**Confessions** – St. Aurelius Augustine

St. Augustine’s *Confessions* are an extremely personal collection of thirteen chapters which are written in the form of a diary to God. It is extremely worshipful in tone, even plaintive, as Augustine sincerely asks God why this or that happened to him and beseeches God to stand by him, give him wisdom, show him the right path, etc.

He writes as if he is talking to God and it reads something not unlike a transcript of a (one-sided) dialogue. In keeping with the title, Augustine spends much time apologising to God for his sins and it is clear that he is extremely obsessed with sin even feeling the need to apologise for the sins he committed as an infant.

It is interesting to note how Augustine, when reflecting back on events in his life, claims to see the hand of God in them, frequently saying things like how he now recognises that the words a person spoke to him actually came from God, or that it is clear God orchestrated this or that event for this or that purpose. He also praises God for everything good that happened in his life (even claiming some of the bad was actually done for his own good, orchestrated, of course, by the mysterious hand of God) but never tires of blaming himself and apologising for his sins.

The first seven chapters recount Augustine’s pre-Christian life and he spends much of this recounting his many sins. In chapter eight, Augustine is converted and from here on the tone of the *Confessions* changes to an even more reverential and deferential one than it was earlier, with him frequently gushing over his love for God, his desire to understand him in ever greater detail, and his apologies for his mortal failings. Chapters ten and eleven are where most of Augustine’s philosophical musings can be found; the former dealing mainly with memory (as part of an investigation into how we can know and love God) and the latter looking at various aspects of creation and time. In chapters twelve and thirteen, Augustine spends a lot of time analysing and interpreting Biblical passages. In chapter twelve, he goes into great detail over the passage, “In the Beginning God made heaven and earth. The earth was invisible and without form, and darkness reigned over the deep”, and in the final chapter, he takes a wider sampling of Scriptural quotes, interpreting them allegorically.

Format of this summary

In what follows I have divided the book up by chapter. Each section has three parts. The first will be an *overview* in which I briefly note the central idea(s) of the chapter.

The second part is called *philosophy* and looks at issues Augustine raises which I consider to be philosophical in nature. Since Augustine is recording his thoughts at earlier times in his life, some of the comments in this section represent views that Augustine was later to repeal. It should also be remembered that the autobiographical format of *Confessions* means there is a certain progression of Augustine’s philosophical musings which he builds on as the book progresses and which we see him developing and refining over the course of his journey into Christianity.

The final section is *religious* and will be direct quotations which explicitly reveal something into Augustine’s thoughts about Christianity. All of these quotes will be negative in some way, e.g. stating that God punishes those who don’t follow his rules. You might think this is one-sided… and it is. The reason for this is that I take it for granted that Augustine believed God was loving and righteous and good, etc. No Christian denies Augustine held these beliefs, but what they *do* deny is anything that purports the opposite and as such, it is important to note that, just as in the Bible, there is a less peaceful and ‘love for all’ side to God and Christianity, and Augustine held these kinds of beliefs just as he did the, “God is love” belief. This is an inconvenient truth most Christians try to deny or ignore. My *religious* section is a counter to this.

If a section is missing from my summary it is because there was nothing to include under that heading.

Book 1

Overview

In this chapter, Augustine recounts his days as an infant paying particular attention to the sins he committed at that time, such as throwing tantrums just because people wouldn’t let him do something which was harmful to him. He also confesses his sins as a youth; not paying attention in his studies, lying to his tutors so he could play games, etc.

He spends a few pages regretting that he had to learn such useless things as Greek literature, which recounted the deeds of immoral and licentious deities, and the rules of grammar instead of learning about God’s rules.

Philosophy

(2) Augustine asks where God is. Is he in heaven and earth or are they too small to hold him, in which case does he flow over into some other place?

(6) He wonders about what there is before birth.

(6) He also discusses infinity with relation to God, which must mean that God never changes.

Religious

(5) “Why do I mean so much to you, that you should command me to love you? And if I fail to love you, you are angry and threaten me with great sorrow”

(11) “…by obeying him she obeyed your law…” He’s talking about his mother always obeying his father.

(12) “…you used the mistake I made myself, in not wishing to study, as a punishment which I deserved to pay, for I was a great sinner for so small a boy.”

(12) “…this is what you have ordained and so it is with us, that every soul that sins brings its own punishment upon itself.”

Book 2

Overview

In this chapter, Augustine confesses the sins he committed as a teenager. Apparently he enjoyed sex quite a lot at the time and later felt a great deal of remorse over this, but most of this book was about the theft of the pears with some friends. He admits he didn’t need or even want the pears but he stole them solely for the thrill involved in the sin itself.

Religious

(2) “Bodily desire, like a morass, and adolescent sex welling up within me exuded mists which clouded over and obscured my heart, so that I could not distinguish the clear light of true love from the murk of lust.”

(2) “…they swept me away over the precipice of my body’s appetites and plunged me in the whirlpool of sin. More and more I angered you, unawares.”

(2) “…*a man does well to abstain from all commerce with women… he who is unmarried is concerned with God’s claim, asking how he is to please God; whereas the married man is concerned with the world’s claim, asking how he is to please his wife*.”

(2) “I surrendered myself entirely to lust, which your law forbids”

Book 3

Overview

In this chapter, Augustine recounts what happened when he was nineteen. He went to Carthage where he continued to follow his lustful heart. Augustine feels immense guilt over either how much he loved and desired sex or over how much sex he had… or maybe both.

He continued to study rhetoric on his path to becoming a lawyer and associated with a group called the ‘Wreckers’ who were apparently scathing in their jests and criticisms of others. Augustine confesses his pride and conceit at his own eloquence at this time. During the course of his studies he discovered Cicero, who had a significant impact on him. Through Cicero, he discovered his love of philosophy. So, he studied the Bible but found it lacking compared to Cicero.

At this point, Augustine fell in with the Manicheans whom he would join in mocking Christianity. He recalls with sincere regret how he accepted all of their arguments and bought into the whole community.

He also talks about a dream his (devout Christian) mother had in which she was crying and a figure asked her why. She replied that she was crying for her son, but he urged her not to cry telling her that “Where you are, he is”. When she turned to look at her side, there was Augustine.

Philosophy

(2) He wonders about why people enjoy tragedy and suffering on the stage when they would hate to have it happen in their lives.

