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Saint Augustine – The Apologist of Love

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Abstract

The concept of love crosses the history of mankind as a red thread, being a topic of reflection for philosophers and theologians, Christian or not, as well as a source of inspiration for virtually any kind of creation: literary, poetical, visual, etc. Thence, the various meanings attributed to the term – from the significations that emerge in such expressions as *love of wisdom*, *love of knowledge*, *love of country* to the acceptations of words such as *Eros*, *philia*, or *agape*. In these circumstances, we see why the universality of love, its various shapes, the final purpose of love, the ways in which it can be misled from its true goals, or its psychological or sociological aspects are just as many landmarks in the exegesis of this concept.

One of the scholars who made very insightful and nuanced analyses of love, which was both the essence and the dominant of his entire life, was Saint Augustine, a theologian, a philosopher, and a well-known writer. Starting from sexual desire, passing through friendship and love for one's neighbour, and culminating in the *love by God* and the *love for God*, the successor of the Apostles Paul and John, while leaning relentlessly on faith, on the one hand, opened his heart and confessed the stages of his own conversion, and, on the other, sought to transform those he addressed into better Christians. As a result, this study aims to exemplify all these forms of love in Saint Augustine's works, to show the path walked from the egocentrism of his passion to unconditional selfless love through self-knowledge, to highlight the relationship established between moral and God's love, to facilitate the accurate understanding of Divine transcendence, and, overall, to show why this theologian was also called the “doctor of love”.

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Introduction

The theme of love reveals the shared interest that philosophers and theologians alike have shown throughout time in this feeling that is both human and divine. The significations of the term *love* are multiple and they have taken various shapes since Ancient times. Thus, going back in time, we see that classical mythology used the word *Eros*, with different meanings in the works of various authors. For instance, in Homer's epic poems, "Eros" means "love" or "desire"; in Hesiod's poem *Theogony*, "Eros", along with Chaos and Gaia, is a primordial element, an abstract principle, a patron of instated unity; among Olympian deities, *Eros* was *the god of love*. Ancient philosophers also talk about love, understood either as a universal force which binds together the primordial elements (Empedocles), or as our soul's longing for the eternal, as man's aspiration to immortality and likeness to the Divine (Plato), or as *philia*, with the meaning of good, closely connected to virtue and absolutely necessary to life, an indispensable condition to the attainment of happiness (Aristotle). With Judaic and Christian theology, when a new relationship with the Divine is established, *love* becomes a commandment and a sacrament. In the *Book of Deuteronomy*, Moses tells people to love God "with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might" (6, 5). This first commandment, reinforced by Jesus the Teacher (Matthew, 22, 37), is followed by another which tells us to love our neighbour as ourselves (22, 39); these commandments actually ask us to reciprocate God's never-ending love for us, men. Thus, filial love for God, brotherly love for our neighbours and love for ourselves become the main forms of Christian love, which, especially in New Testament writings, is also called by the name *agape*. From this moment on, along with the approaches that focused on the new meanings of love brought by Christianity, a series of other perspectives on this topic emerged: *courtly love*, specific to the Middle Ages, *the philosophy of love* elaborated by the neo-Platonists during the Renaissance, and *the psychological aspect* of love specific to the modern era. There are also other interpretations which see love as an unattainable ideal or which condemn all its forms because they are linked to the will to live.

This brief overview of the evolution of *the idea of love* shows that its fundamental meanings have survived, taking various new shapes in time. Of course, explanatory hypothesis with regard to this resilience through time and space are impossible to produce, since love is to be lived, experienced. Yet, we may try to "understand what it means for our human life and our divine life alike" (Philippe, 2011, 7). This is also the path followed by one of the most famous Latin fathers of the Church, Saint Augustine, who became a true authority in philosophy and, mainly, in theology, during the last centuries.

From love of self to love of God

Files The system of thought of Saint Augustine, a philosopher and rhetor, a theologian, a bishop and a lover of "a true and indestructible good" (2006, I, 6) proved to be "so seducing" (Marrou, 1997, 15) that the various themes he approached - the blissful life, order, the soul, the highest Good, the highest Evil, faith, the Holy Trinity, the true religion, the City of God, absolute love - are even today an inexhaustible source for all those who wish to reveal his impact on western thought and his incredible contribution to the richness of religious culture in the centuries after his death. In this study we focus on only one element from the various Augustinian contributions devoted to the knowledge of truth, i.e. the theme of Christian love.

