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Infancy, Childhood, and Adolescence From Will to Willfulness (Books I–II)

Augustine's *Confessions* exhibits an interplay between two competing dimensions: on the one hand, the dynamism of creation and a desire to return to his origins motivates his inquiry; on the other hand, a radical discontinuity separates him from God and makes his longing for peace problematic. A corresponding interaction between desire and discontinuity pervades his experience. Though he is an image of God, original sin separates him from his sustaining ground; and though he longs to recover his origins, he turns away from them to embrace a world of his own. A conflict emerges from these competing orientations that points to two directions in which Augustine develops: the first moves from fragmentation to unity, and the second contracts into itself and disintegrates.

The author implicates his readers in his inquiry by immersing us in the dynamism of the text, by focusing on his origins, childhood, and education, and by analyzing an adolescent pear-stealing episode in which he falls away from God to become a negative reflection of omnipotence. In all these cases, a confrontation surfaces between will and willfulness that specifies the more general contrast between desire and discontinuity. Augustine's will expresses a desire for peace that points beyond itself toward God, but his willfulness generates a separation from God that causes him to turn away from the center of his being.

In Books I and II, Augustine binds his experience and his capacity for philosophical reflection together by giving equal weight to both dimensions of his nature. This allows him to move back and forth among the stages of infancy, childhood, and adolescence and a penetrating analysis of their

significance, exploring the relations between the individual and the community, and reflecting on his desire to plunge beneath the spatial and temporal dimensions of his experience in a restless attempt to escape from God. As these first two Books unfold, Augustine moves through determinate stages of temporal and spatial development; but he also falls along the vertical axis of experience from original innocence into an abyss from which he is unable to extricate himself. After a brief consideration of the framework that the author develops for understanding his own enterprise, we shall turn to the pivotal episodes he relates and to his reflections on their religious and philosophical significance.

THE DYNAMISM OF THE TEXT (1.1.1–1.5.6)

The *Confessions* begins with its own introduction. Like Virgil's *Aeneid*, where the opening lines introduce the entire text rather than the first book,¹ and like the *Divine Comedy*, where the first Canto introduces the text as a whole rather than its first part,² Augustine's first five chapters are intended to give us access to his comprehensive intentions. It is tempting to pass over these chapters in silence by turning directly to Augustine's account of his infancy, but doing so misses the opportunity to allow the author to speak for himself by expressing his basic intentions. The greatest rhetorician since Cicero should be expected to choose the pathway into his *Confessions* carefully, and our first interpretive task should be to understand how he does this.

Augustine's introductory remarks point to the dynamism of the text rather than to the abstract philosophical structure that undergirds it. This is not to say that he is indifferent to systematic considerations, but to suggest that his fundamental objective is to undertake a journey that leads to dynamic and transforming interaction between God and the soul. Augustine begins with the dynamism of God, the dynamism of praise, the dynamism of sin, and the dynamism of the restless heart; moves to faith seeking understanding as the basic pattern of his inquiry; embraces the power of reflection by asking rhetorical questions about the relation between God and the soul; uses paradoxical adjectives to point to a dynamic dimension in the nature of God; and prays that the transforming activity of God will enlarge and restore the "house of his soul" (1.5.6). In all these ways, he seeks the middle ground between God and the soul where a dynamic interplay between them can occur.

The first sentence of the book calls our attention to the greatness of God: "You are great, O Lord, and greatly to be praised; great is your power, and to your wisdom there is no limit" (1.1.1). Yet having begun with God, Augustine also begins with us by claiming that though we are only a part of creation, we desire to transcend our place in nature by praising our creator.

The author tells us that human beings, both individually and collectively, wish to rise beyond our limitations and to praise the one who has brought us into existence; and he says that we desire to do this in spite of our sin and in spite of the mortality that results from it. As Augustine expresses the point in the most memorable sentence in the book: "You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you" (1.1.1).

The restless heart expresses a longing for God that binds individuals together into a community and mobilizes us to reach beyond ourselves to what will always remain beyond our grasp. However, the passion that Augustine shares with his readers reflects an initial contrast between Neoplatonic and biblical strands in his thinking. This apparent opposition expresses itself when he wonders whether he should first invoke God or praise him, and whether he should first know him or call on him. Like a typical Neoplatonist, Augustine suggests that he cannot invoke a being that he does not know, and that unless he knows him, he might invoke him as other than he is. On the other hand, he considers the possibility that he must call on God in order to know him, where calling on God is a way of reaching out toward him in an act of self-transcendence. In this case, calling on God would be prior to knowing him, at least in some sense of this considerably elastic expression (1.1.1).

At this stage of his inquiry, Augustine remembers Paul's questions, "How shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? Or how shall they believe without a preacher?"³ These questions seem to suggest that faith is a way of knowing God, where calling on God presupposes knowing him in this fideistic sense of the term. In this case, the knowledge of God is prior to the search for understanding, where knowledge (*scire*) of God and faith (*credere*) in God are identical, at least at the outset.⁴ Yet even if this should prove to be the case, the Neoplatonic and the biblical strands in Augustine's thinking still seem to diverge on the issue before us: in the first case, the author has cognitive access to the concept of God before he can believe in, call for, or search for him; in the second, his quest for a knowledge of God presupposes faith in him, where hearing someone speak on his behalf mediates the relation between them.