(4) He learns from Cicero that it is best not to love certain schools of philosophy over others but to love wisdom itself.

(6) He wonders about the nature of God. He isn’t the heavenly bodies for He created them. He is not the soul. He is the “life of souls, the life of lives.” He is “life itself, immutable.”

(7) He affirms something he didn’t know at the time, namely, that God is a spirit, “a being without bulk”.

Religious

(1) “I muddied the stream of friendship with the filth of lewdness and clouded its clear waters with hell’s black river of lust."

(8) “How much more right, then, has God to give commands, since he is the Ruler of all creation and all his creatures must obey his commandments without demur!”

Book 4

Overview

This chapter covers Augustine’s nineteenth to twenty-eighth years. At some time during this period, he lived with, and said he was faithful to, a woman he wasn’t married to. He also had a child with her.

He continued to excel in his studies and began to teach at Thagaste. At this time one of his good friends, with whom he shared a lot of interests, became sick and as they thought he would die, he was baptised while in a coma. When he recovered, Augustine reports that his outlook on Christianity had completely changed and no longer wished to mock the faith. Nevertheless, he died a few days later and Augustine was devastated.

He continues to regret his allegiances to Manicheanism and his acceptance of their doctrines. He specifically recalls believing that God was a substance, of which he was a “small piece broken from it”. In this, he thinks he sinned terribly (pride) for he thought he was of the same nature as God.

He also recalls reading Aristotle’s *Ten Categories* and easily understanding it but finding it of no real help to him. All the books he read at this time (he read and understood a lot), he now thinks were useless, leading him ever farther from the one Truth, God.

Philosophy

(3) Augustine was tempted by astrology but was told, when he asked why the future was often correctly predicted using it, it was all due to chance.

(5) He wonders why “tears are so sweet to the sorrowful” conjecturing that it is from hope that God will hear them, or perhaps it only becomes a pleasure after the thing we are crying over loses its lustre.

(6) He speculates that we ought not to tether our souls by love to things that cannot last or (7) to “love a man as something more than human”. Again, in (10) he recommends that we not bind our souls to others because they, like all things must die.

(7) He also recognises it as foolish to complain at the “lot man has to bear”.

(9) Augustine talks a bit about friendship recognising its importance.

(10) Here, he muses over death, acknowledging that it is perfectly natural and a part of life; “Not all the parts exist at once, but some must come as others go, and in this way together they make up the whole of which they are the parts.”

(11) He gives a kind of argument, based on his understanding of death as a kind of making way for others, for why God is eternal. It is because there is no one who can take his place.

(13) He speculates about what beauty is and (15) defines it in two classes:- that which is beautiful in itself and that which is beautiful because it is properly proportioned in relation to something else.

(14) He wonders how one soul can contain so many conflicting feelings, specifically, how can he love in another what he hates in himself?

(15) He sees a certain peace coming from virtue and discord from vice. This leads him to think that there is unity and rationality in goodness and disunion and irrationality in evil. Unity he calls a ‘monad’, a kind of “mind without sex”, and disunity a ‘dyad’, consisting of anger and lust.

(16) He writes a short paragraph summarising Aristotle’s *Ten Categories*.

Religious

(1) “Let the strong and mighty laugh at men like me: let us, the weak and the poor, confess our sins to you.”

(3) “…you, O God, who *will award to every man what his acts have deserved*”

(4) “For you are the God of vengeance as well as the fountain of mercy.”

(9) “If he abandons your love, his only refuge is your wrath.”

(11) “…he will not withhold himself from your love unless you withhold your love from him.”

(11) “…when it dies [your body] it will not drag you with it to the grave, but will endure and abide with you before God, who abides and endures for ever.”

(12) “Our Life himself came down into this world and took away our death… From heaven he came down to us, entering first the Virgin’s womb, where humanity, our mortal flesh, was wedded to him so that it might not be for ever mortal.”

Book 5

Overview

Augustine is twenty nine when the events of this chapter take place.

He recalls how he had read a number of scientific books and found their answers compelling but criticises the authors for their pride in not giving due credit to God, who *made* the things they are attempting to explain. He also begins to question some of the “extremely incoherent” teachings of the Manicheans, many of which disagree with science. He even says the “Manichean books are full of the most tedious fictions”. He got the chance to meet and talk with a Manichean bishop named Faustus, who was reputed to be a supreme intellect, but Augustine found that he was, while a gentleman, no scholar.

During this year, he went to Rome to teach. As soon as he arrived he became sick and came close to dying. However, he did recover.

He talks a bit about his mother and how much she loved him and desired the best for him.

He confesses a few sins in this chapter related to his Manichean beliefs:

* It is not humans that sin but some “other nature that sins within us”.
* He imagined God, and evil, as bodily substances. He thinks this was the greatest impediment to him realising the truth.
* He could not believe that God, who was good, could have created an evil nature, so he imagined there were “two antagonistic masses, both of which were infinite”
* He did not belief that Jesus was the incarnation of God because for Jesus to be born of the Virgin Mary, his nature would have “mingled with her flesh” and therefore been defiled.

Sometime later, he was sent to Milan on the recommendation of a Roman Prefect where he met the bishop Ambrose whom he liked as a man and enjoyed listening to although he didn’t agree with his beliefs. Nevertheless, Ambrose’s words began to sink into Augustine’s mind and he left the Manicheans, resolving to remain a sceptic until the true path presented itself to him. His feelings towards Christian doctrine begin to soften as he hears Ambrose figuratively interpret passages from the Old Testament. This book finishes with Augustine a catechumen in the Catholic Church.

Religious

(2) “…so they have fallen down upon your anger.”

(3) “Their conceit… their curiosity… their lust… O God, you are the consuming fire that can burn away their love for these things…”

(4) “And the man who knows you, and knows these things [facts about the universe] as well, is none the happier for his knowledge of them: he is happy only because he knows you”.

(5) “*wisdom is fearing the Lord*”

(5) “I listen with patience to his theories and think it no harm to him that he does not know the true facts about material things, provided that he holds no beliefs unworthy of you, O Lord”.

(9) “…the bond of original sin, by which we *all have died with Adam.*”

(9) “…if I left this life, where else would I go but to the fiery torments which my deeds deserved in the justice of your law?”

