

WHY PEARS? THE ROLE OF LITTLE SINS IN AUGUSTINE'S *CONFESSIONS*

I. INTRODUCTION

Augustine's *Confessions* hardly seems to the modern reader the parade of "such great sins and such wicked deeds" that it promises to be¹. Augustine does relate a few juicy transgressions, but he spends most of his time reflecting on and excoriating himself for what often seem to be very minor offenses, or "little sins". This shows clearly the extent of Augustine's soul-searing, and perhaps urges readers to examine their own lives with as fine a comb. Little sins also assure every reader that he will have something to relate to, no matter how "good" he may think himself.

But little sins also seem to serve a larger function. They weave their way through most of the many topics Augustine covers in the *Confessions*, particularly in the first ten books. Little sins play a role in Augustine's conceptions of original sin, bondage of the will, the nature of God and our relationship with Him, and the death of Christ. I hope, in this article, to explore the role and importance of little sins in each of these contexts, to demonstrate links of causation and dependence between little sins and each area, and finally, to explain how little sins encompass the widest possible audience. Before doing this, however, I will mention briefly a few alternative explanations for little sins, and outline in rough form several of the sins Augustine confesses, both before and after his conversion.

II. PATHS NOT TAKEN

There may be many reasons, or no reason, why Augustine focuses on little sins; my goal in this article is not to explore all of the possibilities. Nevertheless, I mention several here briefly not only, I hope, to place my argument in sharper focus, but also to demonstrate that it is not the only one that could be made.

¹ "tanta mala et nefaria opera"; AUGUSTINUS, *Confessionum Libri XIII*, II,7; CCL 27,25; ed. L. VERHEIJEN, Turnhout, Brepols, 1981. All Latin language quotations in the text are taken from this edition. AUGUSTINE, *Confessions*, II,7, transl. R.S. PINE-COFFIN, Harmondsworth, 1961. All English language quotations in the text are taken from this edition.

1. *There Could Be No Particular Reason.*

There could be no particular reason why Augustine focuses on little sins². Either he views sins as fungible for exemplary purposes, or, like he says, "all that I am is laid before you"³. The latter point implies (although not in the quotation's context) that in spite of his ceaseless self-condemnations, Augustine really was fairly well-behaved⁴. Perhaps the bulk of his sins seem trivial because they are trivial. After all, as he says: "I used to pretend that I had done things I had not done at all, because I was afraid that innocence would be taken for cowardice and chastity for weakness"⁵. This possibility, however, does not explain why Augustine spends so much time describing his sins of infancy (I,6-7) and gives relatively short shrift to his illegitimate son and to living with one woman while engaged to another (IV,15). Nevertheless, Augustine simply may be describing sins without regard to their weight, an idea⁶ explored more fully in the next section.

2. *Weighing Sins is Anachronistic.*

Any attempts at assessing the heinousness of particular sins — and from there concluding that some are trivial and others not — may be so anachronistic as to render the exercise meaningless. As Augustine himself

² In *De ciuitate Dei*, Augustine suggests that sins are significant *prior* to their actualization. Discussing original sin, he implies that the actual *act* of eating the apple was only of secondary importance: "Mala uero uoluntas prima, quoniam omnia opera mala praecessit in homine, defectus potius fuit quidam ab opere Dei ad sua opera quam ullum, et ideo mala opera, quia secundum se, non secundum Deum"; XIV,11; CCL 48,431. "The first evil act of will, since it preceded all evil deeds in man, was rather a falling away from the work of God to its own works, rather than any substantive act. Any consequent deeds were evil because they followed the will's own line, and not God's"; AUGUSTINE, *City of God*, XIV,11, transl. H. BETTENSON, Harmondsworth, 1972. In this view, little sins are not qualitatively different than any other type, and so Augustine's focus on the former may reflect no specific intention. For a further discussion related to this, see note 7.

³ "tibi ... manifestus sum, quicumque sim"; X,2; CCL 27,155.

⁴ Peter Brown maintains that "far from being the libertine that some authors have imagined, converted at the age of 32 from a life of unbridled sensuality, Augustine was, in reality, a young man who had cut the ebullience of his adolescence dangerously short"; P. BROWN, *Augustine of Hippo*, London, 1967, 39. Payne, without as much conviction, suggests something similar: "It is possible that Augustine was making too much of his own sins; to have been chaste in Madaura must have been nearly an impossibility"; R. PAYNE, *The Fathers of the Western Church*, New York, 1951, 142.

⁵ "Ego ... fingebam me fecisse quod non feceram, ne uiderer abiectior, quo eram innocentior, et ne uilior haberer, quo eram castior"; II,3; CCL 27,21.

puts it, "offenses against human codes of conduct vary according to differences of custom"⁶. To Augustine, or to Augustine's community, stealing pears may have been worse than cohabitation. In writings outside of the *Confessions*, Augustine suggests that the "weight" of particular sins may not be an important quality⁷. Particular sins, therefore, may be irrelevant, because *amaricantes* "the bitter sea of humanity" is full of *malas cupiditates animarum* "the wicked desires of men's souls" (XIII,17). Thus Augustine shifts our focus away from "evil fruit" (sins) to the "evil tree" (man's will) from which such fruit springs⁸.

⁶ "quae autem contra mores hominum sunt flagitia, pro morum diuersitate uitanda sunt"; III,8; CCL 27,35.

⁷ Augustine suggests that the "weight" of particular sins is not particularly relevant in his *Homilies on the First Epistle of St. John*, V, in AUGUSTINE, *Later Works*, (*Library of Christian Classics*, VIII), transl. J. BURNABY, Philadelphia, 1955, 295-302. Here he attempts to reconcile "No one born of God commits sin" (I John 3:9) (all Biblical references herein are to the Revised Standard Version) with "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (I John 1:8) by focusing on the Gospel's "new commandment," that we "love one another" (John 13:34). This commandment alone, which he calls "charity," makes all other sins irrelevant; it is "tale peccatum est illud, ut si quisquam illud admiserit, confirmet cetera; si quis autem hoc non admiserit, solvat cetera"; AUGUSTIN, *Commentaire de la Première Épître de S. Jean*, V,2; ed. P. AGAËSSE, (*Sources Chrétiennes*, 75), Paris, 1961. "Sin of such a kind that its commission binds all other sins upon us, whereas if it be not committed the others may be absolved" (Fifth Homily, 2). In his *Tractates on the Gospel of John*, XII, (*Fathers of the Church*, 79), transl. J.W. RETTIG, Washington, 1988, 28-45, Augustine minimizes the difference between big and little sins: "In dilectione autem eius et in misericordia eius qui ambulat, etiam liberatus ab illis lethalibus et grandibus peccatis, qualia sunt facinora, homicidia, furta, adulteria, propter illa quae minuta uidentur esse peccata linguae, aut cogitationum, aut immoderationis in rebus concessis, facit ueritatem confessionis, et uenit ad lucem in operibus bonis, quoniam minuta plura peccata si negligantur, occidunt. Minutae sunt guttae quae flumina implent; minuta sunt grana arenae; sed si multa arena imponatur, premit atque opprimit. Hoc facit sentina neglecta, quod facit fluctus irruens, paulatim per sentinam intrat; sed diu intrando et non exhauriendo, mergit nauim"; XII,14; CCL 36,129. "But he who walks in his love and in his mercy, even though delivered from those deadly and immense sins, such as are crimes, homicides, thefts, adulteries, [still] on account of those [sins] which seem to be minute, sins of the tongue, or of thoughts, or of immoderation in permissible things, he does truth of confession and comes to the light in good works because many minute sins, if they should be neglected, kill. Minute are the drops which fill rivers; minute are the grains of sand, but if much sand is placed [upon something], it presses down and crushes. Bilge-water, if ignored, does exactly what a rushing wave does, but it enters little by little through the ship's bilge; but by entering for a long time and not being drawn out, it sinks the ship"; XII,14,1-2. Finally, Pine-Coffin notes in his introduction to the *Confessions*: "Of all the sins [Augustine] wishes to confess there was one which was at the root of all the others. It was not an isolated act or a repeated habit, but a *condition of mind* which was part of his life and provided him with a ready excuse for doing what his conscience told him to be wrong" (12). [emphasis added]

⁸ See also *De ciu. Dei* XIV,11.

