

# Self-Love as the Development of Neighborly Love through the Prism of God's Love: Augustinian Love through the Lens of Oliver O'Donovan

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**ABSTRACT:** This study examines Augustine's perspective on love through four defining aspects: cosmic love, positive love, rational love and benevolent love. O'Donovan will demonstrate, in dealing with these four aspects of Augustine's thought, how he manages to move from one to the other in the order necessary for the equitable fulfilment of the commandment of love given by Christ to his disciples. These sensible claims have been thoughtfully fulfilled by Oliver O'Donovan, in his eminent book *The Problem of Self-Love in St. Augustine*, where, in one section, he makes an essential systematization of love in Augustine, a systematization we shall present in this study.

**KEYWORDS:** cosmic love, positive love, benevolent love, rational love, neighbour

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## Introduction

It is well known that Augustine's vast and monumental work does not allow itself to be authoritatively rendered to those who do not meet the extremely exacting demands of knowing the work in its entirety and in detail of the chronology-writing relationship overseen by the index of transitional maturity, and of the penetrating force necessary to mirror the originality of his ideas.

These sensible claims have been thoughtfully fulfilled by Oliver O'Donovan, in his eminent book *The Problem of Self-Love in St. Augustine*, where, in one section, he makes an essential systematization of love in Augustine, a systematization that we will present in this study (O'Donovan 2006, 19-36). O'Donovan makes a significant contribution because he has made Augustine's great writings accessible again. A long perspective will be of immeasurable benefit to Christian political reflection as it confronts the challenges of our day. O'Donovan is the most learned and persuasive advocate of a Christian state of English-language writers. His arguments for the Christian state are both subtle and powerful. Although O'Donovan claims that his task is to make politics "morally intelligible," he has been interpreted as offering a defense of Christianity, a vision of politics in which the state is confessionally Christian. O'Donovan's exaggeration on this point is difficult since O'Donovan argues that such a state is only in favor of the possibility of a confessional Christian constitutional order, not the necessity of it. O'Donovan insists that the possibility of a government that is confessionally Christian is legitimate because he says that this is an appropriate response to the government in a society that is confessionally Christian. A Christian society also needs Christian principles. He therefore analyzes love in Augustine's thought through four defining aspects: cosmic love, positive love, rational love and benevolent love. O'Donovan reasons that "in dealing with these four aspects of Augustine's thought we shall see how he manages to move from one to the other in the order necessary for the equitable fulfillment of the commandment of love given by Christ to his disciples" (O'Donovan 2006, 19).

Love is central to Augustine's understanding of God and the human person. It is present in a wide range of issues, including what shapes our identity or drives us to seek truth. It motivates our ethical actions, delineates the social order (i.e., the two cities), and binds us to God. Given love's multifaceted role, it is no wonder that it remains a source of inspiration for commentators, both those who wish to direct the Augustinian perspective on contemporary issues and those who wish to read contemporary issues through Augustine's insights (Pollmann & Otten 2014). Elaborating on the latter trajectory, Anders Nygren argues in his much debated book, *Agape and Eros*, that Augustine continued his adherence to a platonic notion of eros that undermines both his own concept and a broad concept of Christian agape (Nygren 2019, 253-257). In Nygren's reading, eros, which is self-fulfilling love originating in the soul's movement

towards God, stops with agape, which is self-denial, love originating in God and condescending to us through Christ's sacrifice.

Before doing so, however, there are a few points to remember as we move forward. First, Augustine relies on three main Latin words to describe love: *amor*, *caritas* and *dilectio*. Scholars have sometimes sought to find trends in the use of these terms, trying to relate them to good and bad forms of love or to place them within contemporary debates (e.g., *eros vs. agape*). We need to be wary of such efforts, however, as Augustine's terminology can be loose and flexible. Sometimes Augustine explicitly draws attention to this tendency. For example, in *The City of God*, 14.7, he argues that all three Latin words *amor*, *caritas*, and *dilectio*, following their indiscriminate use in Scripture, can designate good and bad forms of love and have no fixed meaning. This does not mean that Augustine fails to distinguish between good and bad love or between human (*eros*) and divine (*agape*) love. But at least as far as human love is concerned, he tends to differentiate it, not by precise terminological categories, but rather on the basis of the moral and immoral ways in which we apply our love to the various objects within our lives.

