Ad sensum: A Translation of Augustine's *Confessions*; Book 1

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What follows is, in the strict sense, neither a paraphrase nor a translation of Augustine. I have not attempted to follow the letter of his text either generally or in detail. My intention has been to put Augustine's argument in a form that would be most easily accessible to contemporary readers. This is not a problem that can be solved by translation — or at least not in the ordinary sense of the word. There already exists the incomparable French version of Tréhorel and Bouissou in the Bibliothèque Augustinienne series of the **Oeuvres de Saint Augustin** *to which none other comes close in terms of its sustained accuracy and beauty. But this does not answer to my purpose nor would it if it were available in English. A problem remains even for those who can read Augustine's Latin without any difficulty.*

To begin with there is the obscurity of his reference to things that were commonplace in his day but which are not so to us. Whole empires and world religions, essential to his argument, have disappeared from the face of the earth. There is also the difficulty that his **Confessions** *were written for an audience which had either become Christian, or was contemplating it, as a preferable alternative to the standpoint of the ancient world. The ancient position has been lost to us for some 1500 years and the secularization of Christianity in the past century and a half has resulted in the loss of a whole range of assumptions that were shared by Christians and pagan antiquity alike — such things as the concept of sin, the knowability of God, and the necessity of a Mediator. As these have disappeared from the Western mental vocabulary so has the basis for a simple and direct comprehension of his work. Finally, and perhaps most difficult of all, there is a problem in Augustine's tone and style which are so foreign that, even with a perfect comprehension of his Latin or the most accurate translation, we fail to see where the emphasis lies. Here I cite the strongly rhetorical character of the work, coming from a tradition which assumed that the most compelling answer is the one supplied by the reader himself. Almost all of his answers come in the form of rhetorical questions, often mixed in with a series of genuine questions, with the result that for us, who do not share this tradition, the book appears to have a far more open and indefinite character than it actually has. As well, there is its strongly logical nature which makes of it a single sustained argument. We can easily miss this if we assume that, as an autobiography, it is essentially dealing with chance historical events that have little or no logical connection. Augustine begins almost every*

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*paragraph with one or another of a score of little words (**cum, enim, sic, ergo, itaque, tamen, ideo**, etc.) that he uses as logical connectives but which, either in the original or in translation, lose their force and become merely neutral connectives unless we go out of our way to stress and appreciate their logical character. None of these problems can be resolved by any literal translation.*

*Considerations of this sort led me to the conclusion that the more faithful, literal, and accurate the translation, the greater the barrier between Augustine's text and the contemporary reader — unless he or she can devote years to the study of the text. What I have therefore attempted is to write from Augustine's standpoint as if he were making the same argument but addressed this time not to his world but to ours. The result, while in no way literal, is intended to adhere strictly and faithfully to the sense of Augustine's argument. This leaves the reader with the problem of ascertaining whether I have been true to Augustine. Here my only appeal can be to the reader's judgement of whether the argument fails because I have either imported a position which is not in the **Confessions**, or else failed to take account of one which is. I refer those readers who need or want a fully annotated defence of each position, out of the letter of the text, to **Augustine's Conversion: A Commentary on the Argument of Books I — IX of the Confessions**, forthcoming from the Edwin Mellen Press (1988). I begin from Augustine's starting-point in the consideration of his infancy in I, 6 — leaving aside his general introduction to the whole work which is found in the first five chapters.*

Infancy

6 & 7

I am going to explain how I came to the church. But where should I start? Should I begin with my childhood? That was when I first came into a relation with God — in the sense that it was then that I first learned of God — thinking of You as some great person who could help me even though I couldn't see You. Or should I start with the theft of pears when I was sixteen and for the first time took my life in my own hands by trying to live as if You did not exist? Should I start with the day I read the *Hortensius* when I was nineteen? That was the first time I came to think of You as a being that was completely different from anything in the universe — and more desirable because You were eternal while everything else faded and died. On that day I started a search for You that I never gave up until I found You. Or should I start with the time in Milan, eleven years later, when I finally broke with the Manichees? It was from that moment that I stopped thinking I was going towards You when I was actually going in the opposite

direction. Or would it be best to start two years later, when I finally discovered, for an absolute certainty, that the church had the true idea of God and that is also had a way for man to get to You — though at first I refused to join your church because I saw it would mean giving up my old way of life and I knew I couldn't do this.

When I review these steps the answer becomes clear. None will do as the starting-point of a complete account because a reader could say of each one, "Yes, but what came before? Maybe that too has something to do with why you came to the church." And obviously it does. We're talking about my relation to God so it's going to matter what kind of a creature I was even before I heard of God. And anyway, even though I didn't know it at the time, God made me, so there was a relationship all along — even from the day of my birth.

But how far back could I go? I knew I had come out of the womb of my mother, so I must have existed there while she was carrying me, but as I didn't know much more than this about the life of the foetus, I have decided to start with my birth. This was the first point about which I had any reliable evidence instead of what would have been plain conjecture. Of course this wasn't an absolute starting-point. Not only was there the life in the womb, but what about the time before that — was I anywhere, was I anybody? I had no way of tracing myself backwards to an absolute beginning — except insofar as everything in the world could be traced back to a first cause — but that's another question altogether, a philosophical, rather than an historical kind of knowledge.

And now what do I want to say about my infancy? It doesn't seem that there is much that anyone can say about a healthy baby except its date and place of birth, weight, color of hair and so forth. But these are of no lasting consequence. To find something unique to say about a baby it seems that you have to dwell on external conditions and discuss who its parents were, what they did and the state of the world at the time. This makes sense when an author doesn't have to explain what kind of a creature his baby was because every reader knows it's a human being. Individual differences only begin to appear later through the different circumstances and character of each one — so biographers either turn to externals or move swiftly past infancy.

But I want to show how I came to the church so I must begin by trying to show what kind of a creature I was from the earliest moment I can observe — which is my birth — and the only things I can say about myself at this stage are things which I shared with all other normal babies. I got this information not so much

from my mother and nurses — who knew me particularly — as I did from observing other babies when I was grown up. I myself don't remember anything from this time but I am confident that I behaved this way because we can see that this is the way all babies behave.