Being a central part of any theological Christian approach, love has been the topic of many writings throughout the centuries. From the authors of the *Gospels* and the *Epistles*, through the Fathers of the Church, and present-day theologians, love has been envisaged as a primordial virtue and a driving force of spiritual life. Yet, among all of them, Saint Augustine delivered one of the most detailed and original analyses of love, similar to some extent to those of some Eastern theologians, such as Dumitru Stăniloae or Paul Evdokimov. After his conversion, the Bishop of Hippo found in Biblical exegesis a starting point for the in-depth and right understanding of the answers to some very important questions, and this also allowed him to propose relevant explanations about the Word that became body, about Jesus the Man, about the mystery of love, and to lead a new life, a life in God. Thus, most of Saint Augustine's writings comprise, to a greater or lesser extent, teachings specific to the *Gospels* and the *Epistles of the Apostles Paul and John*; the educative function of the truths encompassed wherein is excellently highlighted and nuanced.

Owing to his unquenched curiosity, to his pursuit of and passion for the discovery of truth, Saint Augustine not only attempts and succeeds in answering some fundamental questions raised by this theme - how does love start and become fulfilled?, what should we love and what should we not love?, and how to love? - but he also proves to be capable of approaching the complexity of this issue at the highest level. Following Saint Matthew the Apostle's imperative "seek and you will find" (7, 7), "the great master of thought" (Marrou, 1997, 469), after having found out about God, aimed to know what He is so that afterwards he be able to find Him. In this tireless pursuit and determination, his lay and rationalist education was constantly accompanied by the faith, the prayers, the advice, and the efforts of his mother, Monica. She played a major part in young Augustine's initiation into Christian practices and truths, guiding him and accompanying him in his journeys, but also weeping whenever her efforts were vain; thus, ultimately, *the son of some many tears* did not perish (1998, III, 21), as his *Confessions* clearly show.

Through his *Confessions* - a testimony of the journey undertaken from the *love of self to the love of God* - the Christian thinker shares with God and with his fellow mortals the challenges he faced and the mistakes he made; they constitute a "universally valuable human experience" (Ştef, 1994, 134). This work is particularly important because it provides precious insight into Augustine's childhood and youth, into the manner in which he used to envisage and analyse various issues before the "decisive turning point" (Marrou, 1997, 143) in his life, namely, the year of his conversion, 386, and the decision to get baptised, a year later. Thus, for instance, we find out that prayer and the sign of the cross were a common habit in the daily life of Augustine the child. Though small "yet with no small earnestness" (Augustin, 1998, I, 14), he prayed that he might not be beaten at school and he bore the mark of the cross from his "mother's womb" (I, 17). In spite of all this, he was seduced by honours and pleasures, by "things below" and "shadowy loves", by the "muddy concupiscence of the flesh" and the "fog of lustfulness" (II, 1-2), by "stage-plays" (III, 2) and the "the emptiness of popular praise" (IV, 1); all these wanderings led him astray from God. But God had not moved away from Augustine, constantly working to "heal his soul" (2007, III, 3) and guide him on the right path. He takes a first step in this direction when he reads Cicero's dialogue called *Hortensius*; this book - as he confesses - *changed his soul and turned his prayers to God* (1998, III, 7), showing him the path to wisdom. Then, he fell upon the writings of the neo-Platonists, who helped him see the "Light Unchangeable" (VII, 16) and guided him towards the *Epistles* of Saint Paul. Also, his discussions with Simplicianus, the confessor of Bishop Ambrose, with the Bishop himself, "famed through the whole world as one of the best of men" (V, 23), and with Pontitianus, an official in the Emperor's court, guided him towards himself, towards what he really was, so that finally he became able to experience the moment when truth showed itself to him in all clarity.. The story is told in detail in Book VIII of the *Confessions*, but it may be summarised by the voice who prompted him "pick it up, read it; pick it up, read it" and by the excerpt from Saint Paul the Apostle's *Epistle to the Romans* on which his eyes fell when he opened the *Holy Book*: „Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh to fulfil the lusts thereof" (Romans, 13, 13-14). In the same vein, the happiness of having met God is expressed in particularly relevant words. "Belatedly I loved thee, - Augustine confesses - O Beauty so ancient and so new, belatedly I loved thee. For see, thou wast within and I was without, (...). Thou wast with me, but I was not with thee; (...). Thou didst call and cry aloud, and didst force open my deafness" (1998, X, 38). Thus, Monica's words, that God was wherever Augustine was, were confirmed (III, 19). And, as Augustine the sinner confessed his sins, sincerely repented, asked for forgiveness, and restlessly prayed, God poured his love on the sinner, helping him pass from a stage in which *he was not in love as yet, but was in love with love* (III, 1) to one in which he got rid of all his passions and experienced divine Love, absolute Love, the ultimate essence of Being, and the source of everything.