Despite initial appearances, Augustine is not forced to choose between beginning with knowledge and beginning with faith; and this is not due to the fact that faith itself may be a way of knowing God. As the *Confessions* unfolds, Augustine finds a way of embedding the Neoplatonic path of recollection within the biblical path of faith. Since we are made in the image of God, epistemic access to God is presupposed by the soul's awareness of its own nature. Yet since the transformation of the will requires a reorientation of the person for which the intellect is a necessary but not a sufficient condition, Augustine subordinates the intellect to the will by claiming that he

will seek and call on God in the faith that God has given him. Thus he concludes the first paragraph of the text, not by mentioning the natural knowledge of God, but by referring to the speaking word that injects itself into history, and by suggesting that he makes access to it, not through recollection, but by listening to Ambrose and Paul, the Neoplatonic bishop and the Christian theologian who are preachers.⁵

Against the background of a vague awareness of the nature of God, Augustine begins with the incarnation as the spoken word of God, turns to preaching as the verbal expression of its existential significance, and embraces hearing as the way in which preaching about the divine word becomes accessible. Though faith presupposes the natural knowledge of God, it also rests on the incarnation, and on preaching and hearing as ways of access to him; calling and seeking are the mediating links that lead to understanding; and understanding emerges as the final step in a progression from hearing and believing, to calling and seeking, to finding and praising the one with whom we begin. In this case, knowledge is not simply identical with the natural knowledge of God (*scire*), or with faith (*credere*) as the knowledge presupposed by our search for him, but with the understanding (*intellegere*) that results from our attempt to comprehend the one we seek. At the beginning of Augustine's attempt to do this, we hear about the incarnation in which God speaks to his fragmented heart; at the end, we hear about a song of praise in which his knowledge of God can begin to celebrate its consummation.

In the auditory space defined by the beginning and the end of his journey toward God, Augustine expands the scope of his inquiry by developing the tensions that arise when we call on God; and he does this by asking questions about the relation between God and the soul, the paradoxical nature of which places us at the center of reflective excitation. The dynamism of creation and desire and the emergence of faith seeking understanding issue in reflective tension, and this tension reveals itself most clearly when the author moves beyond questions about the priority of faith and knowledge to unanswerable questions about the relation between God and the soul. The questions he asks put our souls in motion; and in doing so, they invite us to participate in the perplexity generated by pondering the impenetrable mystery of God, who not only creates heaven and earth, but also establishes a reflective interplay between God and the soul into which Augustine wishes to lead us.

The author of the *Confessions* wonders why we should call God into ourselves where there is not enough room for him to live. Suppose the creator responds to our call; suppose he appears; suppose his answer is a way of being present. How could we be sufficiently rich to contain the ground of our existence? What happens to the center of the soul if God reveals himself to the restless heart? If he discloses himself and appears within it, would the finite container that seeks to contain him explode? Everything God creates

has some capacity to receive him. Yet if God is present in us because he is present in everything else, why should we call on him when he is present already? Within the middle ground between God and the soul, Augustine's disorientation pushes him to the limits of reflection; and he exclaims in desperation, "I am not now in hell, yet you are even there. For 'If I descend into hell, you are present'" (1.2.2). Augustine cries for redemption out of the depths of his soul; but if wherever he goes God is present already, why does he continue to call? Once more, the philosopher asks a paradoxical question only to leave it unanswered.

We might try to resolve these perplexities by suggesting that God is not so much in us as we in God. Yet Augustine remains unsatisfied with a theoretical answer to his paradoxical questions and continues to press them home with relentless intensity: "If we live in God, why do we call him to come to us?" "From whence can he come?" "Where do we stand when we call?" "And why is it not enough to exist in God instead of calling him into us?" (1.2.2). The philosopher who suggests that to be is to be in God has no easy answers to these questions.

Augustine faces these problems by transcending the part-whole framework presupposed by his earlier questions and by embracing a more dynamic conception of the relation between God and the soul than the concepts of whole and part can express.⁶ Though he knows that we exist "in" God, he also knows that we have turned away from our creator and that we must call to God from the depths of our fallen predicament. As a consequence, he suggests that God and the soul are related to one another as dynamic centers of power that often move in radically different directions. This allows him to indicate that the *orientation* of the soul matters more than the place of the soul within a larger context. Our "place" in relation to God is our orientation toward him, where being close to God is turning toward him in faith, and being far away from him is turning away from him in disobedience.⁷ Augustine also calls our attention to the limitations of the concept of place in describing our relation to God by pointing to the fact that there is more reality in God than any finite context can contain, and by insisting that God is not only greater than we are, but also present and absent at the same time. In this way, he suggests that the concept of omnipresence subverts the category of mutual containment as a literal conception and points to the need for a flexible mode of discourse to describe the relation between God and the soul (1.2.2).

To express the dynamism of God and the omnipresence to which it points, Augustine resorts to figurative discourse, claiming that the vessels God fills do not contain him, and that even if they break, he does not pour out. When God pours himself out, he does not descend, but lifts us up. God does not scatter himself, but gathers us together. Thus, the relation between

God and the soul is richer than a literal conception of the relation between a part and a whole, pointing to the omnipresence of God and to the figurative discourse necessary to speak about it (1.3.3).

Some familiar Parmenidean questions underscore Augustine's paradoxical conception of the relation between God and the soul: When God fills all things, does he fill them with his whole being? Do singular things contain God singly? And do larger things contain more of him and smaller things less? (1.3.3) Augustine tries to answer these questions, but even here his answers lead to a further perplexity: Is it not rather that you are wholly present everywhere, yet in such a way that nothing contains you wholly? This pivotal question undermines a literal conception of the part-whole relation between God and the soul, pointing to the irreducible transcendence of God and to the linguistic flexibility that is required to understand the relation between God and what he has created. In doing so, it moves beyond univocal discourse, exploding the concept of place as a way of locating God, and moving toward a more vibrant account of the interplay between God and the soul than conventional expressions of this relation permit (1.3.3).

