



Reflections of a Disordered Youth: An Augustinian Approach to Christian Moral Education

Michael S. Russo
Department of Philosophy
Molloy College

It is generally acknowledged that Augustine's *Confessions* is a masterpiece of Christian spirituality. Those who have read the work can hardly forget Augustine's now famous accounts of his struggles to overcome the oppressive force of carnal habit, his conversion in the garden of Milan, and his supposed mystical ascent with his mother at Ostia. It is less obviously apparent that the work—or at least the first two books of the work—represents one of the earliest and most systematic treatments of Christian moral education in Western thought.

This assertion may surprise those who automatically assume that the *Confessions* was written by Augustine essentially as an autobiographical work. Such a limited reading of the *Confessions*, however, obscures the fact that Augustine's primary aim in the work is to represent his own life as a microcosm of the life of the human person in general and to use his moral struggles and ultimate victory over sin as a guide for others who are on their own spiritual journeys. If this is the case—and recent scholarship on the work suggests that it is—then Augustine's treatment of his own infancy, childhood, and adolescence should be taken as a kind of existential portrait of youth in general, and his often pointed observations about his moral upbringing can be read as a general depiction of the proper type of moral education for Christian youth.

I would also like to suggest that the specific approach to Christian moral education that emerges in these pages of the *Confessions* can serve as a much needed alternative to the non-directive form of moral education that continues to be adopted in many classrooms today. Certainly, since the 1960's there has been a radical shift away from a character-based approach to moral education towards one that seeks to tap into the "natural morality" that all children supposedly possess. The common core of all non-directive approaches, such as "values clarification" or the moral reasoning approach of Lawrence Kohlberg, is that they begin with the assumption that children are naturally good and that they will automatically do the right thing if we simply allow them to sort through moral dilemmas by themselves (Kilpatrick 1992, 79-86). The aim of the moral educator in this approach is not to teach values, but to assist students in clarifying their own values, since to promote any specific values or virtues is viewed the equivalent of moral indoctrination (Simon et al 1972, 15).

The fundamental problems inherent in non-directive forms of moral education should

be fairly obvious. Essentially they reduce morality to a matter of personal preference, similar to the preference that one might have for pizza over hamburgers. The fact that there is no right or wrong answer merely supports a kind of moral relativism that further serves to confuse children (Sykes 161-165). Despite the fact that there is no evidence that non-directive approaches actually work, school districts around the country continue to adopt what are essentially non-directive programs in their misguided belief that this is the only legitimate sort of guidance that can be provided in a multi-cultural society. The real losers, of course are our children, who are burdened with the dangerous conviction that whatever they do is morally acceptable, provided they have adequately reflected upon their own value system or can construct a coherent argument in support of their actions.

This is precisely where an Augustinian approach to moral education can inject a necessary dose of common sense into our contemporary discussion about the best way to morally educate children. For one thing, Augustine takes St. Paul's doctrines of original sin and the force of habit seriously, and, as a consequence, firmly rejects any notions about the inherent goodness of children. Instead, what he discovers through his existential analysis of the life of the child is a propensity for moral disorder that originates at birth and is exacerbated by contact with the larger culture. Given this starting point, Augustine will be compelled to adopt a more radical approach than even the proponents of an Aristotelian-type character education would advocate. After all, character education presupposes that the child, if not naturally good, is at least a blank slate, capable becoming either morally good or bad through the particular training that he or she receives (Aristotle 1962, 1103a 14-25). Augustine, on the other hand, following Paul, views the entire life of the human person as fundamentally tending towards disorder, and, therefore, needs to advocate a universal moral education that begins from the moment the child is born and includes all the key players in the child's community. If we read the first two books of Augustine's *Confessions* as an alternative to non-directive forms of moral education, it will be apparent that Augustine, the moral educator, has some interesting and often provocative things to say about the ways that parents, educators and religious leaders can work together to guide the moral development of young people.