In *Soliloquia*, a work dated back to 387, so, a year after his conversion and his decision to devote his life to God, self-knowledge and the knowledge of God are the central themes in the dialogue carried out by Augustine with his own Reason. Why self-knowledge? A successor of Ancient thought, the philosopher insists on the idea that truth dwells in the conscience of each of us and that it is our duty to find the way to its understanding and discovering. Thus, will and its freedom play a major part in this, an aspect that the thinker emphasised on many other occasions. This also explains every man's responsibility for his own deeds. Otherwise, punishment would be meaningless. In other words, people are free to choose between opposite alternatives and it is only by virtue of the chosen solution that a deed may be judged as good or not. At the same time, each choice helps us not only to know ourselves better but also to change in order to fulfil ourselves so that there may always be agreement between our thoughts, words,

and deeds. Regarding the necessity and the importance of such an agreement, Augustine provides a clear answer in the sermon *On Silence*, written well into his adulthood: “Such as you are, such words you shall speak and such mind you shall show; and such as you shall be in deed, such you shall show yourself in words” (Augustin, 1992, p. 157), an idea which is also present in the *Exposition on Psalm 147*, where we are told that wrong deeds cannot produce good thoughts, “because actions show what has been born in the heart” (Prosper, 2005, LXXXI); the heart is not only a harbour of human feelings, the centre and the symbol of spiritual life, but also “the only one that is able to encompass God himself” (Prelipcean, 2011, 210). Moreover, the heart is also a mirror of our soul’s condition. It is through the heart that we can see ourselves and that God can look at us. And, depending on what He sees - a pure or sinful heart - He judges and rewards those pure in heart, because it is only they who *are blessed and shall see God* (Matthew, 5, 8).

In this context, the fundamental question that Augustine tries to answer refers to the way in which evil may be avoided. The answer provided by Reason is simple: “accomplish” (1992, Book I, I, 1). But how? More precisely, what should we do? First, we should get to know God, “whom every creature capable of loving, loves, whether consciously or unconsciously” (I, 2); reason is of help in this respect. And, as “the eyes of the soul are fit when she [the mind] is pure from every fleshly taint” (VI, 12), first and foremost we must not sin against our body which, in the words of Saint Paul the Apostle, is “a temple of the Holy Spirit” within us (1 Corinthians, 6, 19). Also, we must free ourselves from fleeting desires and improve our sight by trying to reach “eternal things” (Augustin, 2006, II, 9). It is only thus that the gaze of the soul, accompanied by faith, hope, and love, shall become right and accomplished, that is, virtue (1992, Book I, VI, 12), and the vision of God shall follow it. This marriage between rational knowledge and faith is the keystone to the understanding of the manner in which knowledge of God may be achieved; *philosophy and faith are one and the same* (2007, V, 8), i.e. love of wisdom, and ultimately, love of God, because God is Wisdom. This is why faith, a gift from God, a “reciprocity that confirms and affirms the meeting between God’s descending love and man’s ascending love” (Evdokimov, 2012, 30) constitutes the foundation of Christian life itself, preceding the in-depth knowledge and understanding of everything that is.