3. *Little Sins Help Keep Decorum.*

It may be that Augustine, by avoiding discussion of topics such as sexual conduct, desires to maintain decorum: "I must now carry my thoughts back to the abominable things I did in those days ... not because I love those sins, but so that I may love [God]"⁹. He says to God: "I write this book for the love of your love"¹⁰. Consequently, Augustine may feel that it ought to contain suitable material. In addition, he may not want the reader's interest in his sins to detract from the loftier goals of his *Confessions*.

4. *Little Sins are Good Examples.*

Finally, it could be that Augustine, a capable teacher aware of "the many who will read" his *Confessions*, chooses his examples because they are easily memorable, and therefore particularly valuable as teaching aids (X,1). While generic lust and corruption may be easy to forget, or to associate not only with Augustine, who can forget the pear tree and its robber? Augustine was clearly aware of the importance of anecdotes to students. Once while teaching, for example, Augustine observed: "It occurred to me that the passage which I happened to be reading could very well be explained by an illustration taken from the games in the arena. It would appeal to the students and make my meaning clearer"¹¹.

The very fact that Augustine makes so much out of apparently so little -- in terms of sinfulness -- also makes his examples memorable: "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?"¹². Or perhaps even better: "What sins, then, did I commit when I was a baby myself? ... It can hardly be right for a child, even at that age, to cry for everything including things which would harm him"¹³. Such things etch themselves upon one's memory.

⁹ "Recordari volo transactas foeditates meas ... non quod eas amem, sed ut amem te, deus meus"; II,1; CCL 27,18.

¹⁰ "Amore amoris tui facio istuc"; XI,1; CCL 27,194.

¹¹ "Et forte lectio in manibus erat. Quam dum exponerem opportune mihi adhibenda uideretur similitudo circensium, quo illud quod insinuabam ... planius fieret"; VI,7; CCL 27,81.

¹² "Quid cum me domi sedentem stelio muscas captans uel aranea retibus suis inruentes implicans saepe intentum facit?"; X,35; CCL 27,186.

¹³ "Quid ergo tunc peccabam? An pro tempore etiam illa bona erant, flendo petere etiam quod noxie daretur"; I,7; CCL 27,6.

Undoubtedly there are possibilities not mentioned above. This article, however, does not focus upon them. Like Augustine, "I am in haste to pass on to other things, which I am more anxious to confess to you"¹⁴.

III. AUGUSTINE'S SINS

The entire content of the *Confessions* can hardly be fully recounted here. Nevertheless, the following is a rough schema of Augustine's sinning life, as he relates it. This schema is both necessary to and part of the broader theme of this article.

A. Sins of the Past.

As mentioned above, Augustine begins his sin list from his very beginning: "I would toss my arms and legs about and make noises ... I would get cross with my elders ... simply because they did not attend to my wishes; and I would take my revenge by bursting into tears"¹⁵. He allows that "if babies are innocent, it is not for lack of will to do harm, but for lack of strength"¹⁶, and concludes "I ask you, Lord, where or when was I, your servant, ever innocent?"¹⁷.

Next, Augustine "took a further step into the stormy life of human society"¹⁸ and entered boyhood. Perhaps like most boys, he "sinned by reading and writing and studying less than was expected"¹⁹ of him and by his *amore ludendi* "love of games" (I,10). Even Roman mythology was sinful: "It was wrong of me as a boy to prefer empty romances to more valuable studies"²⁰. In describing his sins of boyhood, Augustine uses especially strong language of self-condemnation: "I was blind to the whirlpool of debasement in which I had been plunged away from the sight of

¹⁴ "Propero ad ea quae me magis urgent confiteri tibi"; III,12; CCL 27,38.

¹⁵ "Itaque iactabam membra et uoces ... cum mihi non obtemperabatur ... indignabar ... maioribus ... et me de illis flendo uindicabam"; I,6; CCL 27,4.

¹⁶ "ita imbecillitas membrorum infantium innocens est, non animus infantium"; I,7; CCL 27,6.

¹⁷ "Oro te, deus meus, ubi, domine, ego, seruus tuus, ubi aut quando innocens fui?"; I,7; CCL 27,7. Augustine discusses sin in infants more fully in *On the Merits and Forgiveness of Sins, and On the Baptism of Infants*, 65-70, in AUGUSTIN, *Anti-Pelagian Writings*, (Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, V), 1887, 41-43. [hereinafter *On the Merits*]

¹⁸ "uitae humanae procellosam societatem altius ingressus sum"; I,8; CCL 27,8.

¹⁹ "peccabamus tamen minus scribendo aut legendo aut cogitando de litteris, quam exigebatur a nobis"; I,9; CCL 27,8.

²⁰ "Peccabam ergo puer, cum illa inania istis utilioribus amore praeponēbam"; I,13; CCL 27,12.

[God's] eyes. For in [His] eyes nothing could be more debased than I was then"²¹. His examples that follow immediately after this statement, however, seem unconvincing to modern ears:

"Many and many a time I lied to my tutor, my masters, and my parents, and deceived them because I wanted to play games or watch some futile show or was impatient to imitate what I saw on the stage. I even stole from my parents' larder and from their table, either from greed or to get something to give to other boys in exchange for their favourite toys, which they were willing to barter with me. And in the games I played with them I often cheated to come off the better"²².

While Augustine may have not yet been a saint, he seems hardly "a great sinner for so small a boy"²³. Indeed, he learned the lessons of his traditional education "gladly and took a sinful pleasure in them. And for this reason [he] was called a promising boy".

Paradoxically, it is because Augustine is so promising a student that he also is so sinful: "My sin was this, that I looked for pleasure, beauty, and truth not in [God] but in myself and his other creatures, and the search led me instead to pain, confusion and error"²⁴. Augustine was "being prepared" for a world in which "men strictly obey the rules of grammar ... and yet ignore the eternal rules of everlasting salvation which they have received from [God]"²⁵. His zealotry both for "worldly" teaching and for an *Aeneid* recitation contest (which apparently he won; I,17) was sinful: "For to love this world is to break troth with [God]"²⁶, yet men applaud and are ashamed to be otherwise. I did not weep over this, but instead wept for Dido"²⁷. While studying law: "The more unscrupulous I was, the greater my reputation was likely to be, for men are

²¹ "Non enim uidebam uoraginem turpitudinis, in quam proiectus eram ab oculis tuis. Nam in illis iam quid me foedius fuit"; I,19; CCL 27,16.

²² "Ubi etiam talibus displicebam fallendo innumerabilibus mendaciis et paedagogum et magistros et parentes amore ludendi, studio spectandi nugatoria et imitandi ludicra inquietudine? Furta etiam faciebam de cellario parentum et de mensa uel gula impertante uel ut haberem quod darem pueris, ludum suum mihi, quo pariter utique delectabantur, tamen uendentibus. In quo etiam ludo fraudulentas uictorias ipse ... saepe aucupabar"; I,19; CCL 27,16-17.

²³ "tantillus puer et tantus peccator"; I,12; CCL 27,11.

²⁴ "Hoc enim peccabam quod non in ipso, sed in creaturis eius me atque ceteris uoluptates, sublimitates ueritates quaerebam, atque ita inruebam in dolores, confusiones, errores"; I,20; CCL 27,17.

²⁵ "diligenter obseruent filii hominum pacta litterarum et syllabarum ... et a te accepta aeterna pacta perpetuae salutis neglegant"; I,18; CCL 27,16.

²⁶ See *James* 4:4: "friendship with the world is enmity with God".