The most obvious thing I can say is that I was born into a world which was, so to speak, prepared for me — in the sense that everything I needed for my well-being was automatically provided by an order which was built into the universe. For example, I, like every baby, was born needing mother's milk for my first food. And this was provided in just the right amount and at just the right times without either my mother or me having to do anything about it. A woman comes into milk only when she gives birth and her child needs only what she has to provide. It's quite amazing when you think about it. The mother doesn't have to do anything to fill her breasts and the baby doesn't have to make itself able to flourish on just this food and in just in the amount provided. All this is done in the ordinary course of nature and it's obvious that no human ever set this system in place because none of us could live if it were not already there.

An order exists that must go back to the dawn of time — or, at least as long as there have been men — and it's one which no man can have made. For now let's say that God is its author. And what an order it is! At the same time as the baby needs food, its mother's breats are full and aching. When the baby begins to cry from hunger, its mother knows exactly what it wants. Her body needs to give up her milk at the very time that his needs to take it in. This is really a kind of paradise since each part works for the benefit of the other while it is pursuing its own ends. And both mother and baby are sustained in this wonderful harmony by a universal order laid down by You, O God, at the very base of things.

At first, and by this I mean right after my birth, I was a creature just like this and nothing more. All I could do then was to feed myself by sucking and cry at whatever hurt my body — when, for example, I was hungry. To this point there does not appear to be any difference between myself and any other animal in the natural order.

But soon after, in a matter of months, other ways of behaving began to appear which show that I was more than an animal simply. I began to do things that could not be explained in terms of the natural order because we don't find them in any other kind of animal. The first such thing I can point to was something my mother told me. She used to say that I soon started to laugh — at first in my sleep and then later when awake. And I believe

her because I have seen other babies doing the same. I mention this because in those days it was a commonplace that man is the only animal which laughs. I am talking here of laughter proper — the sense of a ridiculous contradiction — and not the noises of physical contentment or excitement which babies make in common with other animals. Of course I don't remember any of this so I can't say how or in what way I saw some funny contradiction as a baby. But I thought then, and I still think now, that insofar as babies really laugh, and real laughter comes only from seeing a contradiction, then a baby must be distinguished from a simple animal as one who has rational powers with which to see the contradiction.

This soon became clearer in my life in more harmful forms. We can see in all babies that, as the months pass, they soon begin to have strange desires that are inexplicable in terms of the natural order. This happens when a baby starts to cry for reasons which its parents can't determine by any of their senses. Is it too hot, or cold, or pinched by its clothes? Is it hungry, or has it eaten something bad? Is there some annoying noise, or smell? They pass the baby everything in sight, "Do you want this, or this?". The answer to all these questions is no — yet the baby goes on trying to say something by its cries which only get louder and louder. Perhaps it's sick? Maybe something is wrong inside where our senses can't reach? But I am not speaking of the crankiness of a baby who is getting a cold, or the moaning of one who has a pain in its stomach. In ninty-nine cases out of a hundred we can see that the baby is not ill because it does not become ill. Its mother can distract it by one means or another and everything goes back to normal. Sometimes too the baby will work itself into a tantrum either because grown-ups don't understand what it wants or else they understand, but refuse to give it such things because what it wants would be harmful. But what can a baby want, or want to avoid, that is nothing which can be seen, heard, tasted, smelled, or touched? Or what can it mean if a baby wants something that would harm it — and here I am not talking about curiosity but about a positive desire for the harmful.

Let me give you an example. I have seen this in a baby before it could even speak. Its mother had fed it all it wanted and yet it threw the most bitter and envious glances, working itself into a perfect tantrum, whenever she went to feed its brother from the same breasts. And why? It had all the milk it wanted or needed. It refused her when she tried to give it more. It seems that it actually wanted all she had for itself — even though it had no use for any more food and even though it would only have vomited it back if it could, somehow, have drunk more. And why? Only

to prevent the other child from getting what it saw as its own. But how can we explain this? The natural order, which produced both children, provides enough for the needs of both — and yet the one claims as his own what he neither needs nor can use. If the first baby had actually had its way it would, in fact, have meant death for the other. This is a far cry from the perfect order we first observed. There, as a healthy animal, the baby had only to make a noise for its parents to know exactly what it wanted and it did not desire anything that would harm itself or any one else because there was no natural necessity to do so. But we cannot say that this jealous baby was somehow defective or abnormal, as an explanation for this behaviour, because we see that all babies act in this way. If the baby in this example is defective then we are all defective.

The only possible explanation seems to be that in the case of human beings we are not dealing with an animal simply. In part we are this, and are contained and defined within the order of nature, but in part we also stand outside it and are opposed to it. It was commonplace to express this difference by saying that, of all the known species of animals, man alone was a *rational* animal. That is, he alone had rational powers — he alone grasped things not only by means of the senses but also essentially, universally, rationally. It may seem strange to think of a baby as having rational powers and I readily admit that the evidence I can give is slight — that he laughs, that he wants what his parents can't grasp by their senses, that he has tantrums and desires things, for no natural reason, which will do harm to himself and others. But surely it is even stranger to think that the infant has no rational powers when we acknowledge that they are clearly there, at the next stage of life, in childhood? If they are not present in an infant then when and from where, I ask, did we get them?

I can find no better explanation for this behaviour than to refer it to reason — which means that the human infant has an identity outside of the natural order. He senses contradiction, he desires things that are not sensible, he has notions of ownership which go beyond need, possession and consumption which is the only kind of 'ownership' we see in all the rest of the animal kingdom. And, if he had the power, it is clear that this baby would have disturbed the order of nature in order to satisfy these desires — even though this would deprive another baby of the food he needed for his very life — just so that the first could possess what he claims as his own though he neither wanted more milk, needed it, nor could use it or save it.

This means that the human baby is, by his nature as a rational animal, in a harmful relationship to the natural order. He is not

innocent — which means "harmless" — because his rational powers grasp things in universal and rational categories and he wants *these* things for himself. But he can't have *all* the milk without disturbing the order of nature. His mind lays claim to it even though his body doesn't. Of course we put up with these faults because we cannot do otherwise and there is no point in reprimanding a baby who can't understand the words we use. The tantrum passes and in any event no actual damage is done since the baby is powerless to have his way. But all the same, this evidence shows that if babies are innocent it is not due to the lack of will to do harm, but to their lack of strength.

