Augustine Confessions

Augustine's Confessions has long been considered to be one of the great classics of Christian literature. However, as with any great classic, the appreciation of the work comes with knowing something about the author, the world in which he lived, the style of the work, and author's intentions in writing. Your textbook, The Christian Theological Tradition, provides you with details about Augustine's life and the historical situation out of which he wrote Confessions, as well as the theological issues and concerns which occupy his writings.

Augustine wrote the Confessions in 397-401 AD, when he was in his midforties, and shortly after he had been made a bishop. Some people might wonder about the title given to this work Confessions contains an autobiographic account of Augustine's conversion to Christianity and, in that sense, it might be considered a "confession" of faults. However, it is also a "confession" in the sense that it is an extended prayer/poem addressed to God which confesses (proclaims) God's mercy. Augustine's Confessions is also a long-and-reflective look back at life, since it was written some thirteen or more years after his conversion.

Finally, Confessions is also a polemical work, that is, a work designed to argue against the views of his opponents, some of whom are also voices from his past. When Augustine returned to his home in North Africa from Milan in Italy, he found himself in a great flurry of controversy, because his bishop Valerius announced that Augustine ought to be ordained a priest. The congregation took him and ordained him against his will. A few years later the same bishop had Augustine appointed assistant bishop with the right to succeed to the position when the present bishop of Numidia (also in North Africa) was no longer able to serve. This action prompted fierce opposition from a number of people, but from one bishop in particular who wrote a public letter against Augustine, reminding people of his cleverness (not to be trusted), his wicked youth, and his involvement with the Manichees. He also questioned his Baptism which had taken place far from home in Milan, and without the proper letters of support from Africa.

BOOK I

Infancy and Boyhood
1. 1. Great are you, 0 Lord, and exceedingly worthy of praise;¹ your power is immense, and your wisdom beyond reckoning.² And so we humans, who are a due part of your creation, long to praise you—we who carry our mortality about with us,³ carry the evidence of our sin and with it the proof that you thwart the proud.⁴ Yet these humans, due part of your creation as they are, still do long to praise you. You arouse us so that praising you may bring us joy, because you have made us and drawn us to yourself, and our heart is unquiet until it rests in you.

Grant me to know and understand, Lord, which comes first: to call upon you or to praise you? To know you or to call upon you? Must we know you before we can call upon you? Anyone who invokes what is still unknown may be making a mistake. Or should you be invoked first, so that we may then come to know you? But how can people call upon someone in whom they do not yet believe? And how can they believe without a preacher?⁵ But scripture tells us that those who seek the Lord will praise him,⁶ for as they seek they find him,⁷ and on finding him they will praise him. Let me seek you, then, Lord, even while I am calling upon you, and call upon you even as I believe in you; for to us you have indeed been preached. My faith calls upon you, Lord, this faith which is your gift to me, which you have breathed into me through the humanity of your Son and the ministry of your preacher.

¹. See Ps 47:2(48:1); 95(96):4; 144(145):3.
². See Ps 146(147):5.
³. See 2 Cor 4:10.
⁴. See 1 Pt 5:5.
⁵. See Rom 10:14.
⁶. See Ps 21:27(22:26).
⁷. See Mt 7:7-8; Lk 11:10.
2, 2. How shall I call upon my God, my God and my Lord, when by the very act of calling upon him I would be calling him into myself? Is there any place within me into which my God might come? How should the God who made heaven and earth come into me? Is there any room in me for you, Lord, my God? Even heaven and earth, which you have made and in which you have made me-can even they contain you? Since nothing that exists would exist without you, does it follow that whatever exists does in some way contain you? But if this is so, how can I, who am one of these existing things, ask, you to come into me, when I would not exist at all unless you were already in me? Not yet am I in hell, after all, but even if I were, you would be there too; for if I descend to the underworld, you are there. No, my God, I would not exist, I would not be at all, were you not in me. Or should I say, rather, that I should not exist if I were not in you, from whom are all things, through whom are all things, in whom are all things?" Yes, Lord, that is the truth, that is indeed the truth. To what place can I invite you, then, since I am in you? Or where could you come from, in order to come into me? To what place outside heaven and earth could I travel, so that my God could come to me there, the God who said, I fill heaven and earth?

3, 3. So then, if you fill heaven and earth, does that mean that heaven and earth contain you? Or, since clearly they cannot hold you, is there something of you left over when you have filled them? Once heaven and earth are full, where would that remaining part of you overflow? Or perhaps you have no need to be contained by anything, but rather contain everything yourself, because whatever you fill you contain, even as you fill it? The vessels which are full of you do not lend you stability, because even if they break you will not be spilt. And when you pour yourself out over us, you do not lie there spilt but raise us up; you are not scattered, but gather us together. Yet all those things which you fill, you fill with

8. The point is more forceful in Latin: *invocare*, to call upon, is literally "to call into."
10. See Ps 138(139):8.
11. See Rom 11:36; 1 Cor 8:6.
14. The immediate background here is probably the yearning of dispersed Israel for ingathering at the end-time, as expressed in many psalms; but there may also be echoes of the Neo-Platonic doctrine of the return of the many to the One, and possibly of Manichean beliefs concerning the dispersal of the divine being into fragments.
the whole of yourself. Should we suppose, then, that because all things are incapable of containing the whole of you, they hold only a part of you, and all of them the same part? Or does each thing hold a different part, greater things larger parts, and lesser things smaller parts? Does it even make sense to speak of larger or smaller parts of you? Are you not everywhere in your whole being, while there is nothing whatever that can hold you entirely?

