fundamental redefinition of friendship here as binding together people who cleave to God through the charity [supernatural love] poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who is given to us).

Note failure and loss of lesser human love (love for the friend/love for this present life) vs. love for the immutable and eternal God in IV.9, IV.6.11, IV.8.13 (continues in this fundamental error) and Augustine's consequent suffering in IV.7.12. See), IV.9.14 for a theological interpretation and IV.10.15-11.16 for a consequent theological moral (beautifully expressed in a prayer--we need hold lesser goods lightly).

The beauty of lower things praised and traced back to God (IV.12.18; IV.13.20; on the mind's ascent from creatures to God, see IV.15.24)

See IV.25 on divine illumination of the mind.

Book V: Faustus and Rome

V.5-6

V.10.18&20

V.24