God is wholly present everywhere, but nothing can contain him wholly. When we attempt to speak about our relationship with God, something always slips through and moves beyond the containment relation. It is this something to which Augustine points. God frustrates our attempts to capture him because he is too close to our hearts for us to hold him at a distance and because he is too far from our understanding for him to become a determinate content of cognition. As we stand in the middle ground between God and the soul and seek to respond to his voice, we do not find unequivocal answers to theoretical questions. Rather, we are drawn into a persistent activity of questioning that expresses the reflective dimension of our restless hearts and that points beyond us to the omnipresent being whose dynamism permits it to be present and absent at the same time.

The dynamism of faith seeking understanding reflects the dynamism of the nature of God, and Augustine expresses the dynamism of his creator by attributing paradoxical adjectives to him: “[God is] most merciful and most just; most hidden and most present; most beautiful and most strong; stable and incomprehensible; unchangeable, yet changing all things” (1.4.4). He loves, but without passion. He is jealous, but free from care. He is angry, but remains serene. He changes his ways, but leaves his plans in tact. He recovers what he has never lost; owes men nothing, but pays them as if he were in debt; and when he cancels debts, he loses nothing (1.4.4).

No doubt, Augustine chooses many of these adjectives to perplex and irritate his Manichaean critics. How can God be jealous, angry, change his ways, and cancel his debts as if he owes us something? These are attributes of the Old Testament deity that a sophisticated Manichaean reader would

surely repudiate.⁸ Yet in claiming that God changes his ways, but leaves his plans in tact, the resourceful rhetorician prepares the way for a distinction in Book III between the permanence of justice and the variability of custom that undermines Manichaeian objections to the behavior of the Old Testament patriarchs (3.7.12–3.9.17). By placing perplexing characteristics of God in opposition to others that negate them, he also begins to subvert Manichaeian literalism, affirming but pointing beyond determinate attributes of God to the mystery and the majesty of the One who sustains him.

The author of the *Confessions* cannot plumb the depths of the relationship between God and the soul by speaking univocally; and he knows that God must have mercy on him if he is to continue to speak, however inadequate his attempts to do so may be. First he exclaims, “Have pity on me, so that I may speak”; and then he cries, “‘Say to my soul: I am your salvation.’ Say this, so that I may hear you” (1.5.5). Both God and the soul have roles to play in the drama unfolding before us; and though Augustine asks God for permission to speak, he also listens for God’s reply. It is in the interplay between what he says and what he hears that the reflective dimension of the *Confessions* develops, and it is the interaction between speaking and hearing that gives him access to the one who brings redemption.

Augustine prays that the dialogue between God and the soul will have dramatic consequences: the house of his soul is too narrow for God to come into it, and he asks his creator to enlarge and rebuild it so he will be able to stretch out toward God’s infinite richness (1.5.6). To speak about God and the soul in the language of containment does not capture their explosiveness because both concepts transcend our efforts to express them in ordinary discourse. If Augustine is to sustain his role in the conversation, God must transform and enrich him so he can learn to speak a new kind of language that is adequate to the existential matrix within which he is embedded.

Augustine’s soul is in ruins; he asks God to restore it. He knows there is much about him that is offensive; he quickly confesses it. In the process, he returns to the faith that animates his inquiry by insisting that he can speak to God only because he believes (1.5.6). The dynamism of creation and desire leads to the dynamism of faith seeking understanding, and the dynamism of faith seeking understanding generates discourse that is equally vibrant. As he begins to speak, Augustine not only participates in the reflective excitation of paradoxical questions about God and the soul, but also suggests that these questions reflect the paradoxical nature of God. Yet when he faces this paradox, he does not accept merely theoretical answers, but asks God to speak so he may hear, to enlarge the house of his soul, and to restore the ruins into which he has fallen (1.5.6). In doing so, Augustine embraces faith seeking understanding as the maxim of his life,⁹ enters a pathway that leads to a new way of speaking about God and the soul, permits the voice of God to expand

the constricted boundaries of his soul, and asks God to gather up the fragments of his fragmented heart.

ORIGINS AND INFANCY (1.6.7–1.7.12)

Augustine carries the dynamism of his introductory comments into a brief but important account of the first stage of his life. This account, in turn, rests upon a humble entreaty that God permit him to speak. Augustine cries from the depths of his fragmented predicament, “Grant me to speak before your mercy, grant me who am dust and ashes to speak.” This way of referring to himself displays what Rudolf Otto calls a feeling of nothingness when one stands before the majesty of God.¹⁰ Thus, it is appropriate that what Augustine says about himself at this early stage of his reflections tells us more about his ignorance than it does about his knowledge. The first paradox in his narrative is that he begins by speaking about his origins—an original condition that is prior to speech, transcends his capacity to remember, and remains shrouded in mystery. As he expresses his perplexity, “What do I want to say, Lord, except that I do not know whence I came into what I may call a mortal life or a living death. I know not” (1.6.7).¹¹

Whatever the solution to this problem may be, Augustine knows that his origins do not provide a foundation from which to ask the question of the meaning of his life, but point to a cognitive abyss that he cannot transcend by his own efforts. The word *infans* means “one who is not yet able to speak,” and by implication, “one who cannot remember.” Augustine begins the autobiographical section of his book, not only by telling us about a time when he cannot speak, but also by speaking about a stage of life that he cannot remember. This initial stage of his life is opaque, and it points to the opacity of the origins from which he emerges.