4, 4. What are you, then, my God? What are you, I ask, but the Lord God? For who else is lord except the Lord, or who is god if not our God? You are most high, excellent, most powerful, omnipotent, supremely merciful and supremely just, most hidden yet intimately present, infinitely beautiful and infinitely strong, steadfast yet elusive, unchanging yourself though you control the change in all things, never new, never old, renewing all things yet wearing down the proud though they know it not; ever active, ever at rest, gathering while knowing no need, supporting and filling and guarding, creating and nurturing and perfecting, seeking although you lack nothing. You love without frenzy, you are jealous yet secure, you regret without sadness, you grow angry yet remain tranquil, you alter your works but never your plan; you take back what you find although you never lost it; you are never in need yet you rejoice in your gains, never avaricious yet you demand profits. You allow us to pay you more than you demand, and so you become our debtor, yet which of us possesses anything that does not already belong to you? You owe us nothing, yet you pay your debts; you write off our debts to you, yet you lose nothing thereby.

After saying all that, what have we said, my God, my life, my holy sweetness? What does anyone who speaks of you really say? Yet woe betide those who fail to speak, while the chatterboxes go on saying nothing.

5, 5. Who will grant me to find peace in you? Who will grant me this grace, that you would come into my heart and inebriate it, enabling me to forget the evils that beset me and embrace you, my only good? What

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15. See Ps 17:32 (18:31).
16. See Wis 7:27.
17. See Jb 9:5.
19. See Mt 25:27.
20. Possibly an allusion to the Manicheans, whose verbosity Augustine mentions in V, 7, 12.
are you to me? Have mercy on me, so that I may tell. What indeed am I to you, that you should command me to love you, and grow angry with me if I do not, and threaten me with enormous woes? Is not the failure to love you woe enough in itself? Alas for me! Through your own merciful dealings with me, 0 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. Let me run toward this voice and seize hold of you. Do not hide your face from me; let me die so that I may see it, for not to see it would be death to me indeed.

6. 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. Some things are to be found there which will offend your gaze; I confess this to be so and know it well. But who will clean my house? To whom but yourself can I cry, Cleanse me of my hidden sins, 0 Lord, and for those incurred through others pardon your servant? I believe, and so I will speak. You know everything, Lord. Have I not laid my own transgressions bare before you to my own condemnation, my God, and have you not forgiven the wickedness of my heart? I do not argue my case against you, for you are truth itself; nor do I wish to deceive myself, lest my iniquity be caught in its own lies. No, I do not argue the case with you, because if you, Lord, keep the score of our iniquities, then who, Lord, can bear it?

Infancy

6, 7. Yet allow me to speak, though I am but dust and ashes, allow me to speak in your merciful presence, for it is to your mercy that I

24. See Ex 33:23.
27. See In 21:17.
28. See Ps 31(32):5.
29. See Jb 9:2-3.
30. See Ps 26(27):12.
31. Ps 129(130):3.
address myself, not to some man who would mock me. Perhaps you too are laughing at me, but still you will turn mercifully toward me, for what is it that I am trying to say, Lord, except that I do not know whence I came into this life that is but a dying, or rather, this dying state that leads to life? I do not know where I came from. But this I know, that I was welcomed by the tender care your mercy provided for me, for so I have been told by the parents who gave me life according to the flesh, those parents through whose begetting and bearing you formed me within time, although I do not remember it myself. 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. You restrained me from craving more than you provided, and inspired in those who nurtured me the will to give me what you were giving them, for their love for me was patterned on your law, and so they wanted to pass on to me the overflowing gift they received from you. It was a bounty for them, and a bounty for me from them; or, rather, not from them but only through them, for in truth all good things are from you, O God. Everything I need for health and salvation flows from my God. This I learned later as you cried the truth aloud to me through all you give me, both within and without. At that time I knew only how to suck and be deliciously comforted, and how to cry when anything hurt my body, but no more.

8. After this I began to smile, at first only in my sleep and then when I was awake. So I have been told, and I believe it on the strength of what we see other babies doing, for I do not remember doing it myself. Little by little I began to notice where I was, and I would try to make my wishes known to those who might satisfy them; but I was frustrated in this, because my desires were inside me, while other people were outside and could by no effort of understanding enter my mind. So I tossed about

33. See Ps 2:4; 36(37):13; Wis 4:18. Augustine is markedly sensitive to mockery. Elsewhere he speaks of his own mocking attitude in earlier days (for example, III, 10, 18; IV, 4, 8), and regards the mocking spirit that delights in the discomfiture of others as typical of gratuitous evil-doing; see III, 8, 16.
34. See Jer 12:15.
35. All his life Augustine remained agnostic about the origin of the human soul.
36. Human love derived from and conformable to divine love, a very Augustinian idea.
37. Possibly an allusion to Virgil, Ecl 4.60. It was common in ancient wisdom to think of man as the only animal that can laugh: animal cachinnabile.
and screamed, sending signals meant to indicate what I wanted, those few signs that were the best I could manage, though they did not really express my desires. Often I did not get my way, either because people did not understand or because what I demanded might have harmed me, and then I would throw a tantrum because my elders were not subject to me, nor free people willing to be my slaves; so I would take revenge on them by bursting into tears. I have learned that babies behave like this from those I have been able to watch, and they without knowing it have taught me more surely what I was like myself than did my nurses who knew me well.

9. My infancy has been so long dead now, whereas I am alive. But you, 0 Lord, are ever living and in you nothing dies, for you exist before the dawn of the ages, before anything that can be called "before"; you are God and Lord of everything that you have created. In you stand firm the causes of all unstable things; in you the unchangeable origins of all changeable things abide; in you live the eternal ideas of all irrational and transient creatures. Tell me, I beg you, tell your miserable suppliant, 0 merciful God, whether my infancy was itself the sequel to some earlier age, now dead and gone. Was there nothing before it, except the life I lived in my mother's womb? Some information about that has been given me, and I have myself seen pregnant women. But then, my God, my sweetness, what came before that? Was I somewhere else? Was I even someone? I have nobody to tell me: neither father nor mother could enlighten me, nor the experience of others, nor any memory of my own. Are you laughing at me for asking you these questions, and are you perhaps commanding me to praise you and confess to you simply about what I do know?