Moral Disorder and the Life of the Infant

Augustine begins his treatment of the life of the child in the first book of the *Confessions* by painting an idealized portrait of the interaction between a mother and her newborn infant. The reciprocal relationship between mother and child as he describes it is a marvelous illustration of the natural order at work: one gives what the other needs, and both are satisfied. The newborn enters the world as part of a beneficent natural order, so arranged that his needs are provided for him as they arise, and his very needs contribute to the order of which he is a part. There is a natural harmony between the infants' desire to suckle at its mother's breast and woman's desire to nurture and protect the infant: "You...granted me not to desire more than you supplied;" he reminisces, "and on those who suckled me you bestowed a desire to give to me what you gave to them. Their feelings were so ordered that they wanted to give me something of that abundance which they received from you" (Conf. 1.6). The life of the infant, as Augustine idyllically describes it, is one of total concord, with mother and child working together to satisfy both their own good and the good of each other (Starnes 1990, 3).

This idealized image of perfect natural order is then starkly contrasted by Augustine with the actual state of the infant from the moment of its birth. Using his own life as an example, he describes how as an infant he became agitated when his parents and guardians did not respond quickly enough when he wanted something: “And when people did not do what I wanted either because I could not make myself understood or because what I wanted was bad for me I would become angry with my elders for not being subservient to me, and with responsible people for not acting as though they were my slaves” (Conf. 1.6). While most of his contemporaries would probably view the incessant grasping of the newborn with tolerant bemusement, Augustine ominously describes these acts as the “sins” of infancy, and suggests that the infant is somehow culpable for them (Conf. 1.7; Rigby 1989; Sage 1969). The infant, he argues, perverts the natural order that should exist between himself and his mother by desiring more milk than is good for himself, for failing to recognize the legitimate authority of those who are in charge of him, and for being envious of other children. The only thing that prevents these infants from acting on their harmful desires, he writes somewhat pessimistically, is the weakness of their bodies, not the innocence of their souls (Conf. 1.7; Casey 1990, 115-116).

While Augustine’s views on infant sin are often difficult for contemporary readers to sympathize with, his underlying point is a significant one. Although our tendency may be to view children as innocents, Augustine, ever the realist, knows that there is no such thing as a completely innocent human being. From the moment of birth, the life of the infant, and later of the child, is characterized by disordered inclinations and desires that are only controlled by the prudent disciplinary actions of the child’s parents. Children left to their own devices, and without proper checks on their actions, are sure to end up causing tremendous harm to themselves and others around them. Indeed, the current rash of violence caused by children who have been able to overcome their own physical weakness by acquiring weapons seems to bear out this fact. Augustine’s implicit aim in *Confessions* 1 can be seen as an attempt to dispel the prevailing image of children as angelic creatures, who, if simply protected from some of the more pernicious influences of contemporary culture, will automatically become kind, responsible and compassionate members of their communities. Those who hold such a naive view of children, according to Augustine, demonstrate a profound misunderstanding of human nature.

If, as Augustine suggests, the life of the human person is characterized by a pervasive tendency towards moral disorder from the very beginning of life, what, if anything, can be done to stem the tide of this disorder? A possible corrective is indicated in *Confessions* 1.10, where Augustine describes a serious illness that befell him around the age of seven. Because of the life-threatening nature of this infirmity, his mother, Monica, began preparing to have him baptized for the “remission of [his] sins.” Having recovered suddenly, however, Augustine’s baptism was put off in recognition that he was bound to sin in adulthood, and therefore would have incurred even greater guilt than if he had not been baptized (Mallard 1994, 19-22; O’Meara 1954, 38). Although he is aware that his mother acted out of the best of intentions, Augustine clearly views her decision as an incorrect one, since he is certain that baptism would have put “reigns on my sinning” (Conf. 1.11). But how would baptism have tempered his moral disorder? Augustine remarks that the absence of baptism inadvertently gives license to sinful behavior:

what was the reason that my baptism was put off at that time? Was it for my own

good that I was given more free reign to sin?...How is it that even now one is constantly and everywhere hearing it said of one person or another: “Leave him alone; let him do as he likes; he is not baptized yet” (Conf. 1.11).