The existence of such creatures, who are, by their nature opposed to the natural order, might tempt us to a re-evaluation of what we earlier observed about the wisdom and power of its author when we were looking at its harmony and perfection. But this is not necessary. A moment's reflection will show that even though nature produces such creatures out of herself, capable of working against her order, they are incapable of destroying nature as a whole. In principle — putting aside the actual impotence of babies — reason can only harm the whole in its parts, chiefly in harming itself. This is because man's rational powers are supported by his animal nature at every moment in at least this sense — that he is a rational animal only so long as he is first of all an animal simply. In adults these same rational powers can actually pervert the order of nature and twist it to their own purposes but in doing so, if they go too far, they will ultimately destroy their own ground. The fundamental unity of nature therefore continues undisturbed at the base of all things and everything takes place according to God's law, which You implanted in creation from the beginning. This is man the polluter, killing himself every time he twists nature too far in the effort to make it suit his purposes.

Since the fundamental order placed in nature is in no way threatened, even by a creature such as I then was, I have to say that I owe God thanks for what I then was — even if He had done nothing more. After all, I came into the world with everything I needed for my well-being — with life and body and limbs and all the instincts necessary for my self-preservation. I didn't give these things to myself and nor did my parents. They came through them but from You, O God, and for them I thank You.

In the Scriptures, which, in time, I came to recognize as Your word to men, we find You saying that in Your sight no man is free from sin, not even the infant who has only lived a single day on earth (Job 14:4,5). On the basis of this evidence I can now understand this. Indeed, no other conclusion seems possible. Elsewhere in the Scriptures we also find it said that, "I was

conceived in iniquity and I was in sin when my mother bore me in her womb" (Ps. 50:7). Of course I have no evidence of any rational activities in the womb but, since in infancy my sin consisted in being a *rational animal*, it is most likely that I was already such a creature from the moment of my conception. If this is so then I ask You, my God, where, or when was I, your servant, ever innocent? The only possible answer seems to be — nowhere in space and never in time. But now I will go on to consider the next period of my life. There is nothing more of importance that I can say about my infancy about which I don't remember a single thing.

Childhood

8 — 20

I: Early Childhood, 8 — 12

The next stage of life was childhood. This lasted from the time I began to speak until I reached puberty in my sixteenth year. The rest of this book is concerned with my childhood. I will discuss adolescence, the next period of my life, in Book II. From the moment one learns to speak it appears that the first, infantile, relation to the universe disappears and one comes into a new connection with everything. Of course I can't really say that my infancy left me — for if it did, where did it go? The truth seems to be that the infant turns into a child when it learns to speak and that through this power we come into a new relation to the universe which stays with us for the rest of our lives.

The ability to speak is certainly the turning-point. This is clearly shown in Latin because the word *in-fans* is composed of two words which mean, literally, "one not speaking". The first thing we can observe about speech is that, in the ordinary course of human affairs, everyone learns his or her mother tongue simply by imitating those who already speak it. We do not have to learn it by any rigid system of instruction — as I did when I came to learn Greek or when, later, I was taught the formal structure of Latin in order not only to be able to use it, but to use it correctly and to write it. In this sense we learn our mother tongue 'naturally'. Of course this is just what we would expect from our observations of infancy. The rational powers of the baby must remain implicit until they find an appropriate way of expressing themselves and this is just what happens in speech.

Words, after all, are signs for rational essences and these are not grasped by any of the senses of the body nor by the imagination but only by the rational mind. I mean, for example, that when

I sense or imagine a dog I do so exclusively in terms of one or more of the five senses and then it is always a particular sight, sound, smell, taste or touch that confronts them or is recollected in imagination. But my relation to dogs is not limited to these particular sensations or images. Right now, in my study, there is no dog — none of my senses are receiving any impression from a dog and nor am I imagining any particular dog yet here I am talking about dogs. I can do this because the word "dog" is a sign for what the mind grasps as the rational essence, the definition, of such a creature by which it is, on the one hand, distinguished from every other rational essence in the universe — everything with a different definition — and, on the other, identified with every creature that shares the same definition — big dogs, little dogs, fierce dogs, friendly dogs, all breeds, past, present and future dogs, here or anywhere else.

As we saw in infancy, human beings have the power to grasp things not only by means of the five senses, but also rationally — i.e., in an essential and universal manner. Until the baby learns to speak it has no adequate or accurate way of expressing these things. It therefore suffers from the frustration of desiring, or desiring to avoid, what it apprehends in this rational manner — although without being able to express any of this. Until it learns to speak, it has only the sounds of nature at its disposal and the meaning of these is strictly limited by the natural order where a cry can only be interpreted as, "something is hurting me; I am hungry, etc.". Through the mediation of words it is freed from this bondage to the sensible and it acquires a way of expressing its relation to the rational forms it perceives with the mind. After all, words, as rationally informed sound, are simply adequate signs for these essences. In short, a *rational* animal is bound to develop speech as the necessary expression of its rational powers. This, of course, is why we all learn to speak 'by nature' and doing so brings about the most radical changes in our lives.

As long as we are infants, unable to speak, we are like novice members of human society. Insofar as this is run by a rational order, as distinguished from the natural order we first observed, we can't be subjected to it because there is no means of communicating that order to us — no more than the baby can communicate to others the desires which spring from its rational nature. This is why there is no sense in scolding or punishing the jealous baby who is having a tantrum. It couldn't understand the rebuke.

All this changes once we can talk. We then become full-fledged members of the human community and are completely subject to *its* order — which is present to a young child through the authority of its parents and of grown-ups in general. What a messy

world I came into! How I suffered and was humiliated in my early childhood! Not that anything unusual happened to me. I am just talking about the ordinary course of human society — it was messed up and so was I.

The first important change which happened as a result of my learning to speak was that my parents sent me to school to be taught how to read and write. They said this was the way to get ahead in the world. At first I was too young to understand the use of these studies and yet, if I was lazy or careless, I was beaten. Our masters used to do this to us all the time. In fact this practice was so usual that the phrase, "to put out a hand to the ruler", was just another way of saying, "to study". Obviously I had come into a different situation that I was in as a baby when I was never beaten. But even if I didn't know why I should study, I did understand that my parents and teachers expected me to do so and I knew that I was under their authority.