Second, one of the underappreciated points for examinations of Augustine's writings is the extent to which his understanding of love depends on developments in his understanding of God and the human person. It is not enough simply to speak of "divine love." It is also necessary to consider the Trinitarian doctrine that comes to shape his view of divine love. Similarly, one cannot simply refer to "human love." One must also consider Augustine's evolving understanding of the human self, which is at least for a modern audience somewhat problematic because it does not have a Latin word for "self" (Cavadini 2007, 119–132). Rather than a fixed concept, terminologically speaking, it is based on a variety of less precise pronouns and terms designating the human person. This should alert us to the difficulties the contemporary reader faces when faced with the challenge of perceiving the Augustinian "self" through a post-Cartesian, post-Freudian lens (Menn 1998, 18). It is extremely important to understand exactly what this "self" is that Augustine supposedly recommends as the central element of our love for God.

## 1. Cosmic love

Cosmic love, in the form of the two commandments comprising law and prophecy, is closely related to the three philosophical divisions of the Stoics

(natural philosophy, moral philosophy and logic) (Rotaru 2005, 185-190). "It is evident that Augustine believed that love is firmly rooted in the fundamental reality of the cosmos ... he sees love as a natural law of the universe" (O'Donovan 2006, 19). In *The City of God*, Augustine writes the following: "anyone who gives even moderate attention to the human problem and to our common nature will recognize that if there is no man who does not desire to be happy, there is also no man who does not desire peace. For even those who wage war desire nothing but victory, the desire, so to speak, to obtain peace together with glory. In what else would victory consist if not in conquering those who resist us? And when that is achieved, there will be peace. There is, then, a desire for peace in those who wage war even as they find pleasure in the exercise of their warlike nature in commandments and battles. For every man seeks peace by waging war, but no man seeks war by waging peace. For even those who interrupt the peace in which they live do not hate peace, but only wish it to change into a peace in which they can better accommodate themselves" (Augustin 2015, 78).

Looking, among other things, at this passage, O'Donovan is of the opinion that one can see an illustration of cosmic love, here in the form of the love of peace characteristic of human nature. He sees different phenomena that are summed up in the natural law of love: "a physical phenomenon, which consists in the continual search for equilibrium, is compared with a political phenomenon, in which people form communities even in the way of overthrowing each other, and both are compared with the anthropological phenomenon, in which people do not want to die and will fight to preserve their lives. Behind all this is discerned the universal tendency towards pax, a word that can be translated as stability, or equilibrium, which will not take place apart from the pursuit, through justice, of perfect happiness in the City of God" (O'Donovan 2006, 20).

After observing from Augustine's words that people can not love peace, but instead can love an unjust peace, he reasons that "being obliged to love a certain peace is argued to be in the power of loving that peace. And so we see that the distinction between natural necessity and moral obligation is not completely eroded, only that one is used to reinforce the other. If such a natural law exists to be the basis of human morality, the applications must be distinct. Each element of the natural universe loves the kind of peace that is intended for it (O'Donovan 2006, 20).

O'Donovan directs us, among other things, to the famous passage from *Confessions*: "To this place our love lifts us up, and your good Spirit lifts our humility from the gates of death. In your goodness we have peace. By its weight, the body tends to a place of its own. Weight does not only pull towards those below, but towards its own place. The fire rises up, the stone falls down. All are actuated by their own weights, all tend towards their own places. Oil poured under water rises above water, and water poured over oil sinks under oil. All are carried by their own weights, all seek their own places. Those that have been worse made are seething with restlessness; as soon as they are well ordered, they are at peace. My weight is my love; I am carried by them wherever I am carried. By Thy gift we are kindled and carried up, we begin to kindle and start" (Augustin 2018, 56).

This passage contributes to the critic's conclusion that, metaphysically speaking, God's love is a movement of the will towards the final cause. But in the paradise of this conception the serpent of sin inexplicably creeps in. This being the case, Augustine attempts a reconciliation in *De libero arbitrio*, III. 1. 2., where, making an analysis of two significant elements (the will and a stone), he makes a distinction and a similarity between them: the distinction is that the movement of the stone is natural, and the movement of the will is voluntary, and the similarity is that each of them exists without any "external propulsive force". Then, the question of will is difficult to elucidate. Finally, O'Donovan says: "the solution lies in an order of love. But it proved difficult for Augustine to be adequate. The concept of love, as a cosmic necessity, was nowhere allowed to unfold, and so, on the other side of the classical tradition, he turned to supplement it by establishing an order of love in the free choice of the subject" (O'Donovan 2006, 21).