If the absence of baptism eliminates those social checks whereby one is compelled not to sin, then conversely, baptism places one in a community of believers who strengthen and encourage one another to behave properly. “How much better...would it have been,” he writes, “if I had been made well at once [i.e., if he had been baptized as an infant] and then, by my own care [fear of eternal punishment] and that of my friends [the members of the Church], had managed to bring it about that the recovered health of my soul had been preserved in your keeping...” (Conf. 1.11). Augustine does not mean to imply, however, that baptism would have completely eliminated the moral disorder that exists in his soul, but that it would have at least placed limits on this disorder by encouraging him and other members of his community to be more vigilant about his behavior.

Throughout the *Confessions* Augustine frequently returns to this idea of a community of faith as a stop-gap for moral disorder. His own conversion, we know, was precipitated by the admonitions of Simplicianus, the Bishop of Milan, and Ponticianus, a fellow African Christian. Both these men “inflamed” his own desire for conversion by providing examples of other individuals who had overcome far greater obstacles than Augustine in order to live out Christian lives. But Augustine is only able to be aided in his moral and spiritual development because he had previously opted to inscribe himself within the “walls” of the Catholic Church, putting aside his own arrogant presumption of moral autonomy and accepting the guidance of others in positions of authority (Conf. 8.2, 8.6). There is no doubt that Augustine is convinced that without this kind of supportive community to nurture, encourage and at times rebuke us, true moral development would be difficult indeed.

Childhood and the “River of Human Custom”

The pattern of moral disorder that we have seen in Augustine’s treatment of the life of the infant emerges once again in his treatment of childhood. In this case, the detrimental habits that have been developed early in life due to the negligence of one’s parents are now compounded by the corrupting influences of the larger society. Although the sins of childhood are less severe than those of adolescence and adulthood because they take place prior to the age of reason, Augustine again gives no quarter to those who would dismiss the transgressions of the child as insignificant. Just as the infant demonstrates a deep-rooted disordered inclination by “crying for more,” so too does the child in attempting to evade serious studies that can aid his salvation. Although the object of sin has changed in childhood, the disordered desire that gives rise to sin in the first place remains constant (Miles 1991, 22-23; Starnes 1975, 29).

Describing his childhood education, Augustine writes about how he was beaten by his teachers for spending too much time in play to the detriment of his studies. Although his instructors’ motives for teaching him such “vain” studies may themselves have been dubious, Augustine still considers the desire to escape from schoolwork for the sake of idle pleasure to be a manifestation of his sinfulness. He did not avoid these studies, he says, for the sake of something loftier, but rather to do something even more frivolous:

And yet I sinned, my Lord God...I sinned in acting contrary to the commands of my parents and those school masters. For whatever purpose these preceptors of mine may have had in mind when they wanted me to learn, I could still afterwards have made good use of this learning. For I was not disobedient because I was making some better choice, but because I loved playing; I loved feeling proud when I won and I loved hearing my ears tickled by false stories, so that they might itch all the more. (Conf. 1.10)

Augustine recognizes that the best form of education is one that trains the child in virtue and piety. But, even if the education that he received as a boy was more of a training in vanity, learning rhetoric and secular literature is not necessarily bad in itself. Thus Augustine's choice of pleasure over studies that could indirectly improve his intellect is symptomatic of a disordered soul and a manifestation of the effects of original sin. When Augustine writes, then, that he was "so small a boy and so great a sinner" (*tantillus puer et tantus peccator*) (Conf 1.12) we should not assume that he means this hyperbolically. When the child willingly chooses the lesser over the better, he perverts the natural order of which he is a part.