This is the great difference between the world of the infant and that of the child. Because all humans possess these rational powers which are 'outside' the order of nature and opposed to it, we are not simply governed by nature's order like all the other animals. But this means that if there is to be any order amongst men it will have to come from some source other than nature. We are forced to create and maintain our own order where we both rule and are ruled by authority. There are two possible sources for such authority. Either it can come from brute force or else from reason. In the earliest stages of human history mankind was governed by brute force. This can happen because we are a society of rational *animals*. Such, for example, was the rule of the Assyrians — which I believe was the first and the largest empire the world has even seen — or the rule of all those fabled and ferocious kings between Adam and Noah whose names are recorded in the Bible. But brute irrational force can never be adequate to the demands of reason and it is our reason which creates the need for government in the first place. In the end, the only source of an authority which is adequate to the needs of a society of *rational* animals is one which is itself rational. This of course was the basis of rule in the Roman Empire — expressed in its single law for all mankind. Rome had been able to bring most of the known world under its authority because it offered a government which derived ultimately from a rational and divine principle. This was the society of which I had become a member. As a child I came directly under the authority of my parents and teachers. They, in turn, were under the authority of the Roman magistrates who were under the authority of the Emperor, and he, ultimately, was under the authority of the rational principle which was conceived

as governing the universe — God.

But this did not mean that everything was sweetness and light. Far from it. From the bottom to the top of this chain, the penalty for disobeying authority was the most dreadful punishments — whether these took the form of the schoolmaster's cane or the racks and claws of adult torture. These punishments were legal — meaning they were permitted by the divine law. Besides this, beatings were favoured by a long tradition, which must extend back to the very start of human government, as the most convenient and serviceable means of bringing and keeping man under the tutelage of the law.

Now the fact that we all learn to speak our mother-tongue without being forced or beaten shows that, where learning alone is concerned, we do this much better when the desire comes from within us and we are not under the threat of external punishments. But my education — Roman education in general — had a hidden agenda. It was not simply concerned to teach reading, writing and arithmetic. Behind this there was also the intention of subduing the natural will of the child to the higher demands of the universal. Where, as in Rome, a rational and divine law was recognized as the ultimate principle of human society, then the natural will of the individual had to be broken to make him serviceable to that law — otherwise our natural desires would be primary instead of the law. This, rather than any strictly educational purpose, is the reason why both law and tradition sanctioned these punishments. Countless generations had built up this wretched and painful path along which I in my turn was forced to tread.

Pretty soon I discovered from those around me that when people wanted something very much they used to pray to God. At that time I thought of You as some great and powerful person who was able to hear and help us even though invisible to our senses. I used to pray fervently that You would not let me be beaten at school but often, for my own good, You did not grant this request and I was punished.

When I look back on these beatings I have to acknowledge that, at least in relation to You, O God, they were deserved. I don't see how I can avoid this conclusion since I got them for playing hookey and failing to do my homework. I never did these things because I was incapable of learning, or had some better way of learning, or had some better purpose than learning in mind. The only reason I tried to avoid my studies was because I revolted against the imposition of what seemed to be a harsh and alien order that conflicted with my natural inclinations. "One and one are two, two and two are four", the endless conjugation of Greek verbs, memorizing the rules of Latin grammar, all this was a dull grind in

which I had to mould myself to the abstract and implacable laws of maths and grammar. I hated it all, preferring instead a natural life free of any external reason. Playing truant whenever I could, I found such a world in the games and sports of childhood and then a little later in sneaking off to see the shows that delighted the adult world.

I can understand why I behaved like this but I cannot find any justification for having done so. I was a rational animal who sought to flee from everything which could nurture my rational nature. It too needs to be cultivated and cared for, with food of the appropriate kind, just as much as the body. But I preferred to starve the one in order to pamper the other. The sin here was the opposite of that of infancy. As an infant I sinned every time I acted in a way which showed a willingness to do harm to the natural order just so that my rational purposes could be realized. As a young child I erred on the other side. I was now willing to harm my rational powers by ignoring the nurture and education they required in favour of what seemed like a purely natural existence. But this has to be wrong. I did not lack either memory or intelligence — both of which I owed to You, O God. Neither I nor my parents had made them any more than either of us had made the natural order. To harm or prevent the proper development of these powers showed as much a lack of innocence — in relation to what You had created — as it did to strive for things which would harm the natural order.

Now I confess that while I sinned against You, O God, when I disobeyed my parents and teachers for these reasons, it seems to me that they, for different reasons, were also guilty. It is true that they sent me to school where I was taught such things as were necessary to educate my rational powers. Through these studies they really did develop, and I was eventually enabled to arrive at whatever end my rational nature was capable of attaining far more adequately than if I had remained illiterate. All this was true but, to the best of my judgement, this was not the real reason my parents sent me to school — or at least it was not the essential purpose which they had in mind.

I had come into a world governed by authority and yet the authorities to which I was subjected — my parents and teachers — were profoundly vain and contradictory. I can show this in two ways by giving you an example of the inward and outward contradictions in their position. Let's start with the first. My parents often laughed at the beatings I got at school. I remember very well that I found the humiliation of their mockery as painful as the beating itself which can only mean that I must have been embarassed that such violent means were necessary to nurture

my rational soul. But how could *they* do this — how could they, who loved me, have laughed and made light of these punishments which obviously terrified me? It certainly wasn't that they were cruel, wishing me harm because they enjoyed seeing me hurt; nor were they callous people, indifferent to pain because they were dull-witted and insensitive. No, they laughed at my misery because they pretended to be in a position which was so closely attached to the majesty of the divine law that they knew such petty bodily sufferings were really nothing and found it laughable that I feared them. "What's a little spanking compared to the truth?" This was their attitude and if this had been the truth of the situation their laughter would not have been contradictory. But if they had been threatened with the rack or some other instrument of adult torture I do not believe that they would have feared it any less that I did the cane of my master. Indeed, I wonder if any man can be so closely attached to You that he really can count bodily pain as nothing and so could make light of another man's fear without contradicting himself. This, at any rate, was not, I think, the case with my parents or masters.