## 2. Positive love

Positive love is a love in which Augustine tries to capture verbs taken from Cicero (to desire, to seek), verbs which together with the verbs to gain, to acquire, represent man's relationship with the good in the Eudemonist tradition. This synonymic metamorphosis "gives the idea of love a new meaning as the target of the subjective conception of the good, and at the same time unites this positivist teleology with Plotinian cosmic teleology in an obvious complementarity" (O'Donovan 2006, 24).

Love thus takes on new positive connotations without losing its earlier cosmic ones. Naturally this identification of love with the pursuit of subjective ends is supported by another modification Augustine makes to the tradition: the transformation of "finis bonorum from being the status of a subject to being a transcendent object of attention, God Himself" (O'Donovan 2006, 24).

From here, and from taking the ordering of love from the Eudemonist tradition, which distinguishes between "ends" and "means", Augustine develops his ideas around the verbs *uti* (to use) and *frui* (to enjoy), ideas that we will consider in another section, and at the end of the analysis. O'Donovan says that "the only positive love that remains is that by which a man pursues his final end, his finis bonorum" (O'Donovan 2006, 24).

### 3. Rational love

Rational love is frequently stifled by Augustine's reason in his mature years. This rational love is a love which, while keeping its distance, succeeds in creating a contact through an admiring touch; the distance between subject and object is abrogated in the direction of a dimension which opens itself to empathic movements. "Let us admire them! Let us praise them! Let us love them!" (Sermo 284. 3) are some of Augustine's words in which O'Donovan notes the synonymy of this love.

He says: "The response of the lover towards the object of his admiration is delectatio: "Nothing can constitute an object of love unless it produces pleasure." (Sermo 159. 3) But the basis of this pleasure is rational. The more the object is known, the more it is loved; some may not find pleasure in something they perceive deformed, but the moment the value is known in a proper way, it will be allowed to be loved. But this rational pleasure is by no means purely passive, since it evokes conformity between the subject and the good that constitutes the object of his love. "The more you love someone", Augustine remarks in passing, "the more you will take him as a model for your actions" (Ephesians 45:1), (O'Donovan 2006, 24-25).

In this situation, however, there is no place for loving the wicked, a conclusion which is obviously unacceptable to those who believe in God's love for sinners and in the duty of Christians to love their enemies. Augustine finds a way to avoid these conclusions. He can go on to speak of the rational love of the unworthy by admitting the possibility of loving certain aspects of the person. This also allows for right and wrong love of values. O'Donovan

shows that rational love finds a very important place in Augustine's thought (Rotaru 2013, 104-108) because through it, he can restore coherence and flexibility in the "ordering" of love.

#### 4. Benevolent love

Benevolent love, strictly between man and man, is the love that regards man on the basis of a positive futuristic orientation. Man, thanks to this love he receives, is directed in a parallelism with the passage of time towards the attainment of his destined fullness. It is the love that gives credit, the love that invests with hope, the virtuality that materializes the potentiality of becoming. Augustine says: "every form of affection, my beloved brothers, shows that there is a certain good will towards those who are loved. But this is not how we should cherish people (...), so this is not how we should love people, as we hear the foodies say: "I like thrushes." Then you ask: "But why do you like them?" The glutton likes thrushes so that he can kill and eat them, and he says he loves them, but he loves them precisely so that they are no more, so that he can destroy them. And everything we like for food, we "love" in this way, so that it may be eaten, and we may feed ourselves. Is it thus that people are to be loved as if they were to be destroyed? But there is a certain kind of friendship, accompanied by goodwill, which consists in our being helpful to those we love." (Augustin 2003, 35-37).

Looking at these words O'Donovan argues that "if goodwill cannot be shown to God and cannot be shown to objects used by man, this is, as the same passage makes clear, the feature of all loving relationships between man and man. This does not constitute a genre of human love, but a partial analysis of all human love. Hence the importance of getting rid of empirical conditions, so that the actual realizations of benevolence and perception, as Augustine sometimes does, between the attitude, *benevolentia*, and the act itself, *beneficentia*. This again emphasizes the independence of the beloved from the lover. I will have to bring fulfillment to my brother's existence, even if he does not fulfill me and, most likely, will not ask for my help" (O'Donovan 2006, 33-34).

Benevolent love necessarily implies that its manifestation is rooted in two substantial reasons: man must be brought to God, and man must be loved for what he is. As regards the first reason, we must understand that it is not the result of human endeavours. The appearance that the lover, by his limited creative powers, is obliged to act in profiling the goal to be assimilated by the

beloved, is opposed to the evidence that the goal, created and bestowed by the Transcendent, is only to be discovered.