Later Augustine writes that he sinned again as a boy in preferring secular literature to the more important study of reading, writing and mathematics: "I sinned...in my boyhood when I showed greater affection for these empty studies than for others that were more useful; or it would be truer to say, I loved the former and hated the latter." Once again he appears to be exaggerating when he writes that his tears over the death of Dido in the *Aeneid* were "fornication against [God]" (Conf. 1.13). However, such an attraction to pagan literature over subjects that would be more useful for his salvation also demonstrates a perversion of the right order that should be present in learning. Whereas reading the *Aeneid* encouraged him to weep over the sorrows of an imaginary pagan, reading Scripture would have led him to weep instead over his own sins. Similarly, the primary studies that he neglected might have indirectly led to the same end by improving his rational abilities. In short, reading for the mature Augustine must always serve as a means to some higher end (moral and spiritual) and can never be viewed simply as an end in itself (Stock 1996, 29-30).

Although Augustine sinned in preferring Virgil to Moses, the fault lay not solely with him, but also with those who are responsible for educating him properly—namely, his teachers. After all, it was his teachers who had determined that he would best be served by studying illicit passages from pagan classics. Had his instructors been truly concerned about his moral development they would have had him spend less time declaiming speeches based upon pagan works and more time studying Scripture. Only Scripture, Augustine writes, "could have supported the tender shoot of my spirit, so that it would not have dragged shamefully on the ground among these empty trifles..." (Conf. 1.17). In the end, such a disordered educational system leads one to worry more about violating the rules of pronunciation than about violating the moral law:

Look down, my Lord God...with patience on how the sons of men most carefully observe the rules of letters and syllables which they receive from those who spoke before them and yet paid no attention to the eternal covenant of everlasting salvation which they received from you....A man who is trying to win a reputation as a good speaker will, in front of a human judge and surrounded by a crowd of human beings, attack his opponent with the utmost fury and hatred, and he will take great care to see that by some slip of the tongue he

does not mispronounce the word ‘human’; but he will not be concerned as to whether his rage and fury may have the effect of destroying a real human being. (Conf. 1.18)

There is no doubt that Augustine believes that this emphasis on pagan classics was partially responsible for moving him towards greater moral dissolution, since he was thereby inspired to emulate the illicit activities of the gods. If, after all, it is perfectly acceptable for a god such as Jupiter to commit adultery, why should a mortal such as himself have any hesitation to do the same (Conf. 1.16)?

Augustine also points out that not only was the content of what was being taught to him in school problematic, but so too were his teachers’ original motivations for educating him. His teachers, he writes with disapprobation, “had no idea of how I was to use the education which they forced upon me except for satisfying the insatiable desires of that wealth which is poverty and of that glory which is shame” (Conf. 1.12). Rather than viewing education as a means to inspire their students to a love of wisdom for its own sake, Augustine’s teachers recognize it only as a tool for aiding students in acquiring wealth and honors later on in life. Indeed, he later admits that when he himself became an educator, he was guilty of this same fault. Ultimately, Augustine rejects the life of a *venditor verborum* because he recognizes the danger of an educational system that emphasizes the peddling of useless information rather than helping the student to attain salvation: “No longer,” he says, “should my young students...buy from my mouth material for arming their own madness” (Conf. 9.2; see also 8.6; 9.5).

Had his teachers been at all concerned about maintaining the right order in their education of young students, they would have emphasized Scripture first and foremost, since it would have forced their students to examine their own moral behavior most intensely. Following Scripture they would have emphasized those sciences that are useful in the service of God—grammar, mathematics and composition—over pagan literature, which is pleasant to read but devoid of moral value. We should be careful, however, not to assume that Augustine believes that secular literature is completely devoid of educational value. We know that he himself greatly benefitted from reading such pagan authors as Cicero and Plotinus. In *Confessions* 7.21, however, he maintains that there was almost nothing that he received from reading Plotinus that he could not have gotten from reading Paul. The implication is that, while pagan sources might be culled for moral insights, the “safe path” in education is to avoid those studies which are potentially harmful to students—at least during their young and impressionable years (Conf. 1.15, 17).