Addressing God and confessing to Him that “I love Thee alone, Thee alone follow, Thee alone seek, Thee alone am I ready to serve” (1992, Book I, I, 5), Augustine asks Him to guide him and show him what he should love and what he should not love. And this because there are two types of love: a good one and an evil one. There is also a love wherewith we also love that which we ought not to love; and this love is hated by him who loves the love which loves what should be loved. Undoubtedly, both loves can co-exist within one man. But good emerges for man when the love which conduces to our living well grows and makes evil decrease, until our whole life be perfectly healed and transmuted into good (Augustin, 2004, 1.º, XI, 28). From here, the creation of two types of cities, *the earthly* and *the heavenly*, was only a step away. The former is the result of the *love of self* going as far as the *contempt of God* while the latter is born out of the *love of God* going as far as the *contempt of self*. Yet, “if the world accomplishes itself through the Kingdom, this happens because the Kingdom is already among people” (Evdokimov, 2012, 22). There follows that the two cities are not separated by a wall of strict demarcation, as they exist simultaneously here on earth. Obviously, the earthly city is dominated by ambition and fleeting glory; the heavenly city is ruled by eternal charity and glory (Augustin, 2004, 2.º, XIV, 28). And as the earthly city is full of “allurements and illusions”, and few of its dwellers share the “knowledge and the love of God” so that they may be not “deceived either in their love of God or in that of their neighbour” (Prosper, 2005, XVII), the major goal of any Christian should be to become a citizen in the City of God. In order to achieve this, being *Christian* only in name is not enough; fighting vice and practising virtue are crucial.

First, let us have a look at the vices we love and at how we can fight them. According to Augustine, the pleasures of the flesh, riches, and glory are “empty desires” which bring only suffering and lead us to the “gates of hell” (2005, CXXXVI), ideas that he also found while reading Cicero’s dialogue *Hortensius*. Starting from here, in his quality as a true servant of God, the great thinker advocated for the need to not subdue ourselves to pleasures and to not accept sin in our lives. If we accept sin, then we will constantly live with it, turning ourselves into the slaves of pleasures. This is why shunning pleasures is the only way of saving ourselves from their slavery. Moreover, feeling guilty for his former relationship with Adeodatus’s mother, Augustine exaggerates in what regards the relation between a man and a woman, stating that even “the marriage relation” must be kept away (1992, Book I, X, 17). On the other hand, life after the flesh is born out of the vices of the body and also out of those of the soul (2004, 2.º, XIV, 2), and this because, actually, the root of all evils and perversions lies in the soul. So, being at a stage when his

soul was “torn by love and pain for things that are born and pass away” (2007, III, 3) because they are loved with no effort, Augustine seeks the means which would help him distance from things earthly because, as he tells us in one of his sermons, *In Praise of Peace*, when there is “anything material that you love, it is difficult for you not to be jealous of someone who has it” (1992, p. 148). So, how can bodily pleasures be repressed and shunned? The answer is but one: through the “strength of the soul” and the “arm of God” (Prosper, 2005, XVIII). In other words, Augustine emphasises the close relationship established between the sanctity of the soul and that of the body; “while the sanctity of the soul remains even when the body is violated”, the sanctity of the latter is not lost, and, vice-versa, “the sanctity of the body is lost when the sanctity of the soul is violated, though the body itself remains intact” (Augustin, 1.º, I, 18.2). Thus, not only can we remove the root of all evils from our life but we can also prove that we love ourselves, a necessary condition if we want to change for the better the world wherein we live.