Augustine cannot find an adequate response to questions about his temporal origins by recollecting them directly, and he must depend on what others teach him about what he cannot discover for himself. His parents assure him that God has brought him into existence, fashioning him in one of them and by means of the other; and though he does not remember this, he is willing to accept what they say (1.6.7). Even though his life begins with death, Augustine is convinced that it also begins with the even more important fact that God fashions him in time. This suggests that the first word to be said about the human situation is not original sin, but original innocence, and that however surprising this might seem, original innocence and original sin stand side by side at the earliest stage of Augustine's development.

Depending once more on the testimony of others, Augustine concludes that though his mother and nurses nourish him, they do not fill their own

breasts, but dispense the “food of infancy” from God. At this initial stage of his life, the “father” who creates him becomes the “mother” who sustains him;¹² and God the creator plays both roles by giving his nurses the will to care for him and the impulse to sustain him by instinctive affection. These important facts give Augustine stability, but they also imply that he must depend on others for sustenance. Thus, his reflections about the absolute dependence of infancy point to a positive community as his natural condition and to an ultimate ground without which he would have been unable to survive.

It should not be surprising that the great rhetorician deals with the problem of origins by focusing on his infancy; for in doing so, he places himself in a condition of weakness and innocence that all of us share. Beginning the discussion in this way rather than with a metaphysical inquiry into the problem of origins allows him to identify himself with his readers and permits us to identify ourselves with him. During this first stage of his journey, he asks us to stand on common ground with him and addresses us as participants in a common enterprise. Augustine’s fascination with infancy makes the question of origins a human question; and by starting there, he generates a context that allows us to see ourselves in his story. However, he also weaves the problem of his temporal and his ultimate origins together by calling our attention to the fact that life is a gift, where this central fact points to the grace on which his temporal existence depends. At the beginning of his story, the rhetorician, the psychologist, and the theologian focuses our attention not only on infancy, but also on the creative source out of which he emerges, and on the condition of original innocence that all of us share.¹³

Beginning with infancy also places Augustine in contrast with others and in contrast with God, and he expresses this fact by claiming that he must learn about his origins from others (1.6.10). Thus, the innocence of infancy quickly becomes the dependence of finitude. Augustine focuses on the earliest stage of his life as a way of recovering his origins and of binding himself to his readers, but the radical discontinuity generated by his incapacity to remember his original condition brackets what he says about it. His inability to remember emphasizes his limitations; and this deficiency seems to cut him off, not only from his historical beginnings, but also from his mythological origins.¹⁴ When Hegel asks, “How shall we begin?” he answers that we have begun already and that the first task of systematic reflection is to understand this fact.¹⁵ When Augustine asks the same question, he is unable to answer in the light of his own experience; and as a consequence, he shudders in the face of an abyss he cannot outstrip.

Finitude is a positive condition; and Augustine acknowledges this fact by saying that the ones on whom he depends to prepare comforts for him, satisfy his needs, and see him smiling, both when he sleeps and when he is awake.

As Aristotle reminds us, man is not only a rational animal, but also an animal that imagines, an animal that imitates, and an animal that laughs.¹⁶ It scarcely matters whether rationality, imagination, imitation, or laughter can be found in infancy, even though recent research suggests that a tendency to smile expresses itself in a typical infant between the sixth and the eighth weeks of life.¹⁷ What matters is that the “smile” of the infant points to a state of innocence in which we stand before God as creatures that have been made in God's image.¹⁸

The traditional view that the smile of an infant is caused by an angel passing over is comparable to the scientific claim that it is due to flatulence,¹⁹ for both hypotheses move beyond the evidence of spontaneous smiles in infants found in every culture. Yet what is crucial for our present purposes is Augustine's suggestion that by smiling when he is asleep and awake, the infant participates in a positive community during the earliest stage of his life. Though he complains that he cannot remember his infancy and must learn about it from others, his parents and nurses inform him that a created community sustains him from the beginning, where within this context, he knows “how to suck, to lie quiet when [he is] full, and to cry when in pain—nothing more” (1.6.7).

God is not present as a thematic element in Augustine's account of his origins and his infancy. Yet he acknowledges God's unspoken presence by using what others teach him to paint a placid picture of his original condition that reminds us of a garden of innocence. The purpose of this description of infancy is theological rather than historical, and Augustine moves to the vertical dimension of experience by pointing to a state of innocence in which all of us participate.²⁰ Yet instead of doing this in merely theoretical terms, the great rhetorician describes the early weeks of infancy *as if* he lives in paradise, speaking about his relation to God and to his nurses *as if* the spatiotemporal matrix in which he exists is free from negativity. The problem that remains at the center of Augustine's narrative is that he cannot remember this infant “paradise,” making it necessary for him to depend on the reports of others to understand his infancy and on analogies between himself and other infants to confirm what they say.

The “paradise” Augustine describes contains individuals who stand over against one another, and his description of his original state of innocence has irreducible difference in it. Yet the differences that separate the members of this original community from one another also bind them together. To be finite is to be determinant and to stand in contrast with others, but determination is not simply a negative condition. From an Augustinian point of view, Spinoza's definition of finitude as limitation by negation is mistaken.²¹ It is tempting to believe that finitude is a negative condition that we must overcome; but if this were so, the desire of finite beings to become gods would

be inevitable. A negative appraisal of our finitude would drive us beyond ourselves, pressing us to outstrip our limitations in an erotic quest for satisfaction. Though he is captured by eros at crucial stages of his life, the mature Augustine responds to this problem by embracing the biblical view that God looks at the created order and declares that it is good. This divine declaration points to the positive value of finitude in contrast with the obvious deficiencies of fallenness.²²

Though his description of “paradise” reflects a positive appraisal of finitude, Augustine does not deny his self-transcendence. This dimension of his nature expresses itself in the power of his will to reach beyond itself toward other individuals who stand alongside him in the historical and the mythological communities in which he exists. In the community he shares as an infant, Augustine’s will distinguishes him from others; but this community is also a harmony of wills that presupposes the tacit presence of God. Augustine’s uniqueness expresses itself in the will as a principle of individuation, as a source of self-transcendence that brings him into a positive relation with others, and as a way of pointing beyond space and time to his eternal relation with God. From a temporal point of view, the power of his will individuates him; from a spatial perspective, it brings him into relation with the community that sustains him; and within an eternal horizon, it links him with God at the initial stage of his development.