If we can get beyond Augustine’s polemical assaults on his own education (which could not have been all that inadequate if it produced such a remarkable individual as himself), there are some valuable insights he makes about the right way to educate Christian youth. First and foremost, Augustine forces the reader to ask a fundamental question about the goal of educating young people. If the aim of the educational system is primarily to produce morally upright, pious and compassionate members of society, this will entail a vastly different mode of education than if the aim is to aid students in acquiring wealth and fame. Indeed, in the former case, the type of tools that are being used to educate the young will make all the difference in the world. Educators must certainly be careful that the materials they use in the classroom do not undermine the values that they are trying to promote in the first place. Augustine also continually tries to impress the reader that the education of a child is the affair of the entire community. If the child is to be transformed into a morally upright adult, then parents, teachers and religious leaders must work together—and with

a consistent moral vision—to accomplish this end. In the absence of such a unified effort, Augustine believes, there is no question the child will ultimately become swept away by the “river of human custom”—that is, the often corrupting influence of secular culture.

Adolescence and the Need for Moral Measure

In Book 2 of the *Confessions* Augustine describes his further descent into moral disorder during his adolescent years. By the time that a youth reaches adolescence, and becomes conscious of the demands of the moral law, his sins take on a far more troubling dimension than they previously had: whereas the child cannot be held personally accountable for his sins, the adolescent, by freely and consciously choosing to transgress God’s law, incurs a far greater penalty for his transgressions than he previously would have incurred.

In what appears to be an almost innocuous event, Augustine aptly demonstrates the implications of personal sin in his recounting the theft of some pears during his adolescent years. On the surface the event seems harmless enough: the young Augustine and his friends stopped in a neighbor’s orchard and steal some of his pears. They stole the pears, he writes, not because they were hungry, but simply for the sake of taking them, for afterwards they threw them to the pigs to eat (Conf. 2.4). At first glance, the story does indeed seem to represent nothing more than a demonstration of Augustine’s “neurotic verbal self-flagellation” (Miles 1991, 28). This particular story, however, has a far greater significance than is usually appreciated at first glance: as one commentator on the text has written, in Augustine’s depiction of the theft of the pears his “life of sin finds its fullest (if only symbolic) representation” (Ferrari 1970, 239).

Having arrived at the age of reason, Augustine the adolescent was fully aware of the demands of the moral law, and yet chose to sin anyway. “Certainly Lord,” he writes, “your law punishes theft; indeed there is a law written in men’s hearts which not iniquity itself can erase” (Conf. 2.4). The requirements of God’s law are obvious from the perspective of Scripture, as well as from the perspective of the natural law. By the age of reason, then, the adolescent has no valid excuse for not recognizing and respecting this law. But if the adolescent understands the law, then why is he inclined to violate its precepts so readily? The answer for Augustine is that the very fact that sinful acts are prohibited by law provides an enticement for the adolescent to commit these acts. Prohibited desires, as Augustine is painfully aware, are all the sweeter to man in his fallen state: “the evil was foul, and I loved it...I loved my sin—not the things for which I had committed the sin, but the sin itself.” “What made [this act of theft] sweet to me was my sin....Could I enjoy what was forbidden for no other reason except that it was forbidden” (Conf. 2.4, 2.6)? The fact that the act of stealing the pears is prohibited by the law thus made the act even more desirable for Augustine than it otherwise would have been. His real sin, however, was not specifically the sin of theft, but rather the sin of pride—placing himself above God’s law. Augustine the adolescent wanted to believe that he could violate God’s law with impunity, so as to obtain “a darkened image of omnipotence” (Conf. 2.6). It is the presence of pride as a motivating factor for sin during one’s adolescent years that makes the adolescent sinner far more culpable for his sins than either the infant or child.