(10) “The truth, of course, was that it was all my own self, and my own impiety had divided me against myself. My sin was all the more incurable because I did not think myself a sinner.”

Book 6

Overview

Augustine turns thirty during the events in this chapter.

He recounts how his mother moved to Milan and also befriended Ambrose.

Augustine feels more and more shame at his previous Manichean beliefs and continues to inch forward on the road to conversion. Although he was still very much undecided, he was beginning to prefer Catholic teaching. More and more, he was beginning to accept certain interpretations of the Bible and believe that there were “profound mysteries” contained therein. In particular, the Bible was beginning to impress him as something anybody could read with ease but which also had deeper meanings for those capable of discerning them.

He talks about two friends who were important to him at the time, Alypius and Nebridius. Alypius came from Augustine’s own hometown and used to love the “games in the amphitheatre” which Augustine disapproved of. After hearing a lecture of Augustine’s and, thinking Augustine was talking about him, he decided to quit watching the games. He went to Rome before Augustine and there got caught up in the bloody gladiatorial contests. They met in Rome and Alypius accompanied Augustine to Milan where he (Alypius) earned a reputation as a man of great integrity. Nebridius had also travelled to Milan to be with Augustine so that they may search for wisdom together.

Augustine proposed to a woman and she had accepted although she “was nearly two years too young for marriage, but I liked her well enough and was content to wait.” In addition to this, he was living with another woman who had borne his son but she was “torn from my side as an obstacle to my marriage” and with his son, returned to Africa. Augustine was devastated by this but took another mistress.

Around this time about ten friends and he decided to pool their money and possessions and live communally, with no one person owning anything, everything belonging to all equally. However, the fact that some of them were married (and Augustine engaged) forced them to realise that their wives would never agree to this and the plans fell apart.

Philosophy

(3) He considers how God is not composed of parts but exists everywhere and everywhere is entire.

(5) He states with approval how the Church demanded that some things be accepted on faith because not all things can be proved and even if they could, not everyone would understand those proofs. In addition, Augustine realises that he already believes many things he has never seen (events in history, facts about places he has never visited, etc.), so if we require absolute proof about *every*thing, we could never know *any*thing.

(5) He gives some specious reasoning next about the Bible. He asserts that we are too weak to discover the truth by reason and so we need sacred books. He came to believe that God invested the Bible with the authority he did “in every land” because he meant it to fill in the gaps our reason cannot.

(6) Seeing a drunk but happy beggar causes Augustine to wonder about his goal of peaceful happiness. He was striving and manoeuvring to achieve this happiness but the beggar had already done so “at the cost of a few pence”. He realises the beggar isn’t truly happy but the worldly happiness Augustine was aiming for was even more false.

He concludes that it does matter why someone is happy; comparing the joy of hope that comes from faith to the shallow happiness he was striving for.

(11) He wonders if there might be nothing after death but rejects this because “it is not for nothing… that the towering authority of the Christian faith has spread throughout the world. God would never have done so much, such wonderful things for us if the life of the soul came to an end with the death of the body.”

(16) He discussed good and evil with his friends Alypius and Nebridius. Augustine mentions Epicurus favourably, except for the fact that Epicurus had not believed in life after death. At that time, Augustine imagined that immortality and perpetual bodily pleasure would be perfect happiness. This opinion would obviously change later.

Religious

(5) “…we are too weak to discover the truth by reason alone and for this reason need the authority of sacred books”.

(6) “I ought not to have preferred myself to the beggar simply because I was the more learned, since my learning was no source of happiness to me.”

(11) “no man *can be master of himself, except of God’s bounty*”.

(12) “I was bound down by this disease of the flesh [sex]. Its deadly pleasures were a chain that I dragged along with me”

(12) “…you, O God most high, who formed us out of clay”

(16) “the fear of death and your judgement to come”

Book 7

Overview

Augustine continues to struggle with his belief. He notes again that his inability to conceive of God as anything other than “some kind of bodily substance extended in space” was a substantial impediment to his accepting Christianity. He also reiterates the problem of evil as something he couldn’t get past. A final problem he was having trouble accepting was the divinity of Jesus. He accepted Jesus was a perfect man but couldn’t accept his divinity.

He also notes a story that forced him to completely abandon his faith in astrology. A man called Firminus told him that at exactly the same time as he was born, a female slave in his household also gave birth to a child. Despite the fact that their astrological destinies were therefore identical, their lives played out in completely different ways, Firminus being born to a rich family and the slave child remaining a slave.

Augustine discovers the books of the Platonists and finds them extremely similar to Christian doctrine. He also mentions finding the writings of Paul, which had a significant impact on him.

At this time, Augustine recounts how, with the “eye of my soul”, he “saw the Light” and was raised up (by God) so that, while he couldn’t see the truth yet, he could see there was something there to be seen. He also says he heard God’s voice in his heart, which removed all of his doubts. In addition to this, he mentions a later more intellectual revelation he had when, “in an instant of awe, my mind attained to the sight of the God who IS.”

It is in this chapter that Augustine recounts resolving the problem of God as substance and the problem of evil. Despite these significant steps forward, he still couldn’t retain his enjoyment of God for any length of time. He found he kept being dragged down by the habits of the flesh. To overcome this, he now realises he needed to embrace Jesus as the mediator between men and God.

Philosophy

(1) Augustine affirms three principles: 1) that what is subject to decay is inferior to that which is not, 2) that which cannot be harmed is better than that which can, and 3) what is constant is better than that which changes.

(1) Augustine cannot conceive of any non-bodily substance because anything that has no dimensions in space must be, by definition, nothing. Even removing a body from the space it occupies and leaving it empty still leaves a space, albeit an empty one. One problem he notes with this theory is that, since God must therefore be distributed through space physically, it means the bigger a thing is, the more of God it contains, and this seems false to Augustine. Regarding this, he says that at that time he had failed to consider the power of thought which was very much a real thing despite having no physical dimensions.

(3) He anticipates Descartes a little here saying that one thing he could be sure of was that he had a will and that when he chose to do something, it was him choosing to do so and not anyone else.

(3) Regarding the problem of evil, Augustine had been told that we do evil because we have freewill. But, since God (who is Goodness itself) made him, how could he possibly have the will to do wrong in the first place? Responding to this by saying the devil did it only pushes the problem back; who made the devil?