²⁷ "Amicitia enim mundi huius fornicatio est abs te et 'Euge, euge' dicitur, ut pudeat, si non ita homo sit. Et haec non flebam et flebam Didonem"; I,13; CCL 27,11-12.

so blind that they even take pride in their blindness. By now I was at the top of the school of rhetoric"²⁸. In other words, things that intuitively do not seem sinful — such as the love of learning — are nevertheless so; they represent misplaced priorities.

Augustine reaches sixteen: "This was the age at which the frenzy gripped me and I surrendered myself entirely to lust. ... I was tossed and spilled, floundering in the broiling sea of my fornication"²⁹. It seems that this subject, reckless fornication, may be the first of Augustine's really sinful sins, at least by today's standards. In one unclear passage, Augustine describes an aspect of his conduct that seems particularly heinous:

"I deserted you and sank to the bottom-most depths of scepticism and the mockery of devil-worship. ... I defied you even so far as to relish the thought of lust, and gratify it too, within the walls of your church during the celebration of your mysteries"³⁰.

Augustine does not explain any details of the above. In fact, he explains practically nothing of his lust-related sins. He uses strong rhetoric — "the filth of lewdness", "hell's black river of lust" — but he gives few details. Indeed, while he spends several pages describing how sinful it was for him to cry as a baby (I,6-7), he devotes only a single paragraph to telling us how he got engaged to one woman while living with another, gave up the latter against his will (she then swore off all men and left Augustine with an illegitimate son), and subsequently took yet another mistress (VI,15). He mentions "Adeodatus, my natural born son of my sin" only once more in the *Confessions*³¹. Of course, such goings on may not have been as sinful in Augustine's day as they now appear, but it seems unlikely that they were considered less so than a baby crying.

Not only does Augustine give such activities short shrift, but he juxtaposes the "brambles of lust" (II,3) with his pear tree theft (II,4-10) without differentiating much between the two. That is, he seems to be no more culpable for wanton lust than for stealing a few pears with his friends as a boy of sixteen, perhaps even more so for the latter: "For no sooner had I picked them than I threw them away, and tasted nothing in

²⁸ "Hoc laudabilior, quo fraudulentior, tanta est caecitas hominum de caecitate etiam gloriantum. Et maior iam eram in schola rhetoris"; III,3; CCL 27,29.

²⁹ "Cum accepit in me sceptrum — et totas manus ei dedi — uesania libidinis ... iactabar et effundebam et diffuebam et ebulliebam per fornicationeas meas"; II,2; CCL 27,19.

³⁰ "In quantas iniquitates distabui, et sacrilegam curiositatem secutus sum, ut deserentem te deduceret me ad ima infida et circumuentoria obsequia daemoniorum. ... Ausus sum etiam in celebritate sollemnium tuarum intra parietes ecclesiae tuae concupiscere et agere negotium ..."; III,3; CCL 27,29.

³¹ "Adeodatum ex me natum carnaliter de peccato meo"; IX,6; CCL 27,141.

them but my own sin"³². He spends nearly all of seven chapters excoriating himself for this theft (see II,4-10).

Nevertheless, Augustine takes care to mitigate many of his sins. On living with a woman out of wedlock: "But she was the only one and I was faithful to her"³³. On stealing the pears: "I am quite sure that I would have not done it on my own"³⁴. While many students were disorderly: "As a student I had refused to take part in this behaviour, but as a teacher I was obliged to endure it in others"³⁵. Also: "As I schooled my pupils, I was merely abetting their futile designs and their schemes of duplicity, nevertheless I did my best to teach them honestly ... through the clouds of smoke [God] saw a spark of good faith in me"³⁶. About his mistaken beliefs on evil: It "*seemed to me better* to believe that [God] had created no evil than to suppose that evil, such as I imagined it to be, had its origin in [Him]"³⁷. [emphasis added].

Thus, even when Augustine reflects on his sins, he realizes that he did not always feel so culpable³⁸. Indeed, as mentioned above, he sometimes even felt the need to exaggerate his actual sins in order to impress his friends (II,3). A point (discussed in further detail below) of Augustine's mitigating could be this: "My sin was all the more incurable because I did not think myself a sinner"³⁹, at least not all of the time⁴⁰. The seeming smallness of the sins on which he expounds, some so small as to

³² "Nam decerpta proieci epulatus inde solam iniquitatem"; II,6; CCL 27,23.

³³ "Sed unam tamen, ei quoque seruans tori fidem"; IV,2; CCL 27,41.

³⁴ "Tamen solus id non fecissem ... solus omnino id non fecissem"; II,8; CCL 27,25.

³⁵ "Quos mores cum studerem meos esse nolui, eos cum docerem cogebar perpeti alienos ..."; V,8; CCL 27,64.

³⁶ "Quam exhibebam in illo magisterio diligentibus uanitatem et quaerentibus mendacium, socius eorum ... deus, uidisti ... in multo fumo scintillantem fidem meam"; IV,2; CCL 27,40.

³⁷ "Melius mihi uidebar credere nullum malum te creasse ... quam credere abs te esse qualem putabam naturam mali"; V,10; CCL 27,69.

³⁸ In fact, according to Stendahl, Augustine was Christianity's originator of the "introspective conscience". In Paul's writings, for example, "we look in vain for any evidence that *Paul the Christian* has suffered under the burden of conscience concerning personal shortcomings which he would label 'sins'". K. STENDAHL, *The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West*, in *Harvard Theological Review* 56 (1963), 199-215; cf. 199, 202. [emphasis in original]. The *Confessions*, in contrast, "are the first great document in the history of the introspective conscience. The Augustinian line leads into the Middle Ages and reaches its climax in the penitential struggle of an Augustinian monk, Martin Luther ..."; ib., 205.

³⁹ "Id erat peccatum insanabilis, quo me peccatorem non esse arbitrabar ..."; V,10; CCL 27,67.

⁴⁰ Not admitting that one is a sinner is in itself a common Biblical sin. See, e.g., *Jer.* 3:13; 8:8-12; *Ezek.* 13:1-4,10; *Hos.* 4:6-7; *Amos* 4:6-11.

be unavoidable (a baby crying), coupled with his harsh reproaches of them, reenforces this idea. "This is what happens, O Fountain of life, when we abandon you, who are the one true Creator of all that ever was or is"⁴¹. To emphasize our unknowing, Augustine adds: "Many of things we do may therefore seem wrong to men but are approved in the light of your knowledge, and many which men applaud are condemned in your eyes"⁴². Thus, Augustine seems to be saying that without dependence on God, sin is inevitable, even if unrecognizable.

B. Sins of the Present.

Even after conversion (at which point Augustine switches from using the past to the present tense generally), Augustine both continues his unceasing search for personal sin, and realizes that the power of sin has not abated: "I no longer go to watch a dog chasing a hare at the games in the circus. But if I should happen to see the same thing in the country as I pass by, the chase might easily hold my attention and distract me from whatever serious thoughts occupied my mind"⁴³. No area of Augustine's mind seems beyond scrutiny:

"In my memory, of which I have said much, the images of things imprinted upon it by my former habits still linger on. When I am awake they obtrude themselves upon me, though with little strength. But when I dream, they not only give me pleasure but are very much like acquiescence in the act. The power which these illusory images have over my soul and my body is so great that what is no more than a vision can influence me in sleep in a way that the reality cannot do when I am awake"⁴⁴.

⁴¹ "Ea fiunt, cum tu derelinqueris, fons uitae, qui es unus et uerus creator et rector uniuersitatis ..."; III,8; CCL 27,36.

⁴² "Multa itaque facta, quae hominibus improbanda uiderentur, testimonio tuo approbata sunt et multa laudata ab hominibus te teste damnantur ..."; III,9; CCL 27,36-37.

⁴³ "Canem currentem post leporem iam non spectro, cum in circo fit; at uero in agro, si casu transeam, auertit me fortassis et ab aliqua magna cogitatione atque ad se conuertit illa uenatio ..."; X,35; CCL 27,186.