Certainly the greatest temptation that a young person faces upon entering puberty is the desire for sexual intimacy. For Augustine the adolescent, however, the desire for physical loves took on a degree of intensity that indicates that he was on the road to becoming a

slave to his own physical passions. “I loved the idea of love [amare amabam],” he writes. “It was a sweet thing to me both to love and to be loved [amare et amari], and more sweet still when I was able to enjoy the body of my lover....And so I muddied the clear spring of friendship with the dirt of physical desire” (Conf. 3.1). As Augustine himself indicates, during his adolescence and young adulthood he viewed sexual intimacy as a purely physical activity, which had as its object simply his own immediate gratification:

And what was it that delighted me? Only this—to love and be loved. But I could not keep the true measure (*modus*) of love, from one mind to another mind, which marks the bright and glad area of friendship. Instead I was among the foggy exaltations which proceed from the muddy cravings of the flesh and the bubblings of first manhood. These so clouded over my heart and darkened it that I was unable to distinguish between the clear calm of love (*dilectio*) and the swirling mists of lust (*libido*) (Conf. 2.2).

If the right order of nature demands that sexual activity be reserved solely for the sake of procreation (and Augustine is convinced that this is the case), then he distorted this act by using it for less worthy purposes—namely, to gratify his jejune romantic feelings and to pursue physical pleasure. Augustine’s sexual relationships during his adolescent years were disordered precisely because he attempted to love and be loved with no reference to God, and therefore his love inevitably turned to lust.

Augustine’s later shame over the sexual relationships of his adolescence is not simply an indication that in his maturity he suddenly became prudish about sexual matters. He recognizes that there is nothing inherently wrong with sexual intimacy, but when such intimacy becomes disordered it has the tendency to devolve into lust. Because he is now fully aware of the requirements of the moral law, he realizes that such transgressions compound the seriousness of his offenses, and, as such, increase the penalty for these actions. Having repeatedly given in to temptations of the flesh as an adolescent, he became almost a passive vehicle for the lustful desires that reigned within him. The very language that Augustine uses indicates that he no longer had command over the actions that he performed. “I was tossed here and there,” he writes, “spilled on the ground, scattered abroad; I boiled over in my fornication....I was fettered happily in the bonds of my misery so that I might be beaten with rods of red-hot iron—the rods of jealousy and suspicion, and fears and angers and quarrels” (Conf. 2.2; 3.1). Having understood the demands of the law, yet having failed to resist his lustful urges, the first marks of Augustine’s slavery to habit began to surface during his adolescent years.

Could nothing have been done, however, to limit the disorder that was raging in his soul? Was there no means by which the pattern of habitual behavior that was eventually to ensnare Augustine’s will could have been, if not prevented, at least mitigated? Certainly, Augustine himself believes that other members of his community were remiss in their duties towards him. “How I wish,” he writes, “that there had been someone at the time to put a measure on my disorder and to put to good use the fleeting beauties of these new temptations and put limits to their delights” (Conf. 2.2). His parents, for example, who should have sent out a unified message about the dangers of sexual activity outside of marriage, all but justified his illicit behavior. Although his mother Monica initially warned Augustine against premarital intercourse, she almost immediately qualified her warning by discour-

aging him instead against adultery—a message which he evidently took to heart (Conf. 2.3). Still worse, his father seemed completely uninterested “in how chaste I was,” and at times even encouraged his burgeoning sexuality (Conf. 2.3). Thus, instead of offering him the guidelines he needs to develop into a moral adult, what his parents actually did was to reinforce “different aspects of his youthful concupiscence” (Miles 1982, 354).

In the end, his parents’ neglect and his own inability to regulate his disordered tendencies left him “sizzling and frying” amidst all of the “unholy loves” around him (Conf. 3.1). By the time he arrived in Cartage to study rhetoric at the age of seventeen, Augustine realized that he had lost the ability to correctly order his own desires, and that he was completely enslaved by the force of habit. He found himself caught in the “swirling mists of lust” and “storm tossed;” he was overcome by a “restless weariness” that could not be abated; for all practical purposes, he had become a “wasteland” unto himself (Conf. 1.16, 2.2, 1.2). This sorry state of affairs, according to Augustine, was the necessary consequence both of his own inability to regulate his desires and of the failure of the adults in his life to provide him with the moral framework that he clearly needed. Those who were ultimately responsible for ensuring his moral development instead allowed him “free play with no kind of severity to control [him].” His own father, he maintains, was certainly not interested in “how I was growing up in relation to [God],” but rather was more concerned with his own big plans for his son’s financial success (Conf. 2.3). Nor was there sufficient guidance from the larger community—most notably the Church—to channel his erotic energy into a moral direction. As is frequently the case in our own time, Augustine’s guardians either laugh off the transgressions of adolescence as an inevitable state of affairs (“boys will be boys”) or else abdicated their own responsibility for regulating the behavior of the teenagers in their charge (“what can we do about it, after all?”). In the end, it is hardly amazing that Augustine’s early adulthood should have been characterized by such intense inner turmoil, when his early years were all but devoid of the consistent and forceful guidance that he needed to gain moral maturity.