They were also in contradiction on the objective side of the matter. They thought it right that I should be beaten for playing games instead of studying and yet the whole purpose of my education, in their eyes, was to equip me to succeed at the grown-up version of the same games — though the games of the adult world are called 'business'. The master who beat me for playing instead of studying used his learning for the same ends as I sought in fleeing from my studies. His purpose was to be first in his world, just as mine was to be first in the games I played — and the one pursuit was as trivial as the other. If he lost some unimportant discussion with a colleague he would be wracked with jealousy and envy even more than I was when I lost a game with a playmate. But why? What did it matter except to the most vain and foolish self-esteem in both of us? Yet we children were beaten for doing, in our own way, the same thing as our parents wanted our education to prepare us for in later life — namely, to succeed in the eyes of the world, to get ahead and become important. Would not any true judge find this contradictory?

There is no doubt in my mind that the authorities to which I was subject were profoundly contradictory. From these examples it seems clear that such contradictions were not peculiar quirks of my own parents and teachers but that they were prevalent and widespread. All the same I don't think it is inevitable that human society should have such a face. It could be different if it were governed by authorities which were not vain and contradictory. I later came to think that — in principle — the church was such

a community and that it was the only one that offered the possibility of a society free of these defects. I will be able to show the reasons why I came to this conclusion when we come to discuss my conversion.

At one point in my childhood I came close to being baptized which, of course, is the means of joining the church. This happened when I was about seven years old and almost died from a stomach sickness. Now it is true that, until the time of my conversion, I pretty much saw things in my father's way, but there was one big exception. From the earliest time I can remember my idea of God came from Monica — and she was a Christian, as was everybody else in our household except Patricius. She had seen to it that from the moment of my birth I received the sign of the cross and the touch of blessed salt — the symbol of purity and light. In North Africa this rite constituted the sign that I was enrolled as a catechumen in the Catholic church. In retrospect it is not surprising that I took my idea of God from Monica rather than Patricius. Her faith was strong and pervasive and in these ways she made sure I knew about it while he, for his part, took next to no thought about You and left this side of my up-bringing entirely up to her.

I think the incident of my near-fatal illness was very important in confirming in my heart her views rather than my father's — that such things were of no consequence. As a little boy I was scared to death at the thought of dying of this illness. Monica however had told me of the eternal life promised to us by Christ and had explained how the promise was made only to those who belonged to His church. My father's position had no such consolations to offer and so I begged her, with great fervor and faith in Your Word, to have me baptized.

Through the whole of the thirty-three years leading up to my conversion Monica took far greater pains to see that I was reborn to eternal life in your church than she had ever suffered in bringing me to birth in this world where our natural life leads only to death. She would certainly have seen that I was baptized except that I soon recovered and so she decided to delay it — as she had already done even before I got ill. She did this for a reason which was foolish and naive though widely held at that time when the church was still struggling to define its faith and bring practice into accord with its belief. Her thought went this way: Christ had promised that our past sins would be washed clean in the waters of baptism and that God would not count them against us. But, the argument ran, since baptism could not be repeated, the best course was to delay it as long as possible — or at least until the worst excesses of adolescence were over. In this way the filthy waters of temptation,

(and here she feared especially the sexual temptations to which we Africans were notoriously susceptible), would sweep over a soul that had not already been cleansed — as opposed to one which had, and for whom the guilt of pollution would be both greater and more difficult to remove because the once-only washing of baptism had already been done.

Many readers may begin to part ways with me when I speak of adolescent sex as a sin and a defilement. Nothing, you might say, could be more natural; we should not be blamed for what we cannot help. Rather, since God made us this way, we should rejoice in it. This was pretty much my father's position. I will explain why I think as I do when I come to that period of my life — in the second book. For the time being all I ask is that you don't reject me out of hand until I have had a chance to explain myself. The point I want to make here is that my mother had this idea and, on its account, she decided to delay my baptism once it had become clear that I would recover. This was undoubtedly a mistake. After all, when the health of the body is at stake nobody says, "Let him get worse since he is not yet cured" — so why should she have said, "I won't have him baptized until he has become as bad as he will get"? It would surely have been much better had I become a Christian at that early age. If this had happened I would not have been left free, especially in my adolescence, to do as I pleased with scarcely a word being said to the contrary — not only from Patricius, which was to be expected, but also from Monica, which was not. If I had been a Christian the church would, at the very least, have been urging me to act as one — and this would have been better than the careless silence which left me free to do as I pleased without having to answer to anyone. And what had she to fear from post-baptismal sins? The salvation she acknowledged in baptism came from You alone, O God. You give it to us in the first place and You are surely able to preserve it in us if that is Your will.

In summary, on looking back over those early years of my childhood, three points seem pertinent to the question of how I came to be a Christian. First, (chapter 9) there is the fact that the authorities to which I was actually subject were vain and contradictory. They forced me to school to learn lessons which, though they could have been put to a good purpose, were only intended to enable me to get ahead in this world. Instead of cultivating my rational powers to the end that through them I might discover and serve You, who had given them to me in the first place, they wanted me to learn for no other reason than because, with the ability to read and number, I would be better able to get wealth and fame. Secondly, (chapter 10), for my own part, I was equally

vain and contradictory. It is true that I learned many things by which my rational powers were developed. But as I would not have studied at all unless I had been forced to it, I can no more take credit for the good that came to me than can my parents. All the benefit that I got out of these studies I have therefore to attribute to You, O God, since it was neither willed by me nor intended by the authorities to which I was subject. And You used my own sin in seeking to avoid these studies as my punishment since I only harmed myself every time I fled from those lessons that were the only means by which my rational powers could be developed and nurtured. Finally, (chapter 11), there is the fact that even though I was not made a member of the church I had, all the same, refused Patricius' insouciant relation to God. So far as I thought of this, I thought in terms that came from Monica's Christianity. But now I want to pass on to the second stage of my childhood.

II: Later Childhood, 13 — 20

My life did not go on throughout the whole of my childhood just as I have described it. At a certain point a change of sorts occurred with the result that I think of this one period in two parts. The change consisted in this: that from hating my studies and seeking constantly to flee from them, I came to love them and threw myself into them totally.