⁴⁴ "Adhuc uiuunt in memoria mea, de qua multa locutus sum, talium rerum imagines, quas ibi consuetudo mea fixit, et occurrant mihi uigilanti quidem carentes uiribus, in somnis autem non solum usque ad delectationem sed etiam usque ad consensionem factumque simillimum. Et tantum ualet imaginis inclusio in anima mea in carne mea, ut dormienti falsa uisa persuadeant quod uigilanti uera non possunt"; X,30; CCL 27,176. Augustine seems to be saying that although the fundamental power of sin has been broken, nevertheless this does not immediately make him righteous. His conversion only begins the cure by initiating a convalescence that will be completed only in the age to come. Cf. Luther's central doctrine of *simul justus et peccator* ("righteous and a sinner at the same time"), discussed in J. PELIKAN, *The Christian Tradition: Reformation of Church and Dogma (1300-1700)*, Chicago, 1984, 154-155. This idea was suggested to me by

The culpability of one particular sin which he confesses seems almost incomprehensible. When his mother, whom he praises repeatedly (especially at IX,9) finally dies, Augustine's reaction seems particularly restrained: "I wanted to cry like a child, but a more mature voice within me, the voice of my heart, bade me keep my sobs in check, and I remained silent"⁴⁵.

"[My friends] thought that I had no sense of grief. But in [God's] ears, where none of them could hear, I blamed myself for my tender feelings. I fought against the wave of sorrow ... It was misery to feel myself so weak a victim of these human emotions, although we cannot escape them, since they are the natural lot of mankind ... I was secretly weighed down with grief"⁴⁶.

He reproaches himself even for "natural" emotions which he, or anyone for that matter, cannot control. Eventually, he breaks down and cries, a fault for which he apologizes extensively (IX,12). Augustine spends two chapters confessing the heinous sin of grieving a little too much over the death of his beloved mother (see IX,12-13).

As with Augustine's sins of the past, none seems too small to mention. For example, he says that while fornication is an "evil which I can decide once and for all to repudiate and never to embrace again"⁴⁷, eating and drinking present a larger obstacle: "I find pleasure in this need, though I fight against it"⁴⁸. He catalogues other senses, in terms of their potential for sin. "The eyes delight in beautiful shapes of different sorts and bright and attractive colors. I would not have these things take possession of my soul"⁴⁹. "The sense of smell does not trouble me greatly with its attractions ... This, at least is my own opinion of myself, but I may be wrong"⁵⁰. As to hearing: "I admit that I still find enjoyment in the music of hymns, ... when I find the singing itself more moving than

Rowan Greer. See also *infra* note 107.

⁴⁵ "Hoc modo etiam meum quiddam puerile, quod labebatur in fletus, iuuenali voce cordis, cohercebatur et tacebat"; IX,12; CCL 27,150.

⁴⁶ "Sine sensu doloris me esse arbitrantibus [curantibus]. At ego in auribus tuis, ubi eorum nullus audiebat, increpabam mollitiam affectus mei et constringebam fluxum maeoris ... Et quia mihi uehementer displicebat tantum in me posse haec humana, quae ordine debito et sorte conditionis nostrae accidere necesse est ... Toto die grauitur in occulto maestus eram"; IX,12; CCL 27,151.

⁴⁷ "quod semel praecidere et ulterius non attingere decernam"; X,31; CCL 27,180.

⁴⁸ "Nunc autem suavis est mihi necessitas, et aduersus istam suauitatem pugno ..."; X,31; CCL 27,177-178.

⁴⁹ "Pulchras formas et uarias, nitidos et amoenos colores amant oculi. Non teneant haec animam meam"; X,34; CCL 27,182.

⁵⁰ "De inlecebra odorum non satago nimis ... Ita mihi uideor; forsitan fallar"; X,32; CCL 27,180-181.

the truth which it conveys, I confess that this is a grievous sin"⁵¹. Finally, there is "a different kind of temptation, more dangerous than these, because it is more complicated. ... The mind is also subject to a certain propensity to use the sense of the body, not for self-indulgence of a physical kind, but for the satisfaction of its own inquisitiveness"⁵².

In addition to fornication, Augustine overcomes a great many sins: "I have pared away many sins and thrust them from my heart ... the theatres no longer attract me; the study of astrology does not interest me; I have never dealt in necromancy; and I detest all sacrilegious rites"⁵³. Yet in spite of this, Augustine is hardly without sin. To free oneself totally of sins of the senses, and of curiosity, is impossible. This seems to be the very point Augustine strives to make clear: "Day after day without ceasing these temptations put us to the test"⁵⁴.

In "our own miserable state" (XI,1), none escapes temptation or sin: everyone seems to be guilty of something (IX,13). It is not only the large heinous sins which plague man, but often the smallest. "Who can tell how many times each day our curiosity is tempted by the most trivial and insignificant matters?"⁵⁵. Augustine probes even beyond trifles: "I have great fear of offending [God] unawares by sins to which I am blind, though to [His] eyes they are manifest"⁵⁶.

Augustine analogizes life to a journey or a pilgrimage (VI,4; X,4); he travels *per uiam saeculi latam* "along the broad way of the world" (VI,5)⁵⁷. Thus it seems consistent that he recounts his sins from the be-

⁵¹ "Nunc in sonis ... fateor, aliquantulum adquiesco ... cum mihi accidit, ut me amplius cantus quam res, quae canitur, moueat, poenaliter me peccare confiteor ..."; X,33; CCL 27,181.

⁵² "alia forma temptationis multiplicius periculosa ... Inest animae per eosdem sensus corporis, quaedam non se oblectandi in carne, sed experiendi per carnem ..."; X,35; CCL 27,184.

⁵³ "Multa praeciderim et a meo corde dispulerim ... sane me iam theatra non rapiunt, nec curo nosse transitus siderum, nec anima mea umquam responsa quaesivit umbrarum; omnia sacrilega sacramenta detestor"; X,35; CCL 27,185.

⁵⁴ "Temptamur his temptationibus cotidie ... sine cessatione temptamur"; X,37; CCL 27,187-188. On this point, see Augustine's discussion of *1 Cor.* 15:54-56, which is "Question 70" in AUGUSTINE, *Eighty-three Different Questions*, (*Fathers of the Church*, 70). transl. D. MOSHER, Washington, 1977, 178-179. See also "Question 68", ib., 161: we are all "a mass of sin"; see also J.N.D. KELLY, *Early Christian Doctrines*, New York, rev. ed. 1978, 365; see also infra note 107.

⁵⁵ "In quam multis minutissimis et contemptibilibus rebus curiositas cotidie nostra temptetur et quam saepe labamur, quis enumerat?"; X,35; CCL 27,185-186.

⁵⁶ "Multum timeo occulta mea, quae norunt oculi tui, mei autem non"; X,37; CCL 27,188.

⁵⁷ See also *De ciu. Dei*, XI,2.

ginning (infancy), and that he continues to do so as long as he is on the journey. Another favorite metaphor is a trial: "During this life, which may be called a perpetual trial, no one should be confident that although he has been able to pass from a worse state to a better, he may not also pass from a better state to a worse"⁵⁸. This trial has constant potential for sin; none may rest. "Deep in our inner selves there is another evil ... This is self-compacency, the vanity of those who are pleased with themselves"⁵⁹.

In several ways, Augustine's account of his pre-conversion sins parallels that of his post-conversion transgressions. Both recountings are unceasingly thorough. In writing of his earlier life, Augustine spends little time discussing what seem like larger sins (infidelity, fornication), but instead focuses on smaller ones (enjoying mythology, stealing pears). While his later life may, perhaps, be lacking "larger" sins, Augustine nevertheless expounds on minute ones (enjoying the musical aspect of hymns, watching lizards catch flies). In addition, the guilt he displays over some of his reported transgressions (mourning for his dead mother, crying as an infant) seems counterintuitive. In both periods, Augustine points out that sin is not always recognizable or discoverable, and can appear as good. All of this leads to Augustine's conclusion that he, like everyone else, is unceasingly full of sin.