10. Confess to you I will, Lord of heaven and earth, and praise you for my earliest days and my infancy, which I do not remember. You allow a person to infer by observing others what his own beginnings were like; we can learn much about ourselves even from the reports of womenfolk. Already I had existence and life, and as my unspeaking stage drew to a

38. Throughout these paragraphs Augustine is continually conscious of the literal meaning of *infans*, one who is unable to speak.
39. See Ps 2:4; 36(37):13; Wis 4:18.
40. See Mt 11:25.
close I began to look for signs whereby I might communicate my ideas to others. Where could a living creature like this have come from, if not from you, Lord? Are any of us skillful enough to fashion ourselves? Could there be some channel hollowed out from some other source through which existence and life might flow to us, apart from yourself, Lord, who create us? Could we derive existence and life from anywhere other than you, in whom to be and to live are not two different realities, since supreme being and supreme life are one and the same? You are supreme and you do not change, 41 and in you there is no "today" that passes. Yet in you our "today" does pass, inasmuch as all things exist in you, and would have no means even of passing away if you did not contain them. Because your years do not fail, 42 your years are one "Today." How many of our days and our ancestors' days have come and gone in this "Today" of yours, have received from it their manner of being and have existed after their fashion, and how many others will likewise receive theirs, and exist in their own way? Yet you are the selfsame: all our tomorrows and beyond, all our yesterdays and further back, you will make in your Today, you have made in your Today.

What does it matter to me, if someone does not understand this? Let such a person rejoice even to ask the question, "What does this mean?" Yes, let him rejoice in that, and choose to find by not finding rather than by finding fail to find you.

7. 11. 0 God, hear me. Alas for the sins of humankind! A human it is who here bewails them, and you treat him mercifully because you made him, though the sin that is in him is not of your making. Who is there to remind me of the sin of my infancy (for sin there was: no one is free from sin in your sight, not even an infant whose span of earthly life is but a single day); 43 who can remind me of it? Some little mite who is a tiny child now, in whom I might observe conduct I do not remember in myself? What then was my sin at that age? Was it perhaps that I cried so greedily for those breasts? Certainly if I behaved like that now, greedy not for breasts, of course, but for food suitable to my age, I should provoke derision and be very properly rebuked. My behavior then was equally deserving of rebuke, but since I would not have been able to

42. See Ps 101:28(102:27); Heb 1:12.
43. See Jb 14:4-5.
understand anyone who scolded me, neither custom nor common sense allowed any rebuke to be given. After all, we eradicate these habits and throw them off as we grow up. Yes, but I have never seen any sensible person throw away good things when clearing out, so can we suppose that even in an infant such actions were good—the actions of a child who begs tearfully for objects that would harm him if given, gets into a tantrum when free persons, older persons and his parents, will not comply with his whims, and tries to hurt many people who know better by hitting out at them as hard as his strength allows, simply because they will not immediately fall in with his wishes or obey his commands, commands which would damage him if they were carried out?

The only innocent feature in babies is the weakness of their frames; the minds of infants are far from innocent. I have watched and experienced for myself the jealousy of a small child: he could not even speak, yet he glared with livid fury at his fellow-nursling. Everyone has seen this. Mothers and nurses claim to have some means of their own to charm away such behavior.\textsuperscript{44} Is this to be regarded as innocence, this refusal to tolerate a rival for a richly abundant fountain of milk, at a time when the other child stands in greatest need of it and depends for its very life on this food alone? Behavior of this kind is cheerfully condoned, however, not because it is trivial or of small account, but because everyone knows that it will fade away as the baby grows up. This is clear from the fact that those same actions are by no means calmly tolerated if detected in anyone of more mature years.

12. Your will is that I should praise you, 0 Lord my God, who gave life and a body to that infant; you will me to praise you who equipped him with faculties, built up his limbs, and adorned him with a distinctive shape, as we can see. You implanted in him all the urges proper to a living creature to ensure his coherence and safety; and now you command me to praise you for those gifts, and to confess to you and sing to your name, O Most High,\textsuperscript{45} because you are God, almighty and good, and would be so even if you had wrought no other works than these, since none but yourself, the only God, can bring them into existence. From you derives all manner of being, 0 God most beautiful, who endow all things with

\textsuperscript{44} Possibly a reference to some pagan custom, or perhaps only to the device of distracting the child's attention.

\textsuperscript{45} See Ps 91:2(92:1).
their beautiful form and by your governance direct them in their due order.\footnote{46} But it irks me, Lord, to link that phase of my existence with my present life, the life I live now in this world; I do not remember passing through it, I have to rely on the reports of others concerning it, and I can only infer from my observation of other infants that I went through it too, though certainly this inference is well founded. As far as the dark blank in my memory is concerned, that period of infancy is on a par with the time I spent in my mother's womb. And if I was even conceived in iniquity, and with sin my mother nourished me in her womb,\footnote{47} where, I beg of you, my God, where was I, your servant, ever innocent? Where, Lord, and when? So I will leave that period aside. What does it matter to me now, since it has vanished without trace from my memory?

\textit{Learning to speak}

8, 13. Did I make my way from that infant stage into boyhood? Or should I rather say that boyhood caught up with me and took over from infancy? Yet infancy did not depart, so what happened to it? It did not stay with me, for I was no longer an infant who lacked the faculty of speech,\footnote{48} but a boy who could talk. I remember this, and later I turned my attention to the way in which I had learned to speak. It was not that older people taught me by offering me words by way of formal instruction, as was the case soon afterward with reading. No, I taught myself, using the mind you gave me, 0 my God, because I was unable to express the thoughts of my heart by cries and inarticulate sounds and gestures in such a way as to gain what I wanted or make my entire meaning clear to everyone as I wished; so I grasped at words with my memory,\footnote{49} when

\footnote{46} \textit{A quo est omnas modus, formosissime, qui formal omnia et lege tua ordinas omnia}, an invocation of the Trinity. Triadic patterns occur frequently in Augustine, though the vocabulary varies. The allusion is sometimes directly to the Persons of the Trinity, at other times to aspects of the created world, especially human nature, which reflect the triune Creator. Here \textit{modus} suggests the initial creation of as yet unformed matter; \textit{forma} the principle of differentiation which gives to each thing its distinctive identity; \textit{ordo} the animating, dynamic force of interrelatedness and love.