What step should be taken next in order to pass from the fleeting to the eternal? As our Lord Jesus Christ Himself tells us, the love for our neighbour (Matthew, 22, 39; Luke, 10, 27). A connecting bridge, a common place for many religions and spiritual traditions, love for one’s neighbour finds its highest expression in Christianity. More precisely, how should we love our neighbour? As ourselves. It is only thus that we may succeed in growing this wonderful gift that we were given by God and that we may not stray from the path of holy love. As a matter of fact, this is also the path followed by *the doctor of love*. Being sociable, Augustine loves people in general, but not their “wanderings” because “it is one to love that which they were made, and another to hate that which they do” (Prosper, 2005, II). From his point of view, friendship was the highest manifestation of love for one’s neighbour. This is why, Augustine says, “I love my friends” (1992, Book I, II, 7), a statement that also emerges in the *Confessions* (1998, VI, 26); they were his “joy and solace” (Ştef, 1994, 280). Among his friends he counts Alypius – probably, his most intimate friend –, Nebridius, Theodorus Manlius, Hermogenianus, Zenobius, Verecundus, and Possidius, but also some personalities such as Romanianus, who helped him continue his studies, Bishop Ambrose, who also baptised him, the aristocrat Symmachus, prefect of Rome, etc. He also loves his peers, all believers, and all those whose purpose is to acquire wisdom and discover the truth. Yet, Augustine warns, we should not forget for one moment that we “do not serve the created more than the creator” (2007, X, 19) and that we should “love men as they should be loved” (1998, IV, 12). So, this is where measure comes to play an important part. Because the final purpose must be pure love and the true religion, we ought to love our neighbour as ourselves but we must not love ourselves more than we love God. This is why pride, greed, revenge, vanity, and ambition, because they prevent us from judging things rightfully and become true obstacles to any crucial change, destroying our soul (1998, I, 29), must not find a place in our lives. They are just as many sins on the path to our happiness.

So, caring for the faith of our neighbours implicitly means caring for our own faith. If they are better, then we will also be better. Moreover, just as God “makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust” (Matthew, 5, 45), we too must also love even our enemy, “as far as he is a man” (Augustin, 2006, I, 41) and to wish the same prosperity to come to him as to us. So we should not answer evil with evil, but, following Our Lord’s advice, if anyone slaps us “on the right cheek, turn to him the other also” (Matthew, 5, 38). Let us love our enemies, pray for them, always bearing in mind the truth that “sin can be punished in love rather than be left unpunished” (Augustin, 2006, I, 63), and that correction is only achieved by love, not by hatred or revenge. If we were to direct our love only towards our friends, then our purpose would be too limited and our love just common. We should care for everyone’s good and happiness. This is why Augustine also loves, with no hesitation, the schismatic (Donatists) and the heretic (Arians, Nestorians), prompting them to make peace because “to make peace is to love” (1992, p. 149) and only those who love will determine others to follow them.

What else should we love? According to one of the most beautiful sermons that Augustine wrote, *In Praise of Peace*, we must love peace because “the true lover of peace also loves his enemies” (1992, p. 147), we must love hospitality (p. 156), we must love justice “because the lover of injustice hates his own soul” (Prosper, 2005, I), we must love good because all that we love will always be with us. Our aim should be the next life, the celestial city, and to this purpose we need to constantly take care that our earthly deeds should not threaten it. So, above all, we should love good and blissful life, because one cannot possess that which one does not love. Loving the supreme good, that is, loving God, the only good “which cannot be vitiated” (Augustin, 2007, XIX, 37) we will be happy. Otherwise, we will be *forever wretched* (2004, 1.º, XII, 1.3). The love of God is the law of fulfilled love and, simultaneously, the supreme virtue which, unlike the other virtues that can be “common to both the good and the

evil”, belongs only to the “righteous and saints” (Prosper, 2005, VII). Therefore, above all we should love the God of the Holy Trinity, “the beginning of any being and existence” (Botoșăneanul, 2005, 211) and the “structure of supreme love” (Stăniloae, 1993, 55). So, on the one hand, *His love is the foundation of creation* (Prelipcean, 2011, 206), and, on the other, the relationship between God the Father, God the Son and the Holy Spirit is the best expression of *absolute love*. Although separable, the three Hypostases are united by love, each having a specific role in the understanding of the manner in which God shows His love of people. God the Father created the world out of love and it is also out of love that He sent God the Son to die on the cross to redeem our sins and offer us salvation. But this love would have been incomplete had it not been spread outside through the Holy Spirit; the latter is the “capability of the love between Father and Son to spread to other subjects and, at the same time, the right of a third to the loving dialogue of the two, a right which He bestows on all created subjects” (Stăniloae, 1993, 63). In other words, the communion of fulfilled eternal love is the Holy Trinity. And we must answer it with love because “a declaration of love is nothing unless it brings an answer of love” (Botoșăneanul, 2005, 213). It is only through love that the possibility to attain a tranquil, eternal, and blissful life becomes real. The privilege of such a life is, of course, the Kingdom of God. Unlike the earthly city, a settlement only for man, the City of God, “absent to those who are ignorant of it” (Augustin, 2006, II, 20), is his true home. Also, Augustine tells us that, after the last judgement, the celestial city will be rewarded with eternal bliss, while the earthly city will be punished with eternal toil. Ultimate bliss is eternal peace, which is the same as eternal life. Peace consists in the union, through faith, with God, and in the respect for the two commandments mentioned herewith. Therefore, in the Kingdom of God, “we shall rest and see, see and love, love and praise. This is what shall be in the end without end. For what other end do we propose to ourselves than to attain to the kingdom of which there is no end?” (2004, 2.º, XXII, 30.5). In other words, absolute love must be understood from its twofold perspective, as the origin and the purpose, the beginning and the endless end of the world, as all starts from love to lead and to become fulfilled in love (Botoșăneanul, 2005, 212). Thus, the praise of Supreme love is not random, as love not only offers a way to understand the world in its completeness but is also “the fulfilling of the law” (Augustin, 2006, II, 45).