The thoroughness with which Augustine describes his sin, and by implication that of others, relates not only to his (and our) existential condition, but in many ways underlies and reenforces several other areas of his theology. The following sections of this article hope to explore the broader implications of little sins in Augustine's thought.

IV. LITTLE SINS AND ORIGINAL SIN

Although Augustine does not deal with the topic of original sin in any great detail in the *Confessions*⁶⁰, he nevertheless does mention it at several junctures: "You know, O Lord, how you clothed men with skins when by sin they became mortal"⁶¹. He pleads to God: "Call us back to

⁵⁸ "Nemo securus esse debet in ista uita, quae tota temptatio nominatur, utrum qui fieri potuit ex deteriore melior, non fiat etiam ex meliore deterior"; X,32; CCL 27,181. See also X,28.

⁵⁹ "Intus etiam, intus est aliud ... malum, quo inanescunt qui placent sibi de se"; X,39; CCL 27,190.

⁶⁰ Nevertheless, Paul Rigby has recently written an entire book on the subject, P. RIGBY, *Original Sin in Augustine's 'Confessions'*, Ottawa, 1987.

⁶¹ "Domine, tu scis, quemadmodum pellibus indueris homines, cum peccato mortales fierent"; XIII,15; CCL 27,251.

yourself"⁶². Augustine's longest passage on the subject occurs in Chapter 8 of Book XIII:

"The angels fell; man's soul fell; and their fall shows us what a deep chasm of darkness would have still engulfed the whole spiritual creation if you had not said at the beginning 'Let there be light'; and the light began"⁶³ ... All I know is this, that unless you are with me, and not only beside me but in my very self, for me there is nothing but evil, and whatever riches I have, unless they are my God, they are only poverty"⁶⁴.

The nature of original sin relates to Augustine's little sins in several aspects. First, Augustine can be so thorough in his description of sins because he, like everyone, is inherently sinful. Original sin is an obstacle in Augustine's journey to God:

"When I was trying to reach a decision about serving the Lord my God, as I had long intended to do, it was I who willed to take this course, and again it was I who willed not to take it ... My mind was being punished. My action did not come from me, but from the sinful principle that dwells in me"⁶⁵. It was part of the punishment of a sin freely committed by Adam, my first father"⁶⁶.

The fall leads us into both the largest and smallest of sins. When Augustine examines wandering astray by enjoying hymns, or starting life sinning as a baby who has no concept of sin, we know that our fall is complete. Little sins thus serve to emphasize man's original sin, and to show its ramifications⁶⁷.

⁶² "Reuoca nos"; VIII,4; CCL 27,118.

⁶³ See *Gen.* 1:3: "And God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light".

⁶⁴ "Defluxit angelus, defluxit anima hominis et indicauerunt abyssum uniuersae spiritalis creaturae in profundo tenebroso, nisi dixisses ab initio: 'Fiat lux,' et facta esset lux ... Hoc tantum scio, quia male mihi est praeter te non solum extra me sed et in me ipso, et omnis mihi copia, quae deus meus non est, egestas est"; XIII,8; CCL 27,245-246.

⁶⁵ See *Rom.* 7:17: "So it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me".

⁶⁶ "Ego cum deliberabam, ut iam seruirem domino deo meo, sicut diu disposueram, ego eram, qui uolebam, ego, qui nolebam ... poenam meae. Et ideo non iam ego operabar illam, sed quod habitabat in me peccatum de supplicio liberioris peccati, quia eram filius Adam"; VIII,10; CCL 27,127.

⁶⁷ In *De ciu. Dei*, Augustine points out the "littleness" of Adam and Eve's actual act makes their sin all the more heinous: "Hoc itaque de uno cibi genere non edendo, ubi aliorum tanta copia subiacebat, tam leue praeceptum ad obseruandum, tam beue ad memoria retinendum, ubi praesertim nondum uoluntati cupiditas resistebat ... tanto maiore iniustitia uolatum est, quanto faciliore posset obseruantia custodiri"; XIV,12; CCL 48,434. "The injunction forbidding the eating of one kind of food, where such an abundant supply of other foods was available, was so easy to observe, so brief to remember; above all, it was given at a time when desire was not yet in opposition to the will ... Therefore the unrighteousness of violating the prohibition was so much the greater, in proportion to the ease with which it could have been observed and fulfilled". Or again: "In paradiso tanto maior inoboedientia fuit, quanto id, quod praeceptum est, nullius difficultatis est"; ib.

Second, Augustine sees life as a journey towards God at least in part because man has fallen away from God through original sin. Our separation is, at least in part, the result and the cause of our sin. "Let me not be for my own life, for when I lived of myself I lived evilly: I was death to myself. But in [God] I live again"⁶⁸. Similarly: "In my youth I wandered away, too far from your sustaining hand, and created myself a barren waste"⁶⁹. In other words, our sin helps to place us in a position of total dependence upon God's grace, a fact which Augustine emphasizes by showing the ever-present nature of sin. This point is discussed in greater detail in Section VI below.

Finally, on a deeper level, it could be that Augustine includes the pear tree example in part to mirror the apple tree episode in the Garden of Eden. As Augustine thoroughly reproaches himself for his pointless theft, perhaps he intends the reader to reflect on man's first fall as well. If Augustine does focus on little sins to show, at least in part, the thoroughness of man's sinful nature as a result of the fall, the pear tree makes that connection more explicit.

V. BONDAGE OF THE WILL

Augustine mentions repeatedly the idea that our will is "bound" to sin⁷⁰. The example of stealing the pears illustrates this:

XIV,15; CCL 48,437. "The disobedience in paradise was all the greater inasmuch as the command was one of no difficulty at all". See also J.N.D. KELLY, *o.c.*, 363: "It was worse than any other conceivable sin in proportion as Adam was nobler than any other man and as the will which produced it was uniquely free". Although Augustine does not employ this reasoning specifically in the *Confessions*, it nevertheless could at least partially clarify the role of little sins.

⁶⁸ "Non ego uita mea sim: male uixi ex me, mors mihi fui: in te reuiuiesco"; XII,10; CCL 27,221.

⁶⁹ "Erraui ... nimis deuius ab stabilitate tua in adulescentia et factus sum mihi regio egestatis"; II,10; CCL 27,26.

⁷⁰ In the *Confessions*, Augustine speaks of having actually *two* wills, each opposed to the other: "Duae uoluntates meae, una uetus, alia noua, illa carnalis, illa spiritalis, confligebant inter se atque discordando dissipabant animam meam"; VIII,5; CCL 27,120. "These two wills within me, one old, one new, one the servant of the flesh, the other of the spirit, were in conflict and between them they tore my soul apart". For an excellent discussion of this, see H. ARENDT, *The Life of the Mind*, New York, 1981, 93-96. In another writing, Augustine says directly: "uoluntas est causa peccati"; *De Libero Arbitrio*, III,17; CCL 29,303. "The will is the cause of sin"; *On the Free Choice of the Will*, (*The Library of Liberal Arts*, 150), transl. A.S. BENJAMIN & L.H. HACKSTAFF, Indianapolis, 1964. See also *De ciu. Dei*, XIV,24 (power of the will over the body). Kelly writes that Augustine's "normal doctrine is that, while we retain our free will intact, the sole use to which in our unregenerate state we put it is to do wrong. In this sense [Augustine] can

"It was not the pears that my unhappy soul desired. I had plenty of my own, better than those, and I only picked them so that I might steal"⁷¹.

"Let my heart now tell [God] what prompted me to do wrong for no purpose, and why it was only my own life of mischief that made me do it. The evil in me was foul, but I loved it. I loved my own perdition and my own faults, not the things for which I committed wrong, but the wrong itself"⁷².