(4) He gives an argument very similar in form to the ontological argument in which he tries to prove God’s incorruptibility. Nobody can conceive of anything better than God, and since being incorruptible is better than being corruptible, God must be incorruptible or else one could imagine something better than God.

(4) He also argues that God cannot be surprised because he knows all things and the only reason things exist is because God knows of them.

(5) He wonders if maybe there is no evil at all. He rejects this for two reasons; 1) why would we fear something that wasn’t there?, and 2) even if our fears of evil were unfounded, that fact is itself an evil. Either way, evil is real. Next, he wonders about whether there was something evil in the matter from which God made the universe. He rejects this because surely if that were true, God could, and would have, destroyed it.

(10) Still reflecting on substance, Augustine wonders about truth, speculating that even though truth has no dimensions, it is not nothing.

(11) He claims that all things lower than God have no “absolute being in themselves”. Rather, they get their being from God. This goes back to Parmenides’ idea that the only things that truly ‘are’ are those that don’t change; an idea which Augustine wholly endorses.

(12) This is Augustine’s final solution to the problem of evil. He thinks that things which are corruptible must have some good in the first place (or else what would be corrupted?). Everything corrupted is deprived of some good and if it is deprived of all good it will cease to exist. This follows because if a thing, after having been corrupted to the point where no good remains (therefore being no longer corruptible) *and* still exists, then it is in a better state now than it was before it was corrupted, because it is now incorruptible. To say that a thing can be made better by being deprived of good is ridiculous and therefore must be false. The conclusion is that “whatever is, is good” and evil is therefore not a substance. Rather, it is a *deprivation* of good.

(13) Augustine next answers why, even though he has proven there is no such thing as evil, we imagine that there is. Some of the separate parts of creation can be “at variance with other things” (this disharmony we call evil). However, while evil in one relation, that same thing can be in harmony with some other part (this harmony we call good). As an example, he cites the sky, which, though cloudy and windy (an evil to us), is in perfect accord with the earth (and therefore good). This basically requires us to look at creation as a whole, not just our tiny little corner of it. In addition, Augustine prefigures Leibniz in saying that while some parts of creation are lower than others, “the sum of all creation is better than the higher things alone.”

(15) Back to God as substance, Augustine now understands that everything is in God, not as if he is a container, but in the sense that “all things are true in so far as they have being” which comes from God (see the philosophy note for section 11 above).

(16) Following on from his definition of evil as privation, Augustine sees wickedness, not as substance, but as a “perversion of the will when it turns aside” from God.

(17) He wonders how he can appreciate beauty and make correct decisions and properly judge things, concluding that he can only do these things because there is another realm above his mind full of eternal truths impervious to change. There is probably more than a little Plato in this realisation.

(17) Augustine says there are four ways of thinking; 1) consideration of material things, 2) the soul perceiving things through the senses, 3) the soul’s “inner power” which receives external facts from the senses, and 4) reason, where these facts are judged. It is this final way that allows humans to raise themselves above their mortal limitations and touch the realm of eternal truths.

Religious

(6) “…let no man question the why or the wherefore of your judgement. This he must not do, for he is only a man.”

(7) “…it was yours to care for and to judge mankind.”

(7) “…so that he might come to that other life which is to follow this our life in death.”

(9) “…*in his own appointed time he underwent death for us sinners*”

(9) “*…you did not even spare your own Son, but gave him up for us all.*”

(18) “…*mediator between God and men, Jesus Christ, who is a man, like them,* and also *rules as God over all things, blessed for ever.*”

(19) “worldly goods are to be despised for the sake of immortal life”

(21) “*…we are sinners, that have wronged and forsaken you; all is amiss with us. We are bowed down by your chastisement.*”

Book 8

Overview

Augustine is around thirty one years old by the time the events in this chapter take place.

He was stuck in a place where he was unable to enjoy the material pursuits he once did (honour and wealth) but still wasn’t able to let go of his lust and fully give himself to Christianity. He talks of the two wills within him warring with each other, one the servant of the flesh, the other of the spirit.

He went to see Simplicianus who was an old man and a “good servant of [God]” and Simplicianus told him a story about Victorinus, a man of great learning from Rome, who had held fast to a variety of pagan beliefs all his life. After reading the Holy Scriptures, Victorinus converted to Christianity but only told Simplicianus. He didn’t announce it publicly because he thought it might not be well-received by the wider public. After some time, he feared that Christ might deny him in heaven if he failed to acknowledge Christ before the people and so finally converted with a baptism.

Next, Augustine tells of a visit he received from Ponticianus, a man with a high position in the emperor’s household, who told him and Alypius a story about Antony, a famous Egyptian monk, and how the monks live in their monasteries, including the monastery at Milan. He also told them how two of his comrades had, after reading a book about Antony’s life, decided to serve God on the spot. They were both engaged to be married but broke their engagements off.

It is in this chapter that Augustine gives his famous line referring to a time in his youth when he had prayed to God saying, “Give me chastity and continence, but not yet.”

After hearing Ponticianus, Augustine is deeply disturbed and conflicted. He flees to a garden outside his house where Alypius, seeing his friend in distress, promptly followed. There, Augustine reports he “tore my hair and hammered my forehead with my fists; I locked my fingers and hugged my knees”. Finally, Augustine left Alypius so that he could cry in peace and it was here, under a fig tree that he says he heard “the sing-song voice of a child in a nearby house” saying “Take it and read, take it and read”. He also notes that he could think of no children’s song that contained these words. He took this to be a divine command and hurried back to Alypius where he had left his book containing Paul’s Epistles, opened it, and read the first passage he saw. It read: *Not in revelling and drunkenness, not in lust and wantonness, not in quarrels and rivalries. Rather, arm yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ; spend no more thought on nature and nature’s appetites.* Augustine fully and truly converted on the spot, as did Alypius.

Philosophy

(3) Regarding happiness, Augustine wonders why it is that we are happier if we find or regain something than if we have always had it. He specifically mentions eating and drinking, which are not satisfying unless preceded by hunger and thirst. He wonders if this is the “rhythm of our world”; the greater the pain which precedes it, the greater the joy afterwards.

(5) He recognises that a habit that is not resisted becomes a necessity.