(Chapters 13-17). This happened when I was about twelve and went on to the secondary level under a teacher known as a *grammaticus* — at first in Thagaste and then, when I was about fourteen, in the neighbouring town of Madaura where there was a tertiary level teacher called a *rhetor*. The lessons at the first school had been very abstract, being essentially studies in grammar and number, but under the *grammaticus* we started to read literature and to practice the art of oratory. These I loved. I especially loved the study of Latin literature and of Vergil's stories in the *Aeneid*. We also began to read Homer. He tells just as good a story as Vergil and is every bit as imaginative but I never enjoyed the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey* as much because they were in Greek. We had been taught Greek from the start of our studies but I was not very good at it and so Homer never lost the dull dry character of the elementary studies. I always had to work it out: I could never just read it.

I suppose you might say, from the fact that I started to apply myself to my schoolwork, that I had left behind a certain childish irresponsibility and had made a step in the right direction. Certainly this is how the adults looked at this development but

they were as wrong to be satisfied with me on this account as I was in my new interest in these studies. For what, after all, was the difference between the first and the second studies? Why did I hate the one and love the other? The answer was simply that the literature had a rich content full of images from nature with which I could easily sympathize - the wooden horse and its load of soldiers, Troy in flames, Dido killing herself for love — whereas grammar by itself was just a bare container — a hard-walled, empty and narrow cell where I hated to be kept.

But was I right in loving the one and hating the other? I do not see how I can maintain this. If any of us had to choose between remembering every detail of the wanderings of Aeneas or knowing how to read and write, surely we would all pick the second unless we were bent on harming ourselves? We lose much less by the ignorance of Vergil, or Homer, delightful as they are, than we do by the loss of the ability to read and write. I therefore sinned in hating the primary and loving the secondary studies for such reasons. And I cannot say that my delight in these texts was forced on me by my animal nature — as if I was not guilty of loving their natural content because I was in part a natural animal. The very ability to read and understand these stories came from my rational powers and my sin consisted in using them for an end that was not rational. To use a powerful image from Scripture, I would say that in this I was guilty of "fornicating away from You" (Ps. 72: 27), O my God. That is, I was guilty of turning my back on You by paying no attention to what reason itself required of those who possessed it — using it instead for irrational natural ends. In this I was just like the fornicator, the playboy, who bends his every power of thought and persuasion to the sole end of enjoying sex with everyone that attracts his fancy and gives no thought to the kind of sexual relations our rational powers demand of us in their own right. I did exactly the same in my love of that literature. If I had been forbidden to read it I would have been very unhappy, yet what could be more wretched than my delight in these gaudy fictions while I ignored whatever may have been required of me by the very powers that enabled me to enjoy them. I was like a man who is slowly dying for the want of solid food because he refuses to use his teeth to chew, yet who scrubs and polishes them daily having discovered that they are part of the winning smile that makes his attractive to others and who is content to suppose that this is their real function.

While I delighted in the literature we were set to study for these vain and foolish reasons, it is true that from it I learned many useful words. I don't for a moment want to suggest that we should spend our lives in grammar books and dictionaries. The purpose

of words is to say something. But the things said in the literature that was set before me were as vain and foolish as was I. They taught us that the gods acted in licentious and contradictory ways and authorized man to do the same. Yet what, you will ask, do a few contradictions matter in such a glorious literature? Homer and Vergil were classics and it will probably seem fastidious, if not downright fanatical, to suggest that these books should be banned from the schools on this account. But consider. Homer and Vergil were thought of as inspired poets whose works had a kind of divine authority. It was through them, as much as anything else, that we were taught about the nature of the gods and of the relation which man ought to have towards them. As children these poems were presented to us in this way. Yet what did we find but that Jupiter, the supreme god, who forbade adultery and licentious fornication — punishing it with his thunderbolt — himself committed adultery and fornicated as he pleased using any force or ruse that would gain his purpose? You may say, "So what?", as if this were just a story of no practical consequence, but if you grant their authority the question becomes — "What behaviour do they authorize?". Do they teach that man should refrain from adultery or that he may copulate with whomever he will and is free to use any means to this end?

The answer, obviously, is both — with the result that we were left free to pick either course with the sanction of the highest god. This, of course, reduces divine authority to a mockery since it can be invoked for either of these contradictory purposes. The comical conclusion of such teachings had been recognized long before my day. Look, for example at Terrence's well-known play, *The Eunuch*. He introduces a dissolute young man who justifies his licentious behaviour by pointing to the example of Jupiter, saying that while he can not imitate the righteous power of Jove's thunderbolts, he was able, and happy, to follow him in the deceitful seduction of a girl which he, for his part, had done by pretending to be someone else. If such things could appear on the stage — not as a shocking matter for the audience to abhor but as a joke everyone would enjoy — it was because we were not afraid of such behaviour as abhorrent to the gods who, after all, did the same themselves. And why should it be otherwise when generation after generation had been brought up to regard these tales as the most authoritative account of the nature of the gods?

And you must not think that it was simply an accident that I was taught in this way. This was the traditional education. The state itself looked kindly on these things since, in addition to the fees paid by pupils, the law decreed that teachers should be given a salary. Behind this was the thought that literate men, who were

masters of words, were necessary to both the business and government of the world. I don't deny this. The words must certainly be learnt. But words are like choice and costly glasses that can be filled with a whole variety of meanings and the only texts we were given — with the full approval of our parents, teachers, and even the state — were ones which taught us that it was perfectly all right to cheat and deceive in order to indulge our passions — as if it was only through them that one could learn the meaning of words like "golden", "shower", "lap", "deception", "sky", and so on.

At the time, of course, I simply loved reading these things and would have hated to be forbidden to do so. But even if this were not the case, and out of a purer spirit I had wanted to have nothing to do with such filth, it would have been almost impossible for a child to stand alone against the approval of the whole grown-up world and centuries of tradition. All the more so because, if we had refused to drink the intoxicating stuff, we would have been beaten by our masters who were themselves drunk on it and had a vested interest because they derived their whole living and status as the purveyors of this wine of error.

But I had no such reservations. On the contrary, I loved it and sought to excel in the work which they set me. Let me give you an example of the foolish and empty tasks on which I delighted to waste the powers of mind which You, O God, had given me — and which I did without the slightest concern to use what was Yours in Your service. I remember this case very well. Under the threat of disgrace or a beating, and in hope of winning the praise of such corrput and besotted men, I threw myself into the task of expressing, in prose, the anger of the queen of heaven at her inability to prevent Aeneas from sailing to Italy. My teachers had told us that Juno had never really spoken these words so the whole thing was simply an exercise in fancy and yet it was a fancy that represented the sister and wife of the highest god as wracked with pain and jealousy at the life of a good man. It was bad enough that I should have squandered my efforts on fictions instead of substantial realities - but it was doubly wrong because the fiction presented the gods as opposed to what they themselves had decreed was pious and righteous — Aeneas, after all, was sailing to Italy in obedience to the divine command.