Just as it influenced his stealing the pears, Augustine's will influences his turning to God:

"I longed [to devote myself entirely to God], but I was held fast, not in fetters clamped upon me by another, but by my own will, which had the strength of iron chains. ... My thoughts as they meditated upon [God], were like the efforts of a man who tries to wake but cannot and sinks back into the depths of slumber. ... [I] was quite sure that it was better for me to give myself up to [God's] love than to surrender to my own lust. But while I wanted to follow the first course and was convinced it was right, I was still a slave to the pleasures of the second"⁷³.

In spite of the fact: "All [God] asked of me was to deny my own will and accept [His]"⁷⁴, Augustine nevertheless could not easily do so.

No only Augustine, but all men are prisoners of their wills:

"It may be that all men do desire to be happy, but because the impulses of nature and the impulses of the spirit are at war with one another, so that they cannot do all that their will approves⁷⁵, they fall back upon what they are able to do and find contentment in this way. For their will to do what they cannot do is not strong enough to enable them to do it"⁷⁶.

speak of 'a cruel necessity of sinning' resting upon the human race"; *o.c.*, 365 [references omitted]

⁷¹ "Non ipsa [poma] concupiuit anima mea miserabilis. Erat mihi enim meliorum copia, illa autem decerpsi, tantum ut furarer"; II,6; CCL 27,23.

⁷² "Ecce cor meum, deus, ecce cor meum, quod miseratus es in imo abyssi. Dicat tibi nunc ecce cor meum, quid ibi quaerebat, ut essem gratis malus et malitiae meae causa nulla esset nisi malitia. Foeda erat, et amaui eam; amaui perire, amaui defectum meum, non illud, ad quod deficiebam, sed defectum meum ipsum amaui ..."; II,4; CCL 27,22.

⁷³ "Cui rei ego suspirabam ligatus non ferro alieno, sed mea ferrea uoluntate. ... Cogitationes, quibus meditabar in te, similes erant conatibus expergisci uolentium, qui tamen superati soporis altitudine remerguntur. ... Certum habebam esse melius tuae caritati me dedere quam meae cupiditati cedere; sed illud placebat et uincebat, hoc libebat et uinciebat"; VIII,5; CCL 27,119-120.

⁷⁴ "Hoc erat totum nolle, quod uolebam, et uelle, quod uolebas"; IX,1; CCL 27,133.

⁷⁵ See *Gal.* 5:17: "For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh; for those are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you would".

⁷⁶ "An omnes hoc uolunt, sed quoniam caro concupiscit aduersus spiritum et spiritus aduersus carnem, ut non faciant quod uolunt, cadunt in id quod ualent eoque contenti sunt, quia illud, quod non ualent, non tantum uolunt, quantum sat est, ut ualeant"; X,23; CCL 27,172-173.

Little sins emphasize and clarify Augustine's idea of bondage of the will. Even over the smallest of things, and perhaps particularly over the smallest, he has little control. Augustine watches the lizard catching flies because he cannot help but do so (X,35). People generally share the same condition: "What pleasure can there be in the sight of mangled corpse, which can only horrify? Yet people will flock to see one lying on the ground"⁷⁷.

Bondage of the will relates as well to Augustine's notion of original sin, which, as I tried to show above, also has connections to little sins. Augustine is unable to turn easily to God, in spite of his desire to do so. "Why does this strange phenomenon occur? What causes it? ... the answer to my question lies in the secret punishment of man and in the penitence which casts a deep shadow on the sons of Adam"⁷⁸. Augustine's inability to turn to God "only meant that my mind was being punished. My action did not come from me, but from the sinful principle that dwell in me. It was part of the punishment of a sin freely committed by Adam, my first father"⁷⁹. The sinful principle that dwells in him, then, makes it impossible to escape completely even (and again, perhaps particularly) the smallest of sins, which Augustine demonstrates throughout the *Confessions*.

Little sins relate more explicitly to bondage of the will in Augustine's discussion of habit. "When I gave into lust habit was born, and when I did not resist the habit it became a necessity. These were the links which together formed what I have called my chain, and it held me fast in the duress of servitude"⁸⁰. Habit becomes one of the chains on Augustine's will when he tries to reach God. "The higher part of our nature aspires after eternal bliss while our lower self is held back by the love of temporal pleasure. ... While truth teaches [the will] to prefer one course, habit prevents it from relinquishing the other"⁸¹. Augustine was "held back by

⁷⁷ "Quid enim uoluptatis habet uidere in laniato cadauere quod exhorreas? Et tamen sic ubi iaceat, concurrunt"; X,35; CCL 27,185.

⁷⁸ "Unde hoc monstrum? Et quare istuc? ... mihi respondere possint latebrae poenarum hominum et tenebrosissimae contritiones filiorum Adam"; VIII,9; CCL 27,126.

⁷⁹ "... poenam meae. Et ideo non iam ego operabar illam, quod habitabat in me peccatum de supplicio liberioris peccati, quia eram filius Adam"; VIII,10; CCL 27,127.

⁸⁰ "Dum seruitur libidini, facta est consuetudo, et dum consuetudini non resistitur, facta est necessitas. Quibus quasi ansulis sibimet innexis — unde catenam appellauim — tenebat me obstrictum dura seruitus"; VIII,5; CCL 27,119.

⁸¹ "Aeternitas delectat superius et temporalis boni uoluptas retentat inferius. ... Dum illud ueritate praeponebat, hoc familiaritate non ponebat"; VIII,10; CCL 27,128-129.

mere trifles, the most paltry inanities, all my old attachments"⁸². Although he knew that "only a small thing"⁸³ held him from turning to God (Augustine suggests it is his inability to conceive of non-material beings and his love of sinful ways), he realizes too that "habit was too strong"⁸⁴. Thus little sins play a key role at the pivotal point of the narrative, as Augustine stands "trembling at the barrier"⁸⁵ of truth.

Eventually, of course, Augustine completes his conversion, but not by his own strength or will. "Continenence" beckons him to "cross over" and "hesitate no more"⁸⁶. Augustine imagines her saying: "Why do you try to stand in your own strength and fail? Cast yourself upon God and have no fear. ... Cast yourself upon him without fear, for he will welcome you and cure you of all your ills"⁸⁷. Thus, Augustine says to God: "You converted me to yourself"⁸⁸. As the next section explores, one of Augustine's recurrent themes in the *Confessions* is that of his (and our) total dependence upon God. As with original sin and bondage of the will, little sins both emphasize and support this idea.

VI. ALL DEPENDS ON GOD

One day Augustine's friend Alypius met some fellow-students and boastfully tried to show his strength of will by attending the gladiatorial shows and not watching. He lasted for a while, but when the crowd gave a "great roar" he gave in and opened his eyes. "Instead of turning away, he fixed his eyes upon the scene and drank in all its frenzy, unaware of what he was doing"⁸⁹. Why did Alypius look? "The weakness of his soul was relying upon itself instead of trusting in [God]"⁹⁰. There was only one way Alypius eventually was saved from his sin: "You stretched out your

⁸² "Retinebant nugae nugarum et uanitates uanitatium, antiquae meae ..."; VIII,11; CCL 27,129.

⁸³ "iam exiguo tenebar"; VIII,11; CCL 27,129.

⁸⁴ "mihi consuetudo uiolentia"; VIII,11; CCL 27,130.

⁸⁵ "quo ... trepidabam"; VIII,11; CCL 27,130.

⁸⁶ "Aperiebatur ... casta dignitas continentiae ... ut venirem neque dubitarem"; VIII,11; CCL 27,130.

⁸⁷ "Quid in te stas et non stas? Proice te in eum, noli metuere ... proice te securus, excipiet et sanabit te"; VIII,11; CCL 27,130.

⁸⁸ "Conuertisti enim me ad te"; VIII,12; CCL 27,132. See *Wisdom* 8:21a: "But I perceived that I would not possess wisdom unless God gave her to me".