\footnote{47} See Ps 50:7(51:5).

\footnote{48} The rare form \textit{farer} links this verb with the literal meaning of \textit{infans}.

\footnote{49} \textit{Prensabam memoria}: variant readings for \textit{prensabam} include \textit{pensabam} ("I weighed in my
memory"), and *praesonabam* ("I practiced the sounds in my mind beforehand"). But textual criticism favors the rare *prensabam*, and this accords with the "grasping" character of Augustine's conduct at this stage. As he clutched greedily at food and other objects, so he now grabs at words.
people called an object by some name, and while saying the word pointed to that thing, I watched and remembered that they used that sound when they wanted to indicate that thing. Their intention was clear, for they used bodily gestures, those natural words which are common to all races, such as facial expressions or glances of the eyes or movements of other parts of the body, or a tone of voice that suggested some particular attitude to things they sought and wished to hold on to, or rejected and shunned altogether.

In this way I gradually built up a collection of words, observing them as they were used in their proper places in different sentences and hearing them frequently. I came to understand which things they signified, and by schooling my own mouth to utter them I declared my wishes by using the same signs. Thus I learned to express my needs to the people among whom I lived, and they made their wishes known to me; and I waded deeper into the stormy world of human life, although I was still subject to the authority of my parents and the guidance of my elders.

_9. 14. Ah, God, my God, what wretchedness I suffered_ in that world, and how I was trifled with! The program for right living presented to me as a boy was that I must obey my mentors, so that I might get on in this world and excel in the skills of the tongue, skills which lead to high repute and deceitful riches. To this end I was sent to school to learn my letters, though I, poor wretch, could see no point in them. All the same, I would be beaten whenever I was lazy about learning. This punishment was taken for granted by grown-up people and many a pupil had undergone it before we did, laying down those rough roadways along which we were now being driven, as we bore our part in the heavy labor and pain allotted to the sons of Adam.

We did, however, meet at school some people who prayed to you, Lord, and we learned from them, imagining you as best we could in the guise of some great personage who, while not evident to our senses, was

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50. See Terence, _Adel._
51. See Gn 3:16; Sir 40:1.
yet able to hear and help us. So it came about that even then in boyhood I began to pray to you, my aid and refuge.\textsuperscript{52} By calling upon you I untied the knots of my tongue and begged you, in my little-boy way but with no little earnestness, not to let me be beaten at school. You did not hear my prayer, lest by hearing it you might have consigned me to a fool's fate; so my stripes were laughed at by my elders and even my parents, who would not have wished anything bad to happen to me. But bad it was, and very dreadful for me.

15. Is it possible, Lord, that there exists anyone so courageous, so united to you by intense love, that he could make light of rack, hooks and similar torments, from which other people the world over pray to you to be delivered? Is there any such person who could rise above them through devout union with you, rather than out of mere cloddish insensibility that counterfeits courage? But if this person loved others who are terrified of such tortures, could he still make light of them, as did our parents, who laughed at the torments we boys suffered? We were just as terrified of punishment as other people of torture, and our prayers to you were no whit less heartfelt as we begged that we might escape.

All the same, we were blameworthy, because we were less assiduous in reading, writing and concentrating on our studies than was expected of us. It was not that we lacked intelligence or ability, Lord, for you had endowed us with these in a measure appropriate to our age; it was simply that we loved to play, and we were punished by adults who nonetheless did the same themselves. But whereas the frivolous pursuits of grown-up people are called "business," children are punished for behaving in the same fashion, and no one is sorry for either the children or the adults; so are we to assume that any sound judge of the matter would think it right for me to be beaten because I played ball as a boy, and was hindered by my game from more rapid progress in studies which would only equip me to play an uglier game later?\textsuperscript{53} Moreover, was the master who flogged me any better himself? If he had been worsted by a fellow-scholar in some pedantic dispute, would he not have been racked by even more bitter jealousy than I was when my opponent in a game of ball got the better of me?

\textsuperscript{52} See Ps 93(94):22; 17:3(18:2).

\textsuperscript{53} Defomnius luderem: see note on I, 7, 12 above. "Deformed" persons or activities are those which fail to reflect the "form" or beauty instilled into them by the Second Person of the Trinity. Compare Augustine's lament in X, 27, 38.
10. 16. 0 Lord God, you are the disposer and creator of everything in nature, but of our sins the disposer only; and I did sin at that time, Lord my God, by disobeying the instructions of my parents and teachers, for I was later able to make good use of the lessons my relatives wanted me to learn, whatever may have been their intention in so directing me. I sinned because I disobeyed them not in order to choose something more worthwhile, but simply because I loved games. I hankered to win myself glory in our contests, and to have my ears tickled by tall stories which only made them itch more hotly, and all the while that same curiosity more and more inflamed my eyes with lust for the public shows which are the games of grown-ups. The people who provide these entertainments enjoy such celebrity and public esteem that nearly all of them hope their children will follow their example; and yet they are quite prepared to see those children beaten for watching similar shows to the detriment of their study, study which, as their parents hope, will bring them to a position in which they in turn will provide the shows!

Look with mercy on these follies, Lord, and set us free who already call upon you. Set free those also who do not yet call upon you; so that they may invoke you and you may give them freedom.