As it happens I did very well in the exercise and came out at or near the top of my class. I got a lot of praise and was highly pleased — but what was it worth? What can be the real value of praise from such men for such things? All it proved was that I was adept at using words to incite the vilest emotions of jealousy and anger. Was this anything to be proud of? Everyone about

me thought so and so did I — but is it so in truth? Surely not! And surely it would be much better if the literature by which children were taught the use of language was not shot through with contradictions and did not encourage and praise the lowest passions. You will ask where such a literature exists and I answer, "In Scripture". At this point in my confession I cannot show you the reason why I think this. In time I will be able to do so. But for the moment do you not agree that it would be better for children to learn to use of words from a source which was both pure and true rather than from one whose message was simply violent and pornographic? And I must add this last note. Some of you may argue that neither Homer nor Vergil have to be taken in this sense. I don't deny it. All I am saying, and what I am testifying to, is that I took them in this sense and that it was in this sense, and in this sense alone, that they were presented to me.

(Chapter 18). But whatever possibilities there may have been for a better interpretation of this literature, they could scarcely have come from such masters as we had. These men were held up to us as models we children ought to imitate yet their only concern was to make a good impression in the eyes of men — without caring in the slightest what improper things they did or whom they unjustly hurt in the process. I was thinking, in the first case, of this kind of thing: the master who was much applauded and admired for a fine, well-worded and witty account of his hopes, say, of seducing the mother of one of his students. He thought nothing of parading his lust so long as it could be used to make him shine. But he would have been really embarassed if, in telling some harmless thing, he had mispronounced a word or misquoted a well-known saying so that he looked like a fool to his audience. Mispronouncing a word is an innocent mistake of no consequence — the same cannot be said of the desire to seduce another man's wife. Yet daily we saw examples of how our masters feared the former and thought nothing of the latter.

One may think that this is no big thing because the man in my example had only boasted of his lustful desires. He hadn't committed adultery, he didn't steal anything, or murder anyone or betray his country. This is certainly the standpoint of a worldly-wisdom which, because we cannot see into one another's hearts, can only judge a person if a crime has actually been committed. But this does not mean that such things are of no consequence to You, O God, — or to us. We know our own intentions and so do You who see the truth of all that goes on in our hearts. We fool ourselves if we think we are safe merely because the world cannot haul us into court. If it is the case that we break Your laws by actually committing adultery, stealing, or murder, we do so

just as surely by an unrepented intention to do these things. We would do them if we could — it is only external circumstances, for which we can take no credit, that keep us from the deed. The world may not be able to accuse us but each of us knows the truth in his heart. This is what we must wilfully ignore, by a kind of self-imposed blindness, in order to indulge these passions as if they were matters of no consequence. Just so, the prodigal son of the Scriptures "went away" from his father's house not by any outward act — by taking horse, carriage or ship — but by his willful determination to squander what he had from his father on pleasures that the world approved and provided though he knew his father did not. But while we turn from You in these ways, You do not abandon us and are patient and full of compassion to take us back if only we repent and seek, in the depth of our hearts, to hold onto Your truth rather than the world's.

Be patient with us, O Lord, when You look down and see how carefully we conform to the customs and fashions which we ourselves have created while we ignore those eternal rules of everlasting salvation which we have received from You, our creator. You see how the whole world is readier to ostracize and find fault with a man for breaking the current conventions of speech than they are with a man who breaks the unchanging laws of reason which you have built into your creation. And the primary principle of human rationality is the law of non-contradiction — that the same attribute cannot at the same time belong and not belong to the same subject and in the same respect. This principle everyone must have who understands anything that is, and this is Your law in the sense that it is not made by man nor are we subject to it at our pleasure.

This is the most fundamental condition of all human knowledge since we do not know anything if, on the one hand, we recognize a distinction ("The book is good") and then deny it at the same time and in the same respect ("The book is bad"). In this case what do we know? — is the book good or is it bad? — we don't know. Likewise, on the other side, we contradict ourselves if we recognize an identity between two things which we then deny at the same time and in the same respect. This is the way in which the religious and ethical form of the law of non-contradiction is stated in the 'golden rule' — that one must not do to another what one is unwilling to suffer from him. Whatever our particular differences, we share a common identity in our rational natures which are all alike subject to the law of non-contradiction. It is therefore the purest self-contradiction for one man to hate another and seek to destroy him for no other reason than because he wants to raise himself above the other when he himself is just a man like

him and no god nor some higher species of being. The first man would not tolerate it if the other fellow said, "Look, I know I am a man just like you but I am going to lord it over you." He would cry out, "That's not fair, you have no right, you're no different that I am, you're just a man like me and you know it." And yet he is willing to do this to the other man! And the world not only lets him get away with it but it counts him a great man worthy of respect.

Think, for example of the professor who, in a fine speech, wins great praise for demolishing some other man's thesis — in which, as was his intent, he so managed to discredit the other man that he ruined his career. He could easily have objected to the thesis without attacking the man — who had done nothing to harm him except that by his mere existence he was a rival — yet here he was, willing to destroy a man simply in order to gratify his desire to be first. His name is on every lip. "Isn't so and so clever!" "What a fellow to be reckoned with!" "Did you hear how he destroyed that silly little man?" The audience applauds him though it knows his wicked intention yet it would reject another man as inconsequential who, though free of any malevolent purpose, merely spoke with the wrong accent.