⁸⁹ "Non se auertit, sed fixit aspectum et hauriebat furias et nesciebat ..."; VI,8; CCL 27,83.

⁹⁰ "Animus ... eo infirmior ... qui debuit de te"; VI,8; CCL 27,83.

almighty, ever merciful hand, O God, and rescued him from this madness. You taught him to trust in you, not in himself"⁹¹.

Throughout the *Confessions*, Augustine states over and over that "no man can be master of himself, except of God's bounty"⁹². He explains: God "released me from the fetters of lust which held me so tightly shackled and from my slavery to the things of this world"⁹³. Except in God, "there was no place where I could escape from myself"⁹⁴. With only "the meager powers that are mine in this life"⁹⁵, Augustine (or anyone) alone cannot hope to gain any understanding of the Holy Scriptures. Augustine is converted by God, and after conversion continues to rely on God for salvation: "I shall not turn aside until you gather all that I am into that holy place of peace, rescuing me from this world where I am dismembered and deformed, and giving me new form and new strength for eternity"⁹⁶. Not only for salvation, Augustine depends upon God⁹⁷, but for everything. "I should not even exist if it were not by [God's] gift"⁹⁸.

⁹¹ "Manu ualidissima et misericordissima eruisti eum tu et docuisti non sui habere, sed tui fiduciam ..."; VI,8; CCL 27,83.

⁹² "neminem posse esse continentem, nisi tu dederis"; VI,11; CCL 27,87. "Nemo enim potest esse continens, nisi tu des"; X,31; CCL 27,178. It is interesting to note, however, that Augustine says "Tardabam conuerti ad dominum": "I kept delaying my conversion to you," thus suggesting that Augustine's will *prevented* his conversion, even if it could not effectuate it; VI,11; CCL 27,87. [emphasis added]

⁹³ "de uinculo quidem desiderii concubitus, quo artissimo tenebar, et saecularium negotiorum seruitute quemadmodum me exemeris"; VIII,6; CCL 27,121.

⁹⁴ "a me fugerem non erat"; VIII,7; CCL 27,123.

⁹⁵ "in hac inopia uita meae"; XII,1; CCL 27,217.

⁹⁶ "Non auertar, donec in eius pacem ... conligas totum quod sum a dispersione et deformitate hac et conformes atque confirmes in aeternum"; XII,16; CCL 27,227.

⁹⁷ Augustine sees one value of the Law as accusing us of inadequacy so that we call upon the grace of God. Calvin has an excellent brief discussion of Augustine's position on this point in which he draws together quotations from many of Augustine's writings. See J. CALVIN, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, (*Library of Christian Classics*, XX), transl. F.L. BATTLES, Philadelphia, 1960, 357-358. In his *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, Augustine writes: "Ita, Domine, ita fac, misericors Domine; impera quod non possit impleri, immo impera quod non nisi per tuam gratiam possit impleri; ut cum homines per suas uires id implere nequiverint, omne os obstruatur, et nemo sibi magnus uideatur. Sint omnes paruuli, et reus fiat omnis mundus tibi; quia non iustificabitur ex lege omnis caro coram te; per legem enim cognitio peccati"; *En. in Ps.* 118,XXVII,3; CCL 40,1758. "Do thus, do thus, merciful Lord; command what cannot be fulfilled, yea, command what cannot, save through Thy grace be fulfilled; that when men have proved incapable of fulfilling Thy commandments through their own strength, every mouth may be stopped, and no man may seem great unto himself. Let all be little ones, and let all the world be guilty before Thee; because by the deeds of the Law there shall no flesh be justified in Thy sight; for by the Law is the knowledge of sin"; transl. H.M. WILKINS, (*Library of the Fathers*, V), Oxford-London, 1853, 434. [emphasis omitted]

⁹⁸ "Ut sim tu dedisti mihi"; I,20; CCL 27,17.

And not only Augustine, but all depends on God for everything:

"It is from the abundance of your goodness that your creation subsists ... Could the heaven and the earth which you made in the Beginning make any claim on you by their own deserts? ... What had corporeal matter deserved of you that it should exist even as a being invisible and without form, since it would not have existed even in that state except by reason of the fact that you created it? It did not exist before you created it, and therefore it could not earn any right to exist"⁹⁹.

As Augustine says to God, "You are everywhere, and everywhere you are entire"¹⁰⁰, so also he exclaims, "Thanks be to you, O Lord, for all that we see!"¹⁰¹.

God alone knows, and is "truth, whereas every man is a liar"¹⁰². Thus, there "is no place whatever where man may hide away"¹⁰³ from God; if Augustine knows or understands anything, it is by God's will (VII,9). "Man with his natural gifts is like a mere infant in Christ's nursery. He must be fed on milk until he is strong enough to eat solid food"¹⁰⁴. Augustine thus pleads with God: "You know how weak I am and how inadequate is my knowledge: teach me and heal my frailty"¹⁰⁵. Indeed, Augustine even declares: "I am in a sorry state, for I do not even know what I do not know!"¹⁰⁶.

Augustine reenforces (whether consciously or not) his (and our) total dependence on God by focusing on little sins. On our own we cannot refrain from committing even the smallest of sins¹⁰⁷. The thoroughness

⁹⁹ "Ex plenitudine quippe bonitatis tuae creatura tua substitit ... Quid enim te promeruit caelum et terra, quae fecisti in principio? ... Quid te promeruit materies corporalis, ut esset saltem inuisibilis et incompressa, quia neque hoc esset, nisi quia fecisti? Ideoque te, quia non erat, promereri ut esset non poterat"; XIII,2; CCL 27,242-243.

¹⁰⁰ "Ubique totus es et nusquam locorum es"; VI,3; CCL 27,76.

¹⁰¹ "Gratias tibi, domine! Videmus caelum et terram"; XIII,32; CCL 27,270.

¹⁰² "ueritas, omnis autem homo mendax"; XIII,25; CCL 27,265. See *Rom.* 3:4: "Let God be true though every man be false".

¹⁰³ "non esse quo a te omni modo recedatur"; II,6; CCL 27,24.

¹⁰⁴ "Animalis autem homo tamquam paruulus in Christo lactisque potator, donec roboretur ad solidum cibum"; XIII,18; CCL 27,255.

¹⁰⁵ "Tu scis imperitiam meam et infirmitatem meam: doce me et sana me"; X,43; CCL 27,193.

¹⁰⁶ "Ei mihi, qui nescio saltem quid nesciam!"; XI,25; CCL 27,210.

¹⁰⁷ Cf. Calvin's discussion of various Augustinian writings which explain how even believers are sinners. In Calvin's words: "So long as you live, sin must needs be in your members. At least let it be deprived of mastery". J. CALVIN, *o.c.*, 605-606, note 17. See also *supra* notes 44 and 54. That fact that no one is without sin is, of course, a common theme for Augustine. See, e.g., *Contra duas epistolas pelagianorum*, I,14; PL 44,563: "sine peccato autem in hac vita neminem"; *Against Two Letters of the Pelagians*, I,28,

with which Augustine probes his life for sin parallels the completeness of our dependency upon God in every aspect. It is no wonder that Augustine is "terrified by my sins"¹⁰⁸; they are unescapable. Thus, he calls to God: "Give me the grace to do as you command, and command me to do what you will!"¹⁰⁹ "You are the power of my soul, come into it and make it fit for yourself, so that you may have it and hold it without stain or wrinkle. This is my hope"¹¹⁰. He begs to God, "open your door to my knocking"¹¹¹.

Even after conversion, when Augustine has "pared away many sins and thrust them away from [his] heart"¹¹², he cannot avoid little sins. In fact, one of Augustine's first post-conversion acts is a sin: he continues to occupy the *cathedra mendacii* "chair of lies" for a brief time and to teach "young pupils who gave no thought to [God's] law or [God's] peace"¹¹³. Augustine's use of little sins, then, not only illustrates our complete dependence on God, but also emphasizes God's omnipotence.