Augustine does not simply depend on the reports of others to learn something about his infancy, but confirms what they say by observing other infants (1.6.8). In this case, seeing is more important than hearing because hearing is only hearsay. In addition to common goals to which many individuals may be oriented, analogies between one individual and another are crucial links that bind members of the community together. Without them, we would be separate individuals, cut off from others in a world of our own. From a metaphysical point of view, analogy is a principle of unity and separation that makes a community of individuals possible; from an epistemic perspective, it is a principle of inference that allows Augustine to generalize from his observation of infants to conclusions about his origins that confirm what others teach.

In the first year of his life, Augustine begins to realize where he is, to notice distinctions between himself and others, and to want to express his wishes to the adults who can satisfy them (1.6.8). However, he cannot do this because his wishes are within and his parents and nurses are beyond his reach. Thus, a bifurcation emerges between inner and outer dimensions of his consciousness that mirrors the earlier distinction between himself and others. This second contrast is important because it drives the spatial distinction between self and others back into the structure of consciousness, where the difference between the outer and the inner worlds not only separates Augustine from others, but also separates him from himself.

In its initial efforts to communicate, the infant flings its arms and legs about and makes cries and sounds that reflect its wants and wishes. Yet when its nurses do not satisfy its needs because the signs it makes are not similar to them, it becomes indignant, reminding us that Augustine's original condition is not altogether positive (1.6.8). In its futile efforts to find the gratification it seeks, the frustration of its will externalizes itself; and its consequent outbursts point to a radical discontinuity that disrupts the positive community out of which it emerges.

By pointing in this direction, Augustine does not intend to suggest that an infant first has a concept and then thrashes about to express it. He does not need a Wittgensteinian to tell him that communicating his wishes is a social activity and that a child develops the capacity to do so only gradually through training in practical contexts. In fact, all the sounds and bodily movements that reflect Augustine's predicament can be traced to volitional roots (1.6.8), implying that the psychology of infancy should be more concerned with practice than with epistemology, and more interested in the will as a principle of interaction with others than in the understanding as a pathway to truth. In the first twelve months of life, infants live in a practical rather than a theoretical world; and far from being miniature adults, they are dependent beings whose emotional lives develop stage by stage, manifesting only a minimal continuity with the intelligent individuals they will become.

Augustine's purpose in describing his efforts to satisfy his needs is not to develop a theory of emotion or cognition, but to place the infant in a practical context of communal interaction and to emphasize the ambiguities it faces (1.6.8). An infant can have feelings and impulses to express them through natural signs before it has concepts corresponding to the inclinations and tendencies that generate them. The infant's struggles to express its desires reflect a fundamental opposition between positive and negative elements in its nature, and it is out of this internal conflict that a negative community of fallen individuals emerges. In this case, the finitude of innocence becomes the fallenness of alienation; and this alienation manifests itself, not only in relation to others, but also in relation to ourselves.²³

As an individual who is alienated from himself, Augustine returns to the problem of origins at a more fundamental level. He has sounded the crucial theme already by asking whence he comes into this mortal life or living death, but now he begins to develop it by asking whether his infancy follows another stage of life that has passed away before it. Did he spend such a period in his mother's womb, as others have suggested, and as his own observation of pregnant women seems to confirm? Yet what precedes *this* period of his life, leading him to ask in frustration, "Was I, indeed, anywhere, or anybody?" (1.6.9) No one can explain these things to him—neither his father, nor his mother, nor anyone else; and since his memory cannot extend even to the

earliest stages of life, it can scarcely give him an adequate understanding of a mode of life that is prior to conception. In this case, the limitations of Augustine's memory not only separate him from his infancy, but also cut him off from eternity.²⁴

However this may be, it is tempting to believe that Augustine's question about preexistence reveals a tacit commitment to Neoplatonism and that this commitment is a secret doctrine that he will gradually unveil to the attentive reader as the text unfolds.²⁵ According to one of the most important stands in the Neoplatonic doctrine of the soul, a person is a fallen soul whose task is to return to its origins through a process of recollection and purification that culminates in a contemplation of the truth.²⁶ When the slave boy in Plato's *Meno* works out a mathematical problem in the sand, his recollection of structural truths leads to the hypothesis that the soul exists before birth, where it acquires the knowledge it recalls after its embodiment in space and time.²⁷ In the light of this tradition, could Augustine's question about preexistence be a way of pointing to the Neoplatonic myth of the fall of the soul into the body as an explanation of the forgetfulness that makes recollection necessary?

Augustine seems to point in this direction by praising the creator of heaven and earth for his "first being" and for his infancy, where *primordia* appears to be a way of calling our attention to an original condition of innocence in which the soul exists with God prior to its appearance in history. Indeed, Augustine's use of this word, together with claims he makes at later stages in the text, has led Robert O'Connell to conclude that he is a Neoplatonist, not only when he writes the *Confessions*, but even in the systematic and polemical treatises of his philosophical maturity.²⁸ What response should we make to this thesis, at least as it pertains to Augustine's richest account of the relation between God and the soul?