His baptism is deferred

11. 17. While still a boy I had heard about the eternal life promised to us through the humility of our Lord and God, who stooped even to our pride; and I was regularly signed with the cross and given his salt even from the womb of my mother, who firmly trusted in you. You saw, Lord, how one day in my boyhood I was suddenly seized by stomach pains and, as my fever mounted, came near to death. You saw, my God, because even then you were guarding me, with what distress and what

54. See 1 Tm 4:3-4.
55. The triad of vices to which Augustine here confesses seems to correspond to the "sin of the world" in 1 In 2:16. He will develop the thought more fully in X, 30, 41, but the pattern is already here in his boyhood faults: amore ludendi as an early manifestation of "the lust of the flesh," superbas victorias of "the pride of life," and curiositate of the lust of the eyes."
56. That is, he was initiated into the catechumenate. Although this sentence indicates an awareness of the elements of Christian belief (incarnation and promise of eternal life), it appears that his initiation was not followed by any systematic Christian instruction. The imperfect tenses signabar . . . condiebar probably suggest a rite performed not only on admission to the catechumenate but at regular intervals.
faith I earnestly begged to be baptized into your Christ, who is my God
and my Lord; you saw how I pleaded with my loving kindly mother
and with the mother of us all, your Church. She who had given me life
according to the flesh was very anxious, because in her pure heart,
through her faith in you and with a love still more tender, she was
bringing my eternal salvation to birth. She would have hastened to
ensure that I was initiated into the saving sacraments and washed clean
by confessing you, Lord Jesus, for the forgiveness of my sins, had I not
rapidly recovered.

My cleansing was therefore deferred on the pretext that if I lived I
would inevitably soil myself again, for it was held that the guilt of sinful
defilment incurred after the laver of baptism was graver and more
perilous. I was already a believer, as were my mother and all the
household, with the sole exception of my father. He, however, did not
overrule the influence my mother's piety exercised over me, by making
any attempt to stop me believing in Christ, in whom he did not at that
time believe himself. My mother did all she could to see that you, my
God, should be more truly my father than he was, and in this endeavor
you helped her to win the argument against a husband to whom she,
though a better person, was ordinarily subject, for in taking this course
she was in fact subjecting herself to you, who so commanded her.

18. My God, I beg you to tell me—for I would very much like to know,
if it is your will—to what purpose my baptism was postponed, and
whether it was for my good that the restraints against sinning were in
some degree slackened for me; it is true, is it not, that they were
slackened? Why is it that we still hear nowadays people saying on all
sides of many another person, "Let him be, let him do as he likes, he is
not baptized yet"? Where bodily health is at stake we do not say, "Let
him be, let him go on injuring himself, he is not cured yet." How much
better it would have been if I had been healed at once, and if everything
had been done by my own efforts and those of my family to ensure that
the good health my soul had received should be kept safe in the care of
you who had given it. Yes, how much better it would have been! But

57. See In 20:28.
58. Lavaeum: see Ti 3:5; Sg 6:5. The word became common among Christian writers as a
synonym for baptism. The practice of deferring baptism until the recipient was on his deathbed
was not unusual; in later life as a bishop Augustine opposed it. See his remarks in the following
paragraph.
many towering waves of temptation seemed to be looming in the period beyond boyhood. My mother already anticipated them and thought it better to risk in them the clay from which I would later be molded than the new-formed man himself.\footnote{59}

12, 19. Yet even during that time of my boyhood, when it was supposed that I was safer than I would be in adolescence, I was not fond of study, and hated being driven to it. Driven I was, though, and that did me good, though my own attitude was far from good, because I learned only under compulsion, and no one is doing right who acts unwillingly, even if what he does is good in itself. The people who forced me on were not acting well either, but good accrued to me all the same from you, my God. They did not foresee to what use I would put the lessons they made me learn: they thought only of sating man's insatiable appetite for a poverty tricked out as wealth and a fame that is but infamy. But you, who have even kept count of our hairs,\footnote{60} turned to my profit the misguided views of those who stood over me and made me learn, just as you also turned to my profit my own perverse unwillingness to learn by using it to punish me, for I certainly deserved punishment, being a great sinner for such a tiny boy. In this way you turned to my good the actions of those who were doing no good, and gave me my just deserts by means of my sin itself. Matters are so arranged at your command that every disordered soul is its own punishment.

\textit{Latin and Greek studies}

13, 20. Even to this day I have been unable to make up my mind why I hated the Greek that was dinned into me in early boyhood.\footnote{61} Latin studies, on the contrary, I loved, not the elementary kind under my first teachers, but the lessons taught by masters of literature,\footnote{62} for the early

\footnote{59. The thought emerges from Gn 1:2 and 1:26-27. "Clay" represents unformed matter. \textit{Effigies} is used by Augustine elsewhere of Christ, that is, God in human form. Baptism stamps this form of Christ upon us.}

\footnote{60. See Mt 10:30.}

\footnote{61. The real extent of Augustine's knowledge of Greek is controverted. It seems that he may have had a rudimentary working knowledge of the language throughout most of his life, and have improved it at a date later than the writing of \textit{The Confessions}. He rubbed shoulders with Greek-speaking clergy, and Bishop Valerius, under whom Augustine was a presbyter, was certainly familiar with Greek.}

\footnote{62. "Grammarians," but the term had a wider connotation than our modem word, more like "teachers in secondary schools."}
lessons in reading, writing and arithmetic had been no less burdensome and boring to me than all the elements of Greek. What other reason could there be for this than the sinful, inane pride in my life, flesh as I was, a passing breath that comes not again? 63 Those early lessons in literacy were unquestionably more profitable because more dependable; by means of them I was gradually being given a power which became mine and still remains with me: the power to read any piece of writing I come across and to write anything I have a mind to myself. Far more useful, then, were those studies than others in which I was forced to memorize the wanderings of some fellow called Aeneas, while forgetting my own waywardness, and to weep over Dido, who killed herself for love, when all the while in my intense misery I put up with myself with never a tear, as I died away from you, 0 God, who are my life.