VII. THE DEATH OF CHRIST

To some degree, little sins also recall and parallel the paradox of Christ's death¹¹⁴. "It was because he was the Victim that he also was the

(*Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, V): "no one in this life is without sin" (p. 386). *Sermo* 151,5; PL 38,817: "Ergo semper pugnandum est, quia ipsa concupiscentia, cum qua nati sumus, finire non potest quamdiu vivimus; quotidie minui potest, finire non potest"; *Sermon* 151 (on *Romans* 7), in *Sermons on Selected Lessons of the New Testament*, II,709,713 (*Library of the Fathers*, 1860): "Therefore must we always fight; because this same concupiscentia, wherewith we are born, cannot be ended as we live: diminished it may be day by day, ended it cannot be". *De peccatorum meritis et remissione*, II,14; PL 44,164: "omnes magni, omnes iusti, omnes veraciter laudabiles sunt, sed sine peccato aliquo non sunt"; *On the Merits*, 21 (p. 53): "all these are great, they are all righteous, and they are all really worthy of praise, — yet they are by no means without sin".

¹⁰⁸ "conterritus peccatis meis"; X,43; CCL 27,193.

¹⁰⁹ "Da quod iubes et iube quod uis"; X,29; CCL 27,176.

¹¹⁰ "Virtus animae meae, intra in eam et coapta tibi, ut habeas et possideas sine macula et ruga. Haec est mea spes"; X,1; CCL 27,155. See *Ephesians* 5:27: "that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish".

¹¹¹ "ut aperiantur pulsanti mihi interiora"; XI,2; CCL 27,196.

¹¹² "periculorum ecce multa praeciderim et a meo corde dispulerim"; X,35; CCL 27,185.

¹¹³ "subtrahere ministerium linguae meae nundinis loquacitatis, ne ulterius pueri meditantes non legem tuam, non pacem tuam"; IX,2; CCL 27,133.

¹¹⁴ I do not wish to push this analogy too far, but instead see it at most as a suggestion, or a loose connection, much as Aslan the Lion reminds us of Christ but without any exact correlation. See C.S. LEWIS, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*,

Victor. In your sight he was for us both Priest and Sacrifice, and it was because he was the Sacrifice that he was also the Priest"¹¹⁵. Although the earthly Jesus had amazing powers (walking on water, raising the dead), nevertheless Christians focus upon Christ's death and resurrection. Christ did not come as a powerful earthly king, or a mighty warlord, but instead as a gentle man of humble origins (at least on His mother's side of the family). Christ submitted to God's will and conquered death.

Similarly, although Augustine seems to have substantial sins in his past, he nevertheless focuses on the smallest, sometimes seemingly inconsequential sins throughout the *Confessions*. Perhaps just as we would expect the earthly Christ to be a mighty king, so perhaps would we expect someone who spends as many pages as Augustine does confessing his sins to have some big things to get off his chest. Nevertheless, Augustine focuses on little sins, on acts praised on earth that in reality are sins, and on the fear of sins he cannot recognize. Whether consciously or not, Augustine's use of little sins echoes the seeming paradox of the earthly Christ. "Let the proud deride me, O God, and all whom you have not yet laid low and humiliated for the salvation of their souls; but let me still confess my sins to you for your honour and glory"¹¹⁶. Finally, Augustine recalls Christ's sacrifice by slaying "his old life and offer[ing] it as a sacrifice"¹¹⁷; his confessions too "are a sacrifice"¹¹⁸.

VIII. LITTLE SINS AND UNIVERSALITY

It may seem also paradoxical that little sins have the widest applicability. If we are all sinful in some way, then what Augustine does by focusing on little sins is to place his discussion on a plane of sinfulness so low that it includes everybody. Augustine recognizes that "there are some who have been called by [God] and because they have listened to [His] voice they have avoided the sins which I here record and confess for them to read"¹¹⁹ (II, 7). Nevertheless, he also knows that "however praise-

(1950). For a discussion of the "smallness" of Christ, see P. TILICH, *He Who is the Christ*, in *The Shaking of the Foundations*, 143-152, particularly 146, 149 (1949).

¹¹⁵ "Victor, quia uictima, pro nobis tibi sacerdos et sacrificium, et ideo sacerdos, quia sacrificium"; X,43; CCL 27,193.

¹¹⁶ "Inrideant me adrogantes et nondum salubriter prostrati et elisi a te, deus meus, ego tamen confitear tibi dedecora mea in laude tua"; IV,1; CCL 27,40.

¹¹⁷ "sacrificaueram mactans uetustatem meam"; IX,4; CCL 27,139.

¹¹⁸ "sacrificium confessionum mearum"; V,1; CCL 27,57.

¹¹⁹ "Qui enim uocatus a te secutus est uocem tuam et uitauit ea, quae me de me ipso recordantem et fatentem legit"; II,7; CCL 27,25.

worthy a man's life may be, it will go hard with him if you [God] lay aside your mercy when you come to examine it"¹²⁰.

The bigger the sin Augustine focuses on, the more likely a reader could say to himself, "I am not guilty of such heinous things, therefore I do not need to confess or repent". But who is not guilty of crying as a baby? Little sins encompass everyone's transgressions. In addition, readers who *are* guilty of bigger sins become especially aware of their guilt as Augustine chides himself for such small ones. Little sins do more than emphasize and reenforce several aspects of Augustine's theology. Because they are part of everyone's life, they cannot help but draw in the reader.

IX. CONCLUSION

Augustine himself provides perhaps the wisest conclusion for this article; we should approach understanding the *Confessions* as Augustine does Holy Scripture.

"The truths which those words contain appear to different inquirers in a different light, and of all the meanings that they can bear which of us can lay his finger upon one and say that is what Moses had in mind and what he meant us to understand by his words?"¹²¹.

Nevertheless, provided that

"... each of us tries as best he can to understand in the Holy Scriptures what the writer meant by them, what harm is there if a reader believes what [God shows] him to be the true meaning? It may not even be the meaning which the writer had in mind, and yet he too saw in them a true meaning, different though it may have been from this"¹²².

Any attempt to say conclusively and exclusively what Augustine has in mind by focusing on little sins, or indeed, even that he does so consciously, seems necessarily doomed to failure. I offer no "arbitrary assurance with which [to] insist upon" the points argued in this article (XII,25).

In describing the movement of the heavens, Augustine focuses on the movement of a single potter's wheel, and concludes: "O God, grant

¹²⁰ "etiam laudabili uitae hominum, si remota misericordia discutias eam"; IX,13; CCL 27,152.

¹²¹ "Quis nostrum sic inuenit eam inter tam multa uera, quae in illis uerbis aliter atque aliter intellectis occurrunt quaerentibus, ut tam fidenter dicat hoc sensisse Moysen atque hoc in illa narratione uoluisse intelligi, quam fidenter dicit hoc uerum esse, siue ille hoc senserit siue aliud?"; XII,24; CCL 27,233-234.

¹²² "... quisque conatur id sentire in scripturis sanctis, quod in eis sensit ille qui scripsit, quid mali est, si hoc sentiat, quod tu, lux omnium ueridicarum mentium, ostendis uerum esse, etiamsi non hoc sensit ille, quem legit, cum et ille uerum nec tamen hoc senserit?"; XII,18; CCL 27,229-230.

that men should recognize in some small thing like this potter's wheel the principles which are common to all things, great and small alike"¹²³. Similarly, in confessing his transgressions, Augustine focuses on little sins. Regardless of his intention, Augustine's use of little sins illustrates, emphasizes and supports his thinking on the nature of God and our relationship with Him, original sin, bondage of will, and the death of Christ. In addition, little sins encompass the widest possible audience in terms of personal relevance. Like the potter's wheel, little sins contain principles common to much larger things. Augustine bids us, look.

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¹²³ "Deus, dona hominibus uidere in paruo [rota figuli] communes notitias rerum paruarum atque magnarum"; XI,23; CCL 27,208.