The most straightforward way of understanding Augustine's comment about *primordia* is to construe it as referring to life in the womb. In the Roman tradition, the period before birth is the first stage of life, where *primordia* refers to the time between birth and conception rather than to a place where a disembodied soul exists prior to its fall into the body.²⁹ Augustine suggests this conventional interpretation by claiming that he learns about both his *primordia* and his infancy from women who have had experience of both stages (1.6.9). On the other hand, it would be a mistake to deny that there is a "place" of creation that is "prior" to our fallen predicament and that makes recollection and the use of *primordia* as a philosophical concept possible.³⁰ However, this place need not be construed as a kingdom of disembodied beings, but may be understood as a "paradise" where the souls and the bodies of individuals are created in unfallen space and time "before" their expulsion into the discord of a fallen spatiotemporal medium.³¹

Fallen and unfallen souls are two sides of the same person, where the first word to be said about the person is original innocence, and the second word is original sin.³² When Augustine asks the question, "Whence do I come?" he is not asking about a disembodied soul, but about a person understood as a composite of a soul and a body.³³ Augustine follows the Neoplatonic tradition in claiming that the soul is superior to the body,³⁴ that it is the *higher* man,³⁵ and that it only uses the body;³⁶ but he also suggests that the *true* man is not the soul, but the soul and the body understood as a unity (10.9.6). When Augustine says "I," he usually refers to himself; and only against this background does he use the same word *derivatively* to point to the soul or the body.³⁷ Augustine presupposes a complex semantics that allows him to move back and forth between the metaphorical unity of the soul and the body and their analogical separation, reserving the primary use of the indexical expression to point to himself as a composite being. The great rhetorician uses bodily predicates for the soul and spiritual predicates for the body to bind them together (5.1.1), (9.1.1), and he uses spiritual predicates for the soul and physical predicates for the body to hold them apart (10.2.2), (10.7.11). However, he points to the unity of the person as a composite being when he says "I" without qualification.³⁸

At this stage of his reflections, Augustine introduces the theme of time and eternity, suggesting that the times through which we pass would have no way of moving on unless they were contained in God's eternal present (1.6.10). One of the crucial differences between Augustine and most contemporary philosophers is his conviction that time without eternity is meaningless. This does not mean that eternity is a lifeless standard of intelligibility on which temporality depends, but a dynamic source of power from which it emerges, by which it is measured, and through which it can be transformed into an ecstatic pathway that brings things in time into a positive relationship with God.

Against the backdrop of the relation between time and eternity, Augustine returns to the analysis of his fallen predicament by insisting that God is not responsible for sin. Sin is a pervasive dimension of Augustine's experience; and as we have noticed already, he believes that we would stand under judgment if we had lived for only a day (1.7.11). As with almost every other crucial passage in the book, this reference to the sins of infancy has raised a flurry of scholarly disagreements. Some commentators say that the sins Augustine has in mind are sins that he commits from the beginning of life, while others claim that the sins of infancy are a reflection of the original sin we "inherit" because of our participation in the sin of Adam.³⁹ Some combine the two positions by suggesting that sins of the soul are committed individually, while the mortality of the body is a constant reminder of our participation in Augustine's fallen condition.⁴⁰ Mediating positions of this kind are often dualistic, emphasizing the separation between the soul and the body,

and parceling out the responsibility for sin by tracing bodily mortality to Adam and spiritual degeneration to acts of our own.

My view about this issue occupies the middle ground between the soul and the body and is to be articulated from the ontological and the metaphysical “hyphen” that binds them together and holds them apart. On the one hand, the sins of infancy reflect the fact that both our souls and our bodies participate in the sin of Adam; on the other hand, the sins that we commit as embodied beings are distinctively our own, even though they presuppose Adam as the type of which we are tokens. Augustine’s most profound response to the problem of sin parallels his response to the problem of innocence, where both sin and innocence are functions of our unity and separation from Adam.

Though Augustine claims that he does not remember his infancy, he says that every child serves as an illustration of his predicament: when infants cry for the breast, custom and common sense do not allow adults to rebuke them because they would not understand; but since parents discourage this kind of behavior as children grow older, it must be objectionable from the outset (1.7.11). Again, we find that sin is primarily a phenomenon of the will rather than a cognitive condition that can be dealt with at the level of theoretical understanding. This becomes clear when we notice that this passage is the first place where Augustine uses a distinctively cognitive word to reflect on the status of infancy. When he says that it would be useless for adults to chastise infants for their behavior because they would not *understand* what their elders mean, he places cognition in stark contrast with the volitional malady that characterizes him, even at the earliest stage of his development (1.7.11).

Augustine develops this volitional theme by claiming that it is inappropriate for an infant to cry for what would have been harmful if someone had given it to him; says that he sins when he becomes indignant at those who do not indulge his “capricious desires”; blames him for trying to harm his nurses for not obeying him; and concludes that the innocence of the infant reflects the weakness of its body rather than the purity of its mind (1.7.11). His assessment of this issue is confirmed by the fact that the Latin *innocens* means, “causing no harm,” which is not the case with the kind of behavior to which he calls our attention. This conclusion becomes virtually inescapable when Augustine sees an infant become livid as it watches another baby nursing at the breast, leading him to ask whether it is innocent for one infant to deny another access to the fountain of life, where the milk it has tasted flows freely for all (1.7.11).

We might quibble about whether an infant can be described as indignant, as trying to harm its nurses, or as livid when it observes another infant nursing in its place. Perhaps we should say that the infant behaves *as if* it were

indignant, *as if* it were trying to harm its nurses, and *as if* it were livid at the sight of the behavior of another baby. Recent research about these issues is inconclusive, though much of it suggests that Augustine is more accurate in describing the behavior of infants than our more tentative reformulation of his claims implies.⁴¹ However, to focus on these problems in a scientific way misconstrues Augustine's intentions. He knows that original sin has as much to do with our mature choices as with a defect we inherit and express in the first twelve months of life. As Paul expresses the point in the *Epistle to the Romans*, "Just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, so death spread to all men, *because all sinned*."⁴² The will is the center of human existence;⁴³ and in every person who participates in the human predicament by standing alongside Adam, it is the source of a willful distortion of our positive condition.