(9) When Augustine is trying to commit himself to God and let go of his lustful desires, he notices that even though his mind gives the order to make that act of will, that same mind refuses to carry out its own command. How could this be? The reason is that the command is not given with the full will, hence there are two wills in us. (10) But there are not two minds in us, one good and one evil that spring from opposing substances and opposing principles, as the Manicheans believe. Rather, we have only one soul and that one soul wills two different things, but it wills neither fully so it is “wrenched in two and suffers great trials”.

Religious

(2) “Simplicianus said that he was glad that I had not stumbled upon the writings of other philosophers, which were full of fallacies and misrepresentations *drawn from worldly principles*.”

(5) “…*the impulses of nature and the impulses of the spirit are at war with one another*.”

(10) “It [the sinful principle in him] was part of the punishment of a sin freely committed by Adam, my first father.”

Book 9

Overview

Augustine turns thirty-three in this chapter. From here Augustine really turns up the worshipping nature of his writing, praising God at every turn in almost gushing language.

After his conversion, he decides to quit teaching but rather than make a big fuss over his newfound faith, he elects to see out the final three weeks before the autumn holidays after which he just won’t return. He also mentions he was having health problems; difficulties breathing and chest pains, symptomatic of lung-trouble.

When the holidays begin, Augustine and his friends go to a house in the country where he begins to express his love for God on paper. He talks about how much the Psalms of David moved him, even to tears and spends a lot of time discussing the fourth Psalm in some detail.

While here Augustine reports a toothache he had, the pain of which disappeared, as soon as he and his friends prayed about it.

Augustine and Alypius got baptised at the same time in Milan. He also mentions how his son, Adeodatus, accompanied them. He was just fifteen at the time and apparently very intelligent although he dies not long afterwards; Augustine saying, “…you [God] took him from this world early in life”.

Augustine recounts a couple of miracles which occur as the bodies of two famous martyrs were being transported to Ambrose’s basilica. On the way “several persons who were tormented by evil spirits were cured” and a man, who had been blind for years, had his sight restored after touching a handkerchief to the bier with the bodies on it and then putting it to his eyes.

Augustine sets out for Africa but on the way his mother, Monica, dies at the age of fifty-six. This was a crushing blow for Augustine. He even laments, “her life and mine had been as one”. He talks a lot about her here and it is evident he loved her deeply. He recollects how she was modest and temperate and often played the role of peacemaker for others. He also talks about his father, Patricius, who was unfaithful to Augustine’s mother and even though he was “remarkably kind, he had a hot temper”.

Philosophy

(4) Augustine talks about happiness not being something we can find out there in the temporal pleasures of the world.

Religious

(3) “…you are repaying Verecundus with the contentment of your paradise, where nothing ever fades away.”

(8) “…correcting the children when necessary with strictness, for the love of God… she would not allow them to drink even water, however great their thirst, for fear that they might develop bad habits.”

(10) “…the world, for all its pleasures, seemed a paltry place compared with the life that we spoke of [i.e. heaven]”

(13) “*Any man who says to his brother, You fool, must answer for it in hell fire*, and however praiseworthy a man’s life may be, it will go hard with him if you lay aside your mercy when you come to examine it.”

(13) “Let not the devil, who is *lion and serpent* in one, bar her way by force or by guile. For she will not answer that she has no debt to pay, for fear that her cunning accuser should prove her wrong and win her for himself. Her reply will be that her debt has been paid by Christ, to whom none can repay the price which he paid for us, though the debt was not his to pay.”

Book 10

Overview

Augustine talks about why he is writing his confessions down. He thinks that when others read about his struggles, it will help them overcome their own obstacles to God.

In this chapter, Augustine gets quite philosophical, investigating memory in some detail, as he asks what God is and how it is we can know him.

He also continues berating himself with even more fervour for his evil nature, and the war that he is constantly waging against it. Augustine sees the world as full of sin and temptation at every turn which we must constantly guard against. He is absolutely paranoid about falling into sin, even unwittingly, and sees life as a trial full of difficulty and hardships. He even feels he must confess his dreams in which his former habits rise up once more and give him illicit pleasure. He also wages war on his sensory desires, including his desire for food and drink (by fasting) so that he does not take pleasure in them for pleasure’s sake, but only to sustain his body. He reports how tears flow from his eyes as he tries to overcome what he perceives as his failings and sins.

Augustine identifies three temptations we must be wary of; 1) sensory pleasures (all five senses), 2) curiosity (science and learning), and 3) the desire to be feared or loved by others.

He finishes this chapter talking about Jesus Christ whom he sees as the mediator between man and God and who, of course, died for our sins.

Philosophy

(6) Augustine asks exactly what it is he loves when he loves God. He rejects material, sensory pleasures but notes that it is a certain light, voice, perfume, food, embrace (all five senses) he loves; just not material pleasures but pleasures in his inner self.

(6) He also asks what God is. He is nothing on earth, in the sea, or in the air; not the sun, moon, or stars; nor is he the universe; rather, he is the one who made all of this. He is even more than the soul, he is the “Life of the life of my soul.”

(6) Augustine enquires into who he himself is. He declares that he is body and soul, and that the inner is the “better of the two, for it was to the inner part of me that my bodily senses brought their messages.” In addition, the soul animates the body and gives it life.

(6) We are able to enquire into these things because of our capacity for reason and it is this that separates us from the animals. There is a danger though, because we tend to love material things too much and we “become[s] their slave, and slaves cannot be judges.”

(7) He then goes into more detail. To love God, we must go through the soul but it cannot be in the soul’s capacity to give life or else animals would know God too. Going up a level, he wonders if it is due to the soul’s power of perceiving things by the senses. Again, this can’t be right because animals have this power too.

(8) The final stage is memory and Augustine goes into some detail about this. He is fascinated and intrigued with how our memories work. He claims everything is stored separately, categorised by sense. He marvels at the way memory stores images of things we sense (see, smell, touch, etc.) and brings to mind certain sensory impressions even though the external stimulus is entirely absent. (9) In addition to sensory impressions, our memories also store knowledge, in which case it doesn’t store images, but the facts themselves. (10) He then wonders how these facts got into his memory if it wasn’t through his senses. Augustine concludes that they “must have been in my mind even before I learned them, though not present to my memory” and someone else brought them out from their hiding place by teaching him. (12) In addition, our memories contain “innumerable principles and laws of numbers and dimensions”, none of which were acquired through the bodily senses. (13) We can also remember other internal aspects of our consciousness, e.g. I can remember that I understood a thing, or I can remember that I remembered a thing. (14) We can remember feelings which are recalled in completely different ways from how we actually experience them, e.g. we can remember unhappy times when we are happy and vice versa. Here, Augustine affirms that mind and memory are one and the same. But this raises the question, how is it then that my mind can be happy because happiness is in it, and yet my memory is not sad when sadness is in it? He likens memory to a “stomach for the mind” because images/feelings can exist without any taste (conscious impact).