So, the path followed by the great theologian went from the awareness of his own egocentric condition, initially subordinated only to the joys of sin, and to his own egoistic pleasure, as they are described in the *Confessions*, to the understanding of fulfilled love, of its purpose and role, summarised in the exclamation “What a good thing is to love!” (1992, p. 149).

Conclusions

That love dominated Augustine’s entire life is a fact proven by various writings and deeds. That which we should and should not love is also clearly depicted in his treatises, homilies, and sermons. The pleasures of the senses, the love of power, money, success, glory - all these are like an empty house. What could we possibly steal from it? Nothing whatsoever. But if the first thought that crosses our mind when we act is true love, then a chain of other thoughts will follow and their core will also be love. The reason behind our deeds must always be love. It is thus that we will be able to control our words and deeds, conflicts will disappear, and we will act righteously in any circumstance. It is also what Augustine did; he was an image of his teachings by the manner in which he led his own life. His sermons are a vivid and convincing example in this respect - spiritual exercises and parables which illustrate perfectly how theory can be corroborated with practice.

So, above all, let us love. “Love and do what you will”, says *the doctor of love*. A wise piece of advice because, by complying with it, our thoughts and behaviour will be the beneficial consequences of this love; as a result, we will also help those around us, teaching them to rediscover what God seeded in each and every one of us and showing them the right path to follow. The supreme virtue and the essence of moral life, love is always accompanied by many other human qualities: faith, justice, kindness, altruism, sincerity, understanding, modesty, good will, tolerance, patience, mercy, parsimony, etc. They protect our soul against *distractions, confusion, hasty judgements and actions*, paving our way towards eternal peace and bliss - the aim of all Christians. Also, let us not forget that we reap only what we sow. As a result, the future is ours, and we are its architects. This is why in its projection and construction we should all use the same language, the language of love.

How should our love be? In one word, as Augustine himself loved his fellow men and God, uninterested and uninterestedly. Good deeds must not be the result of our wish to be praised or to receive material gifts, to be

honoured by our fellow men. It is only the actions of those who love that will achieve their purpose. In other words, following the advice of the great theologian, “whether you hold your peace, through love hold your peace; whether you cry out, through love cry out; whether you correct, through love correct; whether you spare, through love do you spare. Let the root of love be within, of this root can nothing spring but what is good” (Augustin, 2003, VII, 8). Following this path we will be “set free by love” (2006, I, 2).

Moreover, love must prevail over any scientific preoccupation. Of course, science contributes to the advancement of knowledge, of technologies, but does it make us better? Definitely not; quite on the contrary, sometimes its results are used against people because of the increasingly huge gap that lies open between intellectual achievements and moral/responsibility. Spiritual achievement must be the most important. As Saint Paul the Apostle tells us, “knowledge puffs up, but love builds up” (I Corinthians, 8,1). But the two do not necessarily exclude each other. If we love, we may build up even when scientific research is the immediate goal.

To conclude, using Augustine’s own words, love “should be put ahead” (Augustin, 1992, 148). It is the only solution to build a world that is better and more just, and it is also the way to eternal happiness and peace.

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