The distinction between will and willfulness points to a contrast between finite power and infinite self-accentuation, expressions that are present even in the earliest stage of life. Two modes of human existence stand in radical opposition: one is positive and defines our finitude; the other is negative and generates our fallen predicament. Yet even though Augustine maintains that fallenness is a problem for which our participation in the sin of Adam is ultimately responsible, he insists that we ought to praise our creator for the gift of finitude. He reminds us that God not only gives life to the infant, but also gives it a body, "equipped with limbs, beautified with a shapely form, and for its complete good and protection, endowed with all the powers of a living being" (1.7.12). These remarks suggest that God expresses his perfection, not only by creating souls, but also by creating embodied beings that are good and in whom original innocence is prior to original sin.

Augustine is reluctant to dwell on his infancy because he must trust what others say about it and must depend on his own observation of other infants to have some grasp of it. Thus he confesses, "although such testimonies are most probable, this age I hesitate to join to this life of mine which I have lived in this world." Infancy "belongs to the dark regions of forgetfulness [and] is like that [period] which I lived in my mother's womb," where the hiddenness of infancy, like the hiddenness of sin, invites Augustine to ask, "If I was conceived in iniquity, and if my mother nourished me within her womb in sin . . . ,⁴⁴ where or when was your servant innocent?" (1.7.12)

Again, the deepest and the most sophisticated answer to this question is not that the soul preexists in an innocent state before it falls into the body, but that both the soul and the body have an innocent dimension in the "paradise" in which they have been created.⁴⁵ Yet in this shadowland which is the deepest substratum of human existence, created beings also participate in Adam's sin, embrace it by making choices of our own, and make the fateful transition from the unfallen spatiotemporal context in which we are created

to the fallen spatiotemporal matrix in which we are separated from God.⁴⁶ Because he understands this so clearly, Augustine recoils from the negative side of his origins, shudders when he looks at original sin, and moves beyond his infancy with the plaintive cry, “What matters that now to me of which I recall no trace?” (1.7.12)

LANGUAGE AND EDUCATION (1.8.13–1.18.29)

Augustine is anxious to move away from the discussion of infancy to a region where his memory extends; and to make this transition he asks, “Did I not advance from infancy and come into boyhood? Or rather, did it not come upon me and succeed my infancy?” (1.8.13) His infancy does not go away, but is no longer present; and he is no longer an infant who cannot speak, but becomes “a chattering boy” (1.8.13). In the Roman world, the passage from infancy to childhood is marked by the transition from an incapacity to speak to verbal interaction; and Augustine follows this tradition by claiming that at the close of his infancy, he is learning signs to communicate his feelings to others. In the judgment of a rhetorician for whom language is so important, the transition from inarticulate gestures to spoken discourse is one of the most important moments in the life of every individual (1.8.13). Augustine’s ultimate purpose is to understand the relation between God and the soul and the language appropriate to it; but he also suggests that learning to speak is a significant step in his temporal development, and the most important way of developing spatial and temporal interaction between himself and others.

Augustine emphasizes the role of language in his transition from infancy to childhood by describing how he learns to speak. His account of this process is a familiar part of the philosophical tradition and has become the standard picture of the way in which language is acquired.⁴⁷ Yet the picture Augustine sketches is much less simple and straightforward than familiar caricatures of his position suggest. For example, he not only uses language in a richly polymorphous way, but also gives an account of learning to speak that reflects the complexity of the figurative, performative, and intelligible uses of language in which he engages. The great rhetorician knows that referential uses of language arise within a context of dynamic social interaction; and he also understands that referring to something, to say nothing of pointing to matters of ultimate significance, is an achievement of considerable subtlety and linguistic complexity. Thus, it is important to discuss his account of the acquisition of language, not only as significant in its own right, but also as a way of laying the groundwork for his approach to the language of God and the soul.

In describing how he learns to speak, the first thing Augustine tells us is that he remembers himself as a babbling boy and that afterward, he reflects

on the process that makes learning a language possible (1.8.13). This suggests that memory is an essential element in what he has to say about the acquisition of language and implies that the stage about which he is giving a reflective account can scarcely be earlier than the second or third years of life. Augustine also claims that adults do not teach him how to speak as they teach him the alphabet when he is older, but that with the mind God has given him, he expresses his feelings spontaneously through cries, sounds, and bodily movements so he will be obeyed (1.8.13). Thus, volitional and theocentric rather than abstractly theoretical elements are at the center of the process of language acquisition he describes.

When the child is unable to express his or her wishes, those around the child sometimes name a certain thing and point to it, permitting the child to observe the object and to grasp the fact that it is called by that name. Yet in doing so, its parents and nurses use a "natural language, common to all nations," which expresses itself through changes of countenance, glances, gestures, and intonations, indicating a practical rather than a theoretical concern with "the affections of the mind in seeking, possessing, rejecting, and avoiding things" (1.8.13). *Little by little* Augustine begins to gather (*colligere*) that words he hears frequently, set in their proper places in sentences, are signs of things; and when his mouth becomes accustomed to the signs, he uses them to express his wishes. Thus, he understands referential terms as parts of a larger linguistic context, and on this basis, not only communicates what he wishes to say, but also plunges more deeply into the "the stormy fellowship of human life" (1.8.13).