(14) There are four kinds of emotion we can experience; desire, joy, fear, and sorrow.

(16) He also finds forgetfulness confusing. We can remember forgetfulness or else we wouldn’t know what it is but how can we remember forgetfulness when forgetfulness is the absence of memory? When forgetfulness is present, we cannot remember, so how can it be present in such a way that we can remember it? As a solution to this, he suggests that it is not forgetfulness that is present in our minds when we remember it, only the image of it. And yet, surely for the image to be imprinted in the first place, the thing must be present?

(17) Augustine summarises his findings thus far; material things are remembered by their images, knowledge is there by itself, emotions are there as ideas or impressions of some kind, and whatever is in memory must also be in mind.

(17) Here, Augustine states that we can’t love God through memory either since animals also have the power of memory.

(19) He now notices that even when we can’t remember something (e.g. a name), and therefore search for it, it must still be in our memories somewhere because if it wasn’t, we wouldn’t be able to recognise it when we found it (e.g. if someone suggests some names to us), therefore information we have forgotten and are looking for is not necessarily completely obliterated from our minds.

(20) So next, Augustine wonders how we go looking for God. When we go looking for God we look for a “life of blessed happiness.” Do we seek this through memory as if we had forgotten it or through desire to find it as something completely unknown to us? Augustine rejects the second of these because everyone wants happiness and must therefore know what it is somehow. So this knowledge of happiness must be stored somewhere in memory. (21) Now Augustine asks how it is stored in our memories. It can’t be as an image since this only applies to material things, or in the same way we remember numbers because once we have knowledge about numbers we no longer try to acquire it, but even with knowledge of happiness we continue to wish to achieve it. He concludes it is in our memories in the same way as joy is, that is, as something we have experienced. (22) And yet, Augustine says that some do not desire and look for joy in God but rather in material things. This path is not true happiness. (23) Everybody also desires to rejoice in truth, but they could not do this unless they had knowledge of truth in their memories. The problem is that this memory is only dim and so people are easily distracted by false joys. (24) Finally then, Augustine realises God was in his memory all along. (25) Augustine now asks in which part of his memory God is. He is not in images of material things since he is not a material body, or emotions since he is not a feeling, or the mind itself since he is the “Lord God of the mind.” (26) Augustine seems to conclude that God is not in a part of the memory because “You are Truth, and you are everywhere present where all seek counsel of you.”

(28) He wonders if there is a middle state between prosperity and adversity in which human life may not be a trial. Prosperity is a trial because there is grief in 1) the fear of adversity and 2) joy that does not last. Adversity is a trial because 1) it is hard to bear, 2) it makes us long for prosperous times, and 3) we fear that we may not be able to endure it.

(30) He wonders how it is that reason abandons us when we sleep and we do things we would never do while awake. Is it sealed away? Does it too fall asleep with the body?

(30) Augustine recognises the dangers in becoming a slave to sex

(31-34) He recognises the dangers in becoming a slave to sensory pleasures; food and drink, pleasant smells, delightful sounds, and beautiful things. (31) Happiness can only be found in being content with circumstances as they are.

(32) Augustine says there are “modes in song and in the voice” which correspond to our emotions and stimulate them although he does not know exactly how this happens.

(36) He also recognises the dangers in worrying too much about what other people think of you

Religious

(2) “For when I am sinful, if I am displeased with myself, this is a confession that I make to you; and when I am good, if I do not claim the merit for myself, this too is confession.”

(4) “The good I do is done by you in me and by your grace: the evil is my fault; it is the punishment you send me.”

(20) “Adam, the first sinner, in whom we all died and from whom we are all descended in a heritage of misery.”

(28) “Is not our life on earth a period of trial?...You command us to endure these troubles, not to love them.”

(30) “You commanded me not to commit fornication”

(30) “By your grace it [Augustine’s soul] will no longer commit in sleep these shameful, unclean acts inspired by sensual images, which lead to the pollution of the body… I am still troubled by this kind of evil.”

(31) “There is another evil which we meet with day by day… eating and drinking”

(31) “…the snare of concupiscence awaits me in the very process of passing from the discomfort of hunger to the contentment which comes when it is satisfied. For the process itself is a pleasure… it is really for the sake of pleasure that I do what I claim to do and mean to do for the sake of my health.”

(31) “…all the good things that we have ever received have come from you.”

(31) “But remember, O Lord, that we are dust. Remember that you made man from dust, and that he was lost and found again.”

(31) “But is there anyone, O Lord, who is never enticed a little beyond the strict limit of need? If there is such a one, he is a great man… But I am not such a man: I am a poor sinner.”

(32) “…this life, which may be called a perpetual trial”

(33) “Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, who used to oblige the lectors to recite the psalms with such slight modulation of the voice that they seemed to be speaking rather than chanting… So I waver between the danger that lies in gratifying the sense and the benefits which, as I know from experience, can accrue from singing… when I find the singing itself more moving than the truth which it conveys, I confess that this is a grievous sin”

(34) “I resist the allurements of the eye for fear that as I walk upon your path, my feet may be caught in a trap… the snares that are laid all about me.”

(35) “a different kind of temptation, more dangerous than these because it is more complicated… This futile curiosity masquerades under the name of science and learning… it derives from our thirst for knowledge”

(35) “…when their motive is curiosity, they may look for just the reverse of these things [pleasurable things], simply to put it to the proof, not for the sake of an unpleasant experience, but from a relish from investigation and discovery… It is to satisfy this unhealthy curiosity that freaks and prodigies are put on show in the theatre, and for the same reason men are led to investigate the secrets of nature, which are irrelevant to our lives, although such knowledge is of no value to them and they wish to gain it merely for the sake of knowing.”