21. What indeed is more pitiful than a piteous person who has no pity for himself? I could weep over the death Dido brought upon herself out of love for Aeneas, yet I shed no tears over the death I brought upon myself by not loving you. 0 God, you are the light of my heart, bread for the inward mouth of my soul, 64 the virtue wedded to my mind and the innermost recesses of my thought; yet I did not love you, and breaking my troth I strayed away from you. 65 Even in this troth-breaking the approval of people all around me rang in my ears: "Fine! Well done!" 66 To pander to this world is to fornicate against you, but so loudly do they shout, "Well done!" that one feels ashamed to fall short of their expectations. For these things I did not weep, yet I wept for Dido, "slain as she sought her last end by the sword," 67 while I myself was abandoning you to seek the last dregs of your creation; dust I was, and unto dust returning. 68 If forbidden to read those tales, I was saddened at being prevented from reading what would sadden me. How insane it is to regard these studies as more civilized and rewarding than the elementary lessons in which I learned to read and write!

63. See Ps 77(78):39.
64. "Light" and "bread" are both images used by Christ of himself in the gospel of John.
65. See Ps 72(73):27. The background to this metaphor is the bridal relationship established by God with Israel in the covenant and consummated in Christ's marriage to the Church. Hence serious sin, and especially resort to false gods, was called "fornication" or "adultery" in the prophetic tradition, and Augustine's use of the psalmist's words in the present context need not refer to sexual sin.
68. See Gn 3:19.
22. But now let my God cry more loudly in my soul, so that your truth may tell me, "No, that is not the case; it is not true. The primary teaching is better in every respect." I am undoubtedly more ready today to forget the wanderings of Aeneas and so forth than how to write or read. Curtains may well hang at the entrance to schools of literature, but they serve less to signal the prestige of elite instruction than to conceal error. 69 Let not those buyers and sellers of literary studies shout me down, my God, as I confess to you according to my soul's need, and acquiesce as you chide me for those evil ways of mine and bring me to love your good ways; let them not shout me down, for I fear them no longer. If I put to them the question whether the poet spoke truly when he affirmed that Aeneas once came to Carthage, the uneducated will say they do not know, while the more scholarly will admit that it is untrue. If, on the other hand, I ask how to spell the name "Aeneas," everyone who has studied the subject will give me a correct answer in accordance with the settled convention which people have made among themselves in fixing those signs. If I then go further and ask which would be a graver handicap in this life, to forget how to read and write, or to forget those poetic fantasies, can one doubt what answer would be given by anyone in his right mind?

Sin I did, then, in boyhood, by preferring those frivolous tales to much more useful attainments, or rather by loving the one and loathing the other. Already the jingle, "One and one make two, two and two make four," was hateful to me, whereas a wooden horse full of armed men, Troy afire, and the shade of Creusa70 thesewere a spectacle on which I delighted to gaze, and as empty as they were entertaining.

14. 23. Why was it, then, that I hated studying Greek literature, which had similar songs to sing? Homer was just as skilled at weaving stories, and he too was empty in a thoroughly entertaining way, yet as a boy I found him distasteful. I expect Virgil is equally distasteful to Greek boys, when they are forced to study him as I was Homer. It was so difficult; and the difficulty of thoroughly mastering a foreign language seemed to sprinkle bitterness over those fabulous narratives for all their Greek

69. These schools were sometimes open-sided buildings, divided from the street only by columns, between which curtains were hung. Augustine refers to them in Sermon 51, 4, 5: "The higher the honor in which a master is held, the more curtains hang at his doorway. They are there to ensure privacy, but lifted to admit anyone who will do him honor." He may be sarcastically alluding to curtains which screened shrines, creating an atmosphere of mystery.

70. See Virgil, Aen 2.772.
sweetness, because I knew none of the words, and the threat of savage, terrifying punishments was used to make me learn them. Time was, in my infancy, when I had known no Latin words either, but those I had learned by paying attention, without any fear or pain at all, amid the cuddles of my nurses, and teasing, and playful, happy laughter. So I learned then without the painful pressure of people pestering me, because my own heart prompted me to bring forth its ideas, as it never could have done had I not learned words. Only I learned in infancy not from teachers but from speakers, into whose ears I in my turn was able to give utterance to what I had conceived in my mind. It is evident that the free play of curiosity is a more powerful spur to learning these things than is fear-ridden coercion; yet in accordance with your laws, 0 God, coercion checks the free play of curiosity. By your laws it constrains us, from the beatings meted out by our teachers to the ordeals of the martyrs, for in accord with those laws it prescribes for us bitter draughts of salutary discipline to recall us from the venomous pleasure which led us away from you.

15, 24. Hear my prayer, Lord? Let not my soul faint under your discipline, nor let me weary as I confess before you those acts of mercy by which you plucked me from all my evil ways. I long for you to grow sweeter to me than all those allurements I was pursuing. You have enabled me to love you with all my strength and with passionate yearning grasp your hand, so that you may rescue me from every temptation until my life's end. See, Lord, you are my king and my God; let every useful thing I learned as a boy be devoted now to your service; let whatever I speak, write, read or count serve you, for even as I was learning such vanities you were schooling me, and you have forgiven the sins of self-indulgence I committed in those frivolous studies. Through them I acquired a great many useful words, though admittedly the same words can be learned just as well from texts which are by no means frivolous, and would make a safer path for children to tread.