Conclusion

Those who read the first two books of the *Confessions* merely as a literal account of Augustine’s early years will undoubtedly be rewarded with much interesting information about the culture of Roman Africa in the mid-fourth century and about Augustine’s own family life and upbringing. I would suggest, however, that an exclusively autobiographical reading of the *Confessions* does a tremendous injustice to this complex work. The Augustine who wrote the *Confessions* in 396 AD was first and foremost a Christian philosopher, who had only recently begun to grasp the grave implication of the Pauline epistles for his own quest for the happy life; he was a man of faith struggling to make sense of the often mysterious doctrines of original sin, election and grace and was willing to use his own life as a vehicle to help illustrate these doctrines.

Augustine, I believe, was also an insightful moral educator, who was keenly aware both of potential for moral disorder that each child possesses and of the hazards involved in leaving a child to work out a value system for him or herself. His own early life, in fact, can be seen as an experiment of sorts in non-directive moral education that left him helpless in the face of the numerous temptations that he encountered. Throughout the first two books of the *Confessions*, he frequently criticizes his own parents and teachers for failing

to provide the necessary guidance and support that might have enabled him to successfully resist these temptations and to emerge from his childhood and adolescence far less scathed by the corrupting influences of the larger society. Instead he was left with “free reign to sin” (Conf. 1.11) and that freedom would ultimately lead him to become a “wasteland,” unable any longer to freely direct the course of his own life.

Far from accepting the idea that the child is capable of developing a moral framework for himself, Augustine consistently argues that the moral development of the child is an affair of the entire community. In this sense, his approach can be described as “super-directive.” While the family remains the first and most important school of morality for the child, the support of other institutions—most notably, the Church and the school—is also required to help mitigate the negative influences of secular culture. Placing the child within the care of the Church ensures—ideally at least—that he will be guided by its teaching and example. During the child’s early years, the Church acts as a support system, exhorting and inspiring him to follow God’s law. Later, when the child reaches adolescence and now has a greater degree of autonomy, the commitment to remain within the Church becomes a first step in overcoming the pride that often causes teenagers to go astray. The school likewise can act as a counter to the influences of secular culture—provided, of course, that its mission and aims do not contradict what is being taught in the child’s home and Church. An educational system that lacks a moral and religious focus can never provide children with the kind of guidance that they need to navigate their way through the numerous moral challenges that they will face later in life. The ideal education for Augustine is one which provides a clear moral framework that supports rather than undermines the example of the child’s parents and the teachings of the Church.

Although Augustine wrote his *Confessions* over 1600 years ago, the issues with which he was struggling in his own time are not all that different from those facing parents and moral educators today. The question of how much adult guidance is necessary to allow children to develop into responsible adults, while also trying according them some degree of moral autonomy, was a problem in Augustine’s time, just as it is in our own. While one might argue that Augustine errs too far on the side of denying the child his or her own unique moral voice, at least he serves to remind us of the real dangers inherent in non-directive approaches to moral education. Augustine’s optimism as a moral educator rests in his conviction that people of faith, working together, could create the kind of environment that could ultimately support the moral development of young men and women. He believed that this was possible even within a society that frequently worked to undermine the cultivation of authentic religious values. We too should have the confidence to believe that, despite the moral relativism of our own age, it is possible to raise children in accordance with a shared vision of the good life. Indeed, it is vital to do so if the next generation is to prove significantly more virtuous than our own.

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