This Augustinian picture of the acquisition of language has been the target of considerable philosophical criticism. Most of it derives from the fact that Wittgenstein ridicules a truncated version of it in the opening pages of the *Philosophical Investigations*, suggesting that Augustine's theory of linguistic development emphasizes the referential aspect of language illegitimately.⁴⁸ No one who is sensitive to Augustine's subtle uses of language, his careful account of how language is acquired, and his struggles to learn how to speak the language of God and the soul can fail to object to this inadequate understanding of his intentions.⁴⁹ However, before we develop our criticisms, let us remember the central strands of Wittgenstein's influential indictment against him.

First, Wittgenstein claims that pointing to a thing and using a name to denote it leaves the meaning of the name linguistically underdetermined for a child who does not understand it already.⁵⁰ For example, when we point to a bottle, how is the child to know whether we are pointing to its shape, its texture, the milk it contains, or the bottle itself? Ostensive definitions are inadequate as a way of learning the meaning of a word because they fail to allow a child who hears them for the first time to pick out the objects to which they point. Second, Wittgenstein claims that Augustine focuses only

on words as names and ignores other uses of language that are equally important in social contexts. These other linguistic activities include asking questions, giving orders, making promises, and assessing the value of a course of action from a normative point of view. Whatever else they involve, these ways of speaking do not bring us into a simple referential relation between language and the world. Finally, Wittgenstein suggests that the contrast between an inner realm of names and an outer region to which these names refer belies the complexity of our interaction with the world. Consciousness and the world do not stand over against one another in stark referential contrast, but interact as elements of a complex social process in which language has multiple uses. As a consequence, Wittgenstein claims that philosophers should focus on the manifold uses of language rather than restricting themselves to the relation between words and objects.⁵¹

Wittgenstein also implies that Augustine believes that he can think before he can speak.⁵² If this were so, it would mean that he possesses an inner language before he acquires the language he uses to communicate with others. Wittgenstein rejects this view by insisting that thought as inner speech presupposes a public context of communication and cannot occur until a person can engage in verbal interaction with others.⁵³ This view has become such a commonplace in contemporary philosophy that to question it seems like blasphemy. However, Augustine's account of how he learns to speak is closer to the truth than Wittgenstein's insistence that the ability to think is totally dependent on the capacity to speak within a social context.

Augustine not only focuses on what he wants to say, but on his spontaneous urge to communicate; and though he implies that he has something to convey, he does not claim that it is perfectly determinate and that he simply lacks the words to express himself. Instead, he tells us that whimperings, grunts, gestures, and the sounds at his disposal are not sufficient to allow him to make the transition from silent frustration to intelligible communication (1.8.13). At this stage of his life, there is a twilight zone of partial indeterminacy where Augustine dwells in virtual isolation because he is not yet able to express his needs.

What he has to say is not what he thinks clearly and distinctly, but something of which he has a vague apprehension without the capacity to make it more determinate either in thought or discourse. This is evident from the language he uses to describe his initial condition, ranging from willing, wishing, and grasping, on the one hand, to the affections of the mind and collecting things together on the other (1.7.11–1.8.13). These words point to an infant's struggle to communicate at a relatively primitive volitional level rather than to a fully developed cognitive condition that it cannot express because of physical limitations. In this respect, Augustine is closer to the author of the *Philosophical Investigations* than to the author of the *Tractatus*:

the clear, univocal, and determinate relation between word and object that characterizes Wittgenstein's first book, and which he repudiates so forcefully in his later philosophy, is also rejected in Augustine's account of a child's attempts to learn how to speak.⁵⁴

As he develops the point in the *Confessions*, the place of indeterminacy between silence and speech is mediated by hearing the adults around him using names for the things to which they point (1.8.13). However, Augustine never suggests that the act of pointing uniquely determines the referent to which an adult is attempting to call his attention. Rather, ostensive definition is only one of the vehicles through which he learns to identify the objects to which the words he hears refer (1.8.13). The natural language his parents and nurses use to teach him how to speak involves a subtle range of facial, bodily, and vocal indications of what they intend, all of which eventually allow Augustine to grasp what they seek to convey (1.8.13). For example, he insists that our earliest uses of language enhance our capacity to seek, possess, reject, and avoid significant items in our immediate environment (1.8.13). As we might formulate the point, practical words are the "metaphors" and "analogies" with which Augustine begins; and he moves only gradually from contexts of action in which words of this kind are appropriate to contexts of cognition in which literal discourse emerges as a medium for cognitive interaction.

The fact that learning how to speak happens step by step not only points to the developmental dimension in Augustine's account of learning a language, but also separates him from the later Cartesian tradition in which speech is merely the externalization of a prior act of thinking. Augustine's impulses and frustrations are prelinguistic, and having these feelings does not presuppose that he possesses the corresponding concepts as parts of his mental vocabulary. The natural language of gestures precedes the referential use of language, and Augustine must learn how to participate in it before reference can occur.

Even in referential contexts, Augustine is more impressed by the indeterminate dimension of the "objects" to which he refers than the determinate structure that transforms them into frozen contents of cognition. For example, he insists on countless occasions that God and the soul are both present and absent, acknowledging an indeterminate dimension in the two terms to which he is most concerned to refer (1.2.2), (1.3.3), (1.4.4), (4.5.10), (6.3.4). Because the world in which he lives is a symbolic universe,⁵⁵ he is prepared to extend this dimension of indeterminacy to all the things to which he refers, suggesting that they stretch out beyond their determinate boundaries toward their creator (5.1.1), (7.13.19), (13.33.48). Only figurative discourse that outstrips the univocal framework in which his critics have attempted to imprison him will permit us to acknowledge this aspect of his experience.