(35) “But if I should happen to see the same thing in the country as I pass by [a dog chasing a hare], the chase might easily hold my attention and distract me from whatever serious thoughts occupied my mind… What excuse can I make for myself when often, as I sit at home, I cannot turn my eyes from the sight of a lizard catching flies or a spider entangling them as they fly into her web?... it is the cause of interruption and distraction from our prayers.”

(36) “…you have curbed my pride my teaching me to fear you and you have tamed my neck to your yoke.”

(37) “I have great fear of offending you unawares by sins to which I am blind, though to your eyes they are manifest.”

(38) “I am poor and needy and I am better only when in sorrow of heart I detest myself and seek your mercy”

(41) “I have now considered the sorry state to which my sins have brought me”

(42) “…because they [proud and conceited people] resembled them at heart, they attracted to their side the fallen angels, *the princes of the lower air*”

(43) “He is *the Mediator between God and men, Jesus Christ, who is a man*, and he appeared on earth between men, who are sinful and mortal, and God, who is immortal and just… he came so that by his own justness, which is his in union with God, he might make null the death of the wicked whom he justified, by choosing to share their death.”

(43) “How great was your love for us, good Father, for *you did not even spare your own son, but gave him up* to save us sinners!”

(43) “Terrified by my sins and the dead weight of my misery”

Book 11

Overview

Augustine says he is writing this book “for love of your [God] love” and so that, not just his own, but his reader’s hearts will also be fired with love of God.

This whole chapter is mainly about two things; creation and time.

Philosophy

(3) We can know the truth when we hear it because, “It [Truth] would whisper, ‘He speaks the truth.’ And at once I should be assured.” Augustine seems to think that we have some kind of intuitive awareness that confirms truth when we hear it.

(4) The universe was created because the things in it (the earth and the heavens) are subject to change and anything not created can have “nothing in it that was not there before”; i.e. cannot change.

(5) So how did God make the universe? He could not have used any pre-existing matter because he would have had to create that. He concludes that it “must therefore be that *you spoke and they were made*.”

(6) So, *how* did God speak? Augustine asserts that it wasn’t with a normal speech that has a beginning and an end in time; rather, it was “God’s eternal Word”. This follows because before God created the universe, there couldn’t have been any way for normal speech to sound in time. (7) “In your Word all is uttered at one and the same time, yet eternally.” This means that the Word of God must be co-eternal with him.

(10) In this section, Augustine also considers two potential objections; 1) what was God doing before he made the universe? And 2) how could a new will (to create) arise in a God who is eternal and unchanging? He answers the second question by saying that the will of God is not a created thing which means that it is not subject to change. In fact, God’s will is part of his substance, which means that since God’s substance is unchanging and eternal, so must his will be. (11) Augustine continues by contrasting eternity with time, saying that in the former all is present. The person who raises the second objection has failed to understand this distinction. (12) He answers the first question by saying “before he made heaven and earth, God made nothing.” (13) Augustine also raises a third objection; why did God allow ages to pass before creating something? The answer is that, he didn’t. There was no time before God created it so it makes no sense to even talk about time ‘before’ creation. God didn’t precede time, in time; rather, he preceded time, in eternity, which is a “never-ending present… before all past time and after all future time.”

(14) So, what is time? Augustine wonders whether time even *is*. The past *is* no longer, the future *is* not yet, and the present *is* only in order to flow into the past, i.e. *not to be*. Time only *is* by reason of its state of *not being*.

(15) So, what do we mean when we speak of a ‘long time’? Augustine continues his above line of reasoning by holding that we cannot say the past was long because it doesn’t exist and something that doesn’t exist can’t be long *or* short. The same can be said about the future. So, what about the present? Can it be long or short? He concludes it can’t because the present is only an instant that “cannot be divided even into the most minute fractions” and therefore has no duration.

(17) Augustine changes tack now by wondering whether the past and future *do* exist in some way since we can talk about the actions we will carry out in the future and describe the past. We wouldn’t be able to do either if the past and future didn’t exist. (18) He continues on speculating that wherever they come from, there they must exist as the present, since they *are*. (18) When we describe the future or the past, it is not as the future or past that we do so; rather, we describe them in the present as *expectation* or *memory*.

(20) So, the future and the past don’t exist. Augustine denies that there are three times, past, present, and future. Instead, there are three times, a present of past things (*memory*), a present of present things (we will later find that this is *awareness*), and a present of future things (*expectation*). These times all exist in the mind.

(21) Augustine returns to the question of how we can measure time even though none of these times *actually* exist. We must be measuring it as it is in the process of passing, i.e. as it is coming “from the future, passing through the present, and going into the past. In other words… coming out of what does not yet exist, passing through what has no duration, and moving into what no longer exists.” But, now Augustine realises that we can only measure time in relation to some measurable period and this can’t be the future or the past (which don’t exist), or the present (which has no duration).

(24) Perhaps we can relate measurements of time to the movement of material bodies. Augustine rejects this because all bodies move *in time*, therefore the “movement of a body is not the same as the means by which we measure the duration of its movement.”

(26) Maybe we measure longer periods of time by shorter ones (as we measure kilometres by metres and metres by centimetres). This can’t be though, because we can perform any action slowly or quickly making this method arbitrary. Augustine asserts here that “time is merely an extension, though of what it is an extension I do not know. I begin to wonder whether it is an extension of the mind itself.”

(27) Augustine considers the recitation of a phrase and how we know one particular syllable is twice as long as another. It can’t be the syllables themselves we measure because, as we have seen, there is literally no time in which to measure them. Rather, Augustine says, we measure something fixed in our memories. “It is in my own mind, then, that I measure time. I must not allow my mind to insist that time is something objective.” We measure the impressions of things, not the things themselves, as they pass from the future, through the present, and into the past.

(28) Finally, Augustine asks how the future can be diminished and the past increased (as in the reading of a page in a book; at first, the future is the whole page and as we read it, this future shrinks, while the part of the page we have read, in the past, steadily grows), when neither exist. Again, all of this happens in the mind, through expectation, attention, and memory. “So it is not future time that is long, but a long future is a long expectation of the future; and past time is not long, because it does not exist, but a long past is a long remembrance of the past.” And “my faculty of attention is present all the while, and through it passes what was the future in the process of becoming the past.”