What foolishness! What utter madness to give our respect to the one instead of the other. It is completely wrong to suppose that the malicious man can harm his enemy in any essential way yet this is exactly what he does to himself. All he can do to his enemy is to harm his worldly prospects — but this much can happen to us at any time through sickness, bad luck or any of a dozen other circumstances. Such things have nothing to do with whether we are good or bad. On the other hand we cannot, we simply cannot, contradict ourselves without making ourselves worse in the most inward and essential way. For our rational powers cannot contradict themselves and remain rational. Every time this happens, as when one man does to another what he would be unwilling to suffer from him, he merely shuts himself off from the truth. By the law of its own nature, human reason inevitably blinds itself in the irrational pursuit of its ends. How could it be otherwise? Its power is to see rational distinctions and identities, which it does — but then it blinds itself and obscures what it knows by denying what it has just affirmed. You have ordered this law for us, O Lord, and this is how things work: for every disordered soul that seeks to use its rational powers in irrational and contradictory ways is, to itself, its own fitting punishment. It thinks that is sees, that it knows how things are — but it does not. And there is no one to blame but itself since it did this to itself.

(Chapter 19). This was the kind of world in which I grew up. These were the people I was expected to imitate and the kind of judgements I was taught to respect. And believe me, I am not simply blaming the world — I *wanted* its respect. As I grew towards the end of my childhood, I tried more and more to please my masters by excelling in my studies because I began to realize that the arts of speech which they were teaching me were the best means to power and preeminence available to me. In this world power comes ultimately through the word. He who has the eloquence to move and persuade others has power — insofar, that is, as we are a society of *rational* animals. It is true, of course, that, as we are also a society of rational *animals*, power and authority can derive more immediately from brute force — but in the end brute force can never be adequate to the demands of reason.

Power through speaking — this was the stuff I wanted and for this reason I soon learned to have a horror of faulty grammar with never a thought, when I committed some error, not to hate and envy my fellow students who did not make such a mistake. I contradicted myself in other more blatant ways too. I often lied to my tutor, my masters, and my parents, deceiving them about what I was doing when I wanted to play some game or see a show they would have forbidden me to watch. I stole from my parents' kitchen, either from greed or to barter with other boys for their toys, taking things they did not want me to take and which I did not want them to know I had taken. And in the games I used to play with my fellows, I often cheated in order to come out on top. Of course nothing made me more furious and nothing made me argue more bitterly than when I found others cheating me as I cheated them — but if I was found out I would argue or lose my temper and break up the game rather than admit my fault.

These things are regarded as childish peccadillos and the world does not take them seriously because nothing it values is at stake — a toy, the odd piece of bread, a few marbles and so on. But it is wrong to regard such behaviour as innocent. From the standpoint of the truth, there is no essential difference between a contradiction in the child and in the adult. The child who cheats at a game to win some marbles does the same thing, according to the capacities of his age, as the adult who cheats his fellow out of a vast estate. Nuts, balls and pet birds give way to money, estates and servants but the intention is the same in the child as in the adult. For this reason, when we read Christ's words in the Scriptures that the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these (little children — in Matt. 19: 44), it can only mean that You used children to symbolize humility because they are small and powerless — not because they are innocent.

(Chapter 20). This is all that I think it is necessary to say about my childhood. You see the kind of creature I was and how I can no more say that I was innocent as a child than I could say this of my infancy. If anything, I had become worse — in the sense that my rational powers were turned not only against nature and the natural order but now also against reason itself and the rational order. Every time I lied, cheated, stole, or contradicted myself in any other way, I was really attempting to twist the truth of things to my own desires. It was bad enough to want to pervert the natural order to the desires of my rational nature but it was even worse to try and pervert the rational order of the universe to suit myself alone. This is what I attempted over and again in my childhood and this, certainly, was not innocent.

But of course I had no more power of actually disturbing the rational order than I had of fundamentally disturbing the natural order. The truth did not change each time I lied. The fact that my playmate's ball was 'in' and that he had really scored a point did not change just because I lied and said that it was 'out'. Inasmuch as my reason was itself subject to a law and an order which it did not make — in that it could not contradict itself and remain rational — each time I did so I only blinded myself and cut myself off further from the truth. Thus, by Your wise and mighty institutions, O Lord, neither the rational nor the natural order of the universe could be disturbed in any essential way by a creature such as I was.

Since our reason is itself limited in this way by the order You have placed in creation, we can see that it is not the case that it is the source of all wickedness — as if the only way to return to harmony with the whole was through the destruction of our rational powers and the 'return' to a purely natural existence. Our rational nature not only comes from You, but it is governed at every moment by Your law. This means that it is both a product of Your truth and is related to that truth as its end — by its nature reason seeks the rational. It is therefore as wrong and futile to try and flee from the demands of our rational nature and lose ourselves completely in the natural as it is to try and pervert the natural order to suit the desires which come from our rational nature. Neither beast (a purely animal nature), nor angel (a purely rational nature), we sin equally when we will to be either. And the want of innocence — understood in its fullest sense — derives neither from the fact that we are animals nor from the fact that we are rational. Rather, it comes from the *confusion* of the universal and the particular, of reason and nature, that we are because we are *rational animals*.

Both my rational and animal natures were created by God —

in the sense that they were neither made by me nor, ultimately, by any other created agency — and for them I owe You thanks, O God. I had being, I had life, and I was capable of thinking — which three things I understand as created images of Your own Trinitarian nature. In themselves each of these was good and each automatically sought its own proper good. (i) I had an instinct for self-preservation, to keep myself in being. (ii) As a form of sentient life I spontaneously guarded the integrity of my senses. (iii) And even in the little thoughts with which I was concerned, I intuitively sought the truth: I did not like to be wrong, my memory was strong, I was learning the command of words, I enjoyed friendship, and I shrank from pain, ignorance and sorrow. If I had not lived beyond childhood I would still owe You thanks, O God, for these gifts which were both marvellous and good and which, in themselves, sought their own good and avoided its opposite.

But I was not good. I did not allow each of these powers to look for its proper good in You who had made both me and them. Instead I sought (i) pleasures, and (ii) eminence, and (iii) truths in the only other place where I could turn — which is to say, in this world. But these things could not really be found there. Try as I might, the order which You had instituted in Your creation — both natural and rational — and by which You governed it, did not disappear each time I tried to twist it to my own purposes. Instead I only got for myself (i) grief, (ii) the confusion of the reality of my ignoble position for eminence, and (iii) error.

Thanks be to You, (i) O my sweetness
and (ii) my honour and (iii) my security;
My God, thanks be to You for Your gifts.
But You must preserve them for me.
For thus will You preserve me
and the things which You have given to me
will be (i) increased and (ii) will reach perfection.
And (iii) I myself will be with You,
for You have also given me myself.

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