16, 25. Woe, woe to you, you flood of human custom! Who can keep his footing against you? Will you never run dry? How long will you toss the

71. See Ps 60:2(61:1).
72. See Ps 106(107), passim.
73. See 2 Kgs 17:13.
74. See 1 Cor 1:8.
75. See Ps 5:3(2);43:5(44:4).
children of Eve into a vast, terrifying sea, which even those afloat on the saving wood can scarcely cross?76 Did you not give me a story to read in which Jupiter is both the Thunderer and an adulterer? He could not possibly be both; yet so he was represented, to the end that his real adultery might seem to establish itself as deserving of imitation because a faked thunderclap acted as go-between. Who among our hooded masters of oratory77 give sober consideration to the cry of one who was of the same clay as themselves, "Homer invented these stories and attributed human actions to the gods, but I wish he had rather provided us with examples of divine behavior"?78 It would be truer to say that Homer did indeed make up these tales, and thereby seemed to invest the disgraceful deeds of human beings with an aura of divinity, so that deprived actions should be reckoned deprived no longer, since anyone who behaved so could pretend to be imitating not abandoned humans but the gods above.

26. 0 hellish river, human children clutching their fees are still pitched into you to learn about these exploits, and general interest is aroused when education is publicly touted in the forum, in view of the law which decrees that a state salary be paid to teachers over and above the pupils' fees. You clash your rocks and set up a great din: "This is the place to acquire literacy; here you will develop the eloquence essential to persuasion and argument." Really? Could we not have learned those useful words elsewhere, words like "shower," "golden," "lap," "trick," "heavenly temples," if Terence had not presented to us a young scoundrel who took Jupiter as a model for his own fornication? This young man looks at a mural painting which shows how Jupiter tricked a woman by sending a golden shower into Danae's lap 79 Watch the dissolute youth making use of heavenly instruction to work up his lust! "What a god!" he exclaims, "a god who makes the temples of heaven ring with his thunder!" Well, a poor little fellow like me can't do that, but I have imitated him in the other thing, and what fun it was!80

76. Combined imagery: (1) the tree of life, the cross; (2) Noah's ark, referred to in Wis 14:7 as the wood whereby righteousness was established.
77. The paenula or hood was originally a hooded cloak worn in the rain. Tacitus mentions orators who wore it even when pleading before a judge, implying that this was a scruffy but common practice (Tacitus, Dial. de Or. 39). It is unclear whether the paenula had become a recognized sign of masters of oratory by Augustine's time.
80. See Terence, Eun. 585, 589-590. The four standard Latin authors read by schoolboys in Augustine's day were Virgil, Cicero, Terence, and Sallust.
It is simply not true that such words are more conveniently learned from obscene stories of this type, though it is all too true that under the influence of the words obscene deeds are the more boldly committed. I am blaming not the words, which are finely-wrought, precious vessels, 81 but the wine of error mixed for us in them by teachers who are drunk themselves: If we as boys refused to drink it we were caned, and no appeal to a sober judge was open to us. Wretch that I was, I learned these things eagerly and took pleasure in them; and so I was accounted a boy of high promise. But in your presence, my God, I can remember it now and be at peace.

17, 27. Allow me to say something, my God, about the intelligence which was your gift to me, 82 and the crazy employments in which I frittered it away. An exercise was set for me which was fraught with worrying implications, for I hoped to win praise and honor if I succeeded, but if not, I ran the risk of being caned. I was required to produce a speech made by Juno expressing her anger and grief at being unable to repulse the Trojan king from Italy, 83 but in words which I had never heard Juno use. We were obliged to follow the errant footsteps 84 of poetic fantasies and to express in prose what the poet had said in verse. That boy was adjudged the best speaker who most convincingly suggested emotions of anger and grief and clothed them in apt words, as befitted the dignity of the person represented. What did it profit me, 0 God, my true life, 85 that my speech was acclaimed above those of my many peers and fellow-students? Was it not all smoke and wind? Was there no other material on which I could have exercised my intelligence and my tongue? Yes, there was: your praise, 0 Lord; your praise in the words of the scriptures would have supported the drooping vine of my soul, and then it would not have yielded a crop of worthless fruit for the birds to carry off. Sacrifice can be offered to those birds of prey, the rebel angels, in more ways than one.

18, 28. Small wonder, then, that I was swept off helplessly after profitless things and borne away from you, my God. The models proposed to me for

81. See Pry 20:15.
82. Augustine opened Book I with a prayer asking God to enable him to speak; he introduces its concluding section similarly.
83. See Virgil, Aen. 1.38.
84. As in I, 13, 20; I, 13, 22, Augustine plays on the double meaning of erro, to wander (geographically) or to go astray.
imitation were people who would have been caught out and covered with confusion if they had related any of their doings—deeds not wrong in themselves—in a barbaric accent or with grammatical blunders, whereas to relate licentious deeds in correct and well-turned phrases, in ample and elegant style, would have won them praise and honor. You see this, Lord, but you are very patient and look on silently; you are exceedingly merciful and worthy of our trust. Will you always remain silent? From this vast, deep sea you are even now drawing out to safety a soul that seeks you and thirsts to enjoy you, one whose heart pleads with you, I have sought your face, 0 Lord, your face will I seek, for at that time I was far away from your countenance in darkness of spirit. Not with our feet or by traversing great distances do we journey away from you or find our way back. That younger son of yours in the gospel did not hire horses or carriages, nor did he board ships, nor take wing in any visible sense nor put one foot before the other when he journeyed to that far country where he could squander at will the wealth you, his gentle father, had given him at his departure. Gentle you were then, but gentler still with him when he returned in his need. No, to be estranged in a spirit of lust, and lost in its darkness, that is what it means to be far away from your face.