(31) Augustine concludes this discussion by affirming how different experience is for humans and for God. When we sing a song, we are partly anticipating words to come and partly remembering words already sung. God, however, being without change, experiences nothing like this; his “knowledge is far more wonderful, far more mysterious than this.”

Religious

(9) “…when I weakly fall away from its [Wisdom’s] light, those clouds envelop me again in the dense mantle of darkness which I bear for my punishment.”

(29) “I look forward, not to what lies ahead of me in this life and will surely pass away, but to my eternal goal. I am intent upon this one purpose, not distracted by other aims, and *with this goal in view I press on, eager for the prize, God’s heavenly summons*. Then I shall *listen to the sound of your praises* and *gaze at your beauty* ever present, never future, never past.”

Book 12

Overview

In this chapter, Augustine continues to discuss Scripture, still focusing on the creation story, specifically, the passage, “In the Beginning God made heaven and earth. The earth was invisible and without form, and darkness reigned over the deep.”

Augustine is effusive in his praise for the Bible, talking about it as something amazingly profound and deep. In all of his discussions about passages in the Bible, he finds that one can interpret them literally and therefore simply, interpretations which do not yield truth; but one can also interpret them allegorically in more profound ways. An example Augustine uses is where it is written God said ‘Let such and such be made’. If you interpret this as normal speech, with a beginning and end in time, you will fail to understand the meaning of the passage. It should rather be understood as what Augustine has previously called the ‘Word’ of God, which is to say, something co-eternal with him.

He also discusses some objections to his interpretation, concluding that anything in the Bible can have multiple interpretations, all of which can be true. Which interpretation the author (in this case, Moses) meant is unimportant. The important thing is that the foundational truths are agreed on; things like, God created everything, God is eternal, God’s knowledge does not admit of anything transitory, etc.

Philosophy

(3) The Biblical phrase “The earth was invisible…” means there was no light so nothing could be seen.

(6) He then turns his attention to the phrase immediately following that one, “…and without form.” Augustine tries to understand what formless matter could be like. Clearly we can’t imagine it because anything we visualise must have form and shape. He concludes that we can think of ‘formless matter’ as matter which is transitioning from one form to another; that is, matter deprived of all form but not altogether deprived of existence.

(8) He affirms that God made the world from formless matter, which was itself created out of nothing.

(8) Augustine thinks that before God created anything, there was nothing. First, God created ‘formless matter’ (“The earth was invisible and without form”) and then made everything from this. He understands earth to be the lowest of the realms; the next is heaven, by which he means the realm containing the moon, stars, and planets; and the highest realm is the Heaven of Heavens, which is God’s realm. (9) He claims that the Heaven of Heavens is “some kind of intellectual creature”, not eternal itself but able to partake in God’s eternity. He also calls it God’s ‘dwelling place’. All of these things, being created, are subject to change although the last doesn’t change by virtue of its “clinging to you [God] unfailingly”.

(11) All change which occurs on earth takes place in ‘formless matter’, being an intermediate stage, as we have already seen.

(11) Augustine asserts that without change of movement there is no time and without form there can be no change.

(12) He declares that there are two things God created from which time is absent, although neither is co-eternal with God. The first is the Heaven of Heavens, which is “mutable but without mutation” solely because it is “without any lapse in its contemplation of you [God]”. The second is formless matter, which is without time because time requires form of some kind form.

(23-24) In discussing Scripture (but this can be generalised to other things as well), there are two types of disagreement; disagreements over 1) the truth of the message and 2) the meaning of the messenger. The first is important, the second is meaningless. The reason is that no one can know for sure exactly what the messenger (Moses in this case) meant; whether he had this meaning in mind or a different one. (25) People who claim their interpretation is what the writer actually meant are speaking from pride, not knowledge; “they are in love with their own opinions, not because they are true, but because they are their own.”

(28) God *didn’t* make the world from his own substance and in his own likeness or else it would be eternal and perfectly Good, like him. Rather, he created “from nothing formless matter utterly unlike yourself [God]”. However, “this matter was to receive form in your [God’s] likeness, each created thing in its allotted degree.”

Religious

(14) “How hateful to me are the enemies of your Scripture! How I wish that you would slay them with your two-edged sword, so that there should be none to oppose your word!”

(22) “…he [God] made a great many other things, the cherubim and seraphim, for example, and all the other separate orders mentioned by Saint Paul, the *thrones and dominion, princedoms and powers*.”

Book 13

Overview

In this final chapter, Augustine goes over the top with his worshipping of God, thanking him for everything, begging him to help him understand Scripture, etc.

The whole chapter is an exercise in Biblical figurative interpretation, with Augustine analysing and drawing analogies from a variety of different passages in the Bible. He really goes over the top with his fanciful interpretations, some examples of which include:

1. “the Holy Spirit moved over the waters” means the Holy Spirit, being eternal and immutable, surpassed all else.
2. The faithless are described as ‘the sea’, whereas pious souls are ‘the dry land’
3. “*grasses that seeded and trees that bore fruit*” are works of mercy
4. “be fruitful and multiply” as applied to humans refers to our thoughts, because reason is fertile and productive

Philosophy

(11) He says the Trinity are three distinct things but their distinction does not separate them. By analogy he asks us to consider three things in humans; existence, knowledge, and will. “I am a being which knows and wills; I know both that I am and that I will; and I will both to be and to know.” However, over and above these different things, there is one life, one mind, one essence.

(22) Augustine thinks that the passages in Genesis where God is referred to in the plural reflect the Trinity.

(22) To Augustine’s credit, he claims that male and female are as one in God’s spiritual grace; as are Jew and Greek, slave and freeman.

(32) But then he says that “in the physical sense, woman has been made for man. In her mind and her rational intelligence she has a nature the equal of man’s, but in sex she is physically subject to him”

(34) And again, “You made rational action subject to the rule of the intellect, as woman is subject to man.”

Religious

(14) “Persevere until the Lord’s anger passes. *His displeasure was our birthright*… We bear the remnants of our darkness in our bodies, which are *dead things in virtue of our guilt*”.

(18) “*One… is given faith; another, through the same Spirit, powers of healing; one can perform miracles, one can prophesy*…”

(29) “Surely these words of Scripture must be true, for you can tell no lie and you, who are the Truth, spoke them.”