29. Look upon all this, 0 Lord God and, as you look, patiently consider how carefully human beings observe those orthographic conventions and syllabic quantities which they have received from earlier orators, while neglecting the eternal rules directed to unending salvation which they have received from you. A speaker who wishes to maintain and teach those long-standing conventions will give greater offense to his fellow-men by pronouncing the word "human" without sounding the "h," in defiance of grammatical discipline, than if he, human as he is, flouts your commands by hating a fellow-human. Does he suppose that another human being who is his enemy can do him more harm than does the very hatred with which he regards that other person, or that anyone can do more serious damage to another by hostile behavior than he does to his

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86. See Ps 102(103):8; 85(86):15.
88. See Ps 85(86):13.
89. See Ps 41:3(42:2); 62:2(63:1)
90. Ps 26(27):8.
91. See Lk 15:32.
92. In these last lines Augustine combines imagery from the parable of the prodigal son (Lk 15:11-32) with a remembered passage from Plotinus (Enn. 1.6.8.16-27).
own soul by harboring hostile intent? Knowledge of letters lies less deep in us than the law written in our conscience\(^\text{93}\) which forbids us to do to another what we would not have done to ourselves.\(^\text{94}\)

How hidden you are, dwelling on high\(^\text{95}\) in your silence, great and only God, who by your unaltering law spread the punishment of blindness over unlawful human lusts! A man in persistent search of fame pleads before a merely human judge, with a crowd of other humans standing round, and accuses his adversary with savage hatred. He takes the utmost care that no slip of the tongue betrays him into saying, "them fellows ... ," while caring not a whit that by his rage he is about to remove a fellow-human from human society.

Childish

19, 30. Such were the moral standards of the world at whose threshold I lay, a wretched boy; this was the arena in which I was to struggle. It made me more wary of committing some barbarism in speech than of being jealous of others who did not commit it when I did. I tell you this, my God, and confess to you those efforts for which I was praised; for at that time I believed that living a good life consisted in winning the favor of those who commended me. I failed to recognize the whirlpool of disgraceful conduct into which I had been flung, out of your sight.\(^\text{96}\) What could have been fouler in your eyes at that time than myself? I was earning the disapproval even of those same people by the countless lies with which I deceived the slave who took me to school, my teachers and my parents, and all because of my love for play and the absurd anxiety with which I craved to gawk at worthless shows and imitate what I watched.

I stole from my parents' larder too, and their table, either out of gluttony or to get something with which I could bribe other boys to let me join in their games, for they exacted a price even though they enjoyed our play as much as I did. In those games I would often seek to dominate by fraudulent means, because I was myself dominated by a vain urge to

\(^{93}\) See Rom 2:15.
\(^{94}\) See Tb 4:16; Mt 7:12; Lk 6:31.
\(^{95}\) See Is 33:5.
\(^{96}\) See Ps 30:23(31:22).
excel. And what was it that I was so unwilling to excuse, what did I so fiercely condemn if I detected it in others, but the very cheating I practiced myself? If I was caught out and accused of cheating I was more apt to lose my temper than to admit it. Is this boyhood innocence? No, Lord, it is not; hear me, dear God, it is not. These same sins grow worse as we grow older: first it is offenses against pedagogues and teachers, or cheating over nuts and balls and sparrow’s; then later it is crimes against prefects and kings, and fraud in gold and estates and slaves, just as a schoolboy’s canings are succeeded by heavier punishments. It was only the small stature of a child that you mentioned with approval, 0 Lord our king, when you declared that of such is the kingdom of heaven.

20. 31. In spite of all this, 0 Lord our God, I give thanks to you, the most perfect, most good creator and ruler of the universe, and I would still thank you even if you had not willed me to live beyond boyhood. Even then I existed, I lived and I experienced; I took good care to keep myself whole and sound and so 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 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.

In a living creature such as this everything is wonderful and worthy of praise, but all these things are gifts from my God. I did not endow myself with them,

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97. Another instance of the threefold temptation: curiosity about seeing, gluttony, vanity. See note on I, 10, 16 above.
98. Mt 19:14.
99. See note at I, 7, 12 above on trinitarian allusions. That the present triad, eram ... vivebam ... sentiebam is an intentional reference to the Trinity is evident from the next phrase Augustine uses of himself, vestigium secretissimae unitatis. He is made in the image of God, Three in One.
100. The "common sense" of Aristotelian and Stoic philosophy which correlates the impressions received through the external senses. The "outer man" is for Augustine an image of the "inner man" who can know both God and the self.
but they are good, and together they make me what I am.
He who made me is good, and he is my good too;
rejoicing, I thank him for all those good gifts
which made me what I was, even as a boy.
In this lay my sin,
that not in him was I seeking pleasures, distinctions and truth,
but in myself and the rest of his creatures,
and so I fell headlong into pains, confusions and errors.
But I give thanks to you, my sweetness, my honor, my confidence; to you, my God, I give thanks for your gifts.
Do you preserve them for me.
So will you preserve me too,
and what you have given me will grow and reach perfection,
and I will be with you; because this too is your gift to me —
that I exist.
Reading Guide for Book 1:

1. To whom is the Confessions addressed? That is, to whom does the author appear to be speaking? What kind of literary work is it (e.g. novel, poem, prayer, speech)?

2. In the Confessions iii (3), Augustine struggles with the claim that God is everywhere and in everything. What is his problem? What solution, does he come to, if any?


4. In Confessions vi (11), Augustine begins to talk of the "sin" of his infancy (p. 8). What was this sin? Why do people "smilingly tolerate" it? Do you agree with Augustine that humans are influenced by sin from the very beginning of their lives?

5. In Confessions viii (13), Augustine begins to talk of his boyhood, learning to speak, and going to school. What problems did he encounter there? What "follies" does he pray to be delivered from [see section x (16)]?

6. In Confessions xi (17-18), Augustine tells the story of an illness that almost led to his being baptized in childhood. Why did his family want to baptize him when he was sick? Why did they put off his baptism again when he got well?

7. According to Augustine, what was the basic problem with the educational system he went through? [see xii (19), xvi (26), xviii (28-29)]. Why is this a problem?

8. Augustine ends Book I with a thanksgiving [xx(31), p. 22-23]. What does he thank God for? What sin does he acknowledge?