The beloved's mission exists, and the lover has only to recognize it and help the beloved to recognize himself in it; and this mission, Augustine emphasizes, is that the lover allows himself to be used to facilitate the beloved's reaching the absolute Love, God. Augustine, does not advocate the one-sidedness of this goal but its fundamentality. Only this affinity of the object with this goal gives a full certainty to the loving subject. On the right of the second reason, that man is to be loved for what he is himself, O'Donovan prohibits (supports) the distinction between the end expressed in benevolent love and the ulterior end. The lover does not love the fulfillment of the end in place of the one who receives the love. The author sees here "an echo of the repudiation with which Cicero greeted utility as a reason for friendship, and we can understand those occasional expressions which seem to restrict true love, in its entirety, to love aimed at the object for its own sake.

In the context of benevolent love such a restriction is understood as a way of excluding further ministry; the opponent of "for his own sake" at this point is not "for God's sake" but "for personal advantage." It follows that people are to be loved either because they are good or because they can become good. An example from Augustine's writings might be this: "But if we must love those who are not yet righteous, in order that they may become so, how much more fervently must you love the righteous" (Augustin 2002, 17).

## 5. Love your neighbor

In the same way that the path of humility is about the liberation and elevation of the individual, Augustine's statement that love of neighbor flows through our love for God is about the elevation and perfection of the neighbor. As with his recommendations about humility, some modern commentators worry that he is arguing that our love of neighbor must flow through God, and that this aspect brings neighbor into a utilitarian role that violates the integrity of neighbor. In the *Doctrina Christiana*, Augustine distinguishes between two forms of love: *frui* is love that has as its ultimate goal the object of its desire, and *uti* is a purposeful love that loves the object for a greater purpose. Augustine argues that *frui* should only be directed towards God and that we should love everything else, including our neighbour of the *uti* type. The problem is that this seems to reduce our love of neighbor to just a



utilitarian (means-ends) formula in which neighbor becomes nothing more than a way for us to find divine love. This was not Augustine's aim and desire, but rather his emphasis on prioritizing and growing in love of God, which we need to distinguish from other forms of human love.

Augustine's framing is well-intentioned, as is the variety of modern critics who protest. The latter, however, err in their criticism, which, of course, owes as much in itself to Augustine's terminology as anything else. This is unfortunate because Augustine actually shares many of the same concerns as his modern critics the way his model is intended to preserve and uplift the integrity of the neighbor.

To understand Augustine's recommendation of how one's neighbor should be loved, we must turn again to his conception of the human self. To the extent that the authentic self exists in and through divine love, I cannot but truly love my neighbor when I refer to my love of neighbor through divine love. If my love of neighbor originates in me apart from God, or fails to return from neighbor to God, it leads to a similar ecteny of sins that arise when I choose to love myself apart from God (Rotaru 2010, 7).

Beyond this, there is also a Trinitarian basis for Augustine's claim that true love of neighbor must run through God. As we have seen, genuine love for Augustine is not an impersonal force or an abstract metaphysical principle - it is not rooted in an emanation from the One - but rather is the free and personal act of the Trinitarian God. "In particular, it is the presence of the Spirit in the soul. Our love of neighbor, then, if it is genuine love, is also the presence of the Spirit moving through us to neighbor and so will always return to God because it is God" (O'Donovan 1994, 129).

## **6. Conclusion**

The conclusion of Oliver O'Donovan's exposition is: "the choice of means to ends, the admiration of what is good in one's neighbour, the pursuit of the true welfare of one's neighbour, are all subjective aspects of a single movement of the soul, reflecting the main cosmic movement, the return of created beings to their source and the highest good" (O'Donovan, 2006, 36). Here we can see the transcendental aspect of changing the foundation of love. The more intimate our love is with God, the more it becomes effective love for our human partners in public social life. The forms of Augustinian love, through the lens imposed by O'Donovan, are transformative forms that maintain a

close connection between *kardia* (heart) and *skepsi* (thought), between *phoni* (voice) and *praxis* (practice).

Usually the structural complexity is directly proportional to the size of the object concerned. As for the universe of love, in all its welcome breadth and richness of variation, a concept that Augustine miniaturises as far as possible in a form that is often overwhelmingly enthusiastic for his readers, it gives rise to a guiding structuring, a form of human social direction in which the human, a participant in public life, transforms himself from actor to creator. He is the person who creates love around him through forms of relational existence. He not only looks at the cosmos as a visual existence but he is captured by its greatness through a form of existential love, a love that allows him to find himself in the other neighbour who, even far away, coexists closely through the existence of love.

The whole conceptual outline of love presented above is permeated by an order, the "order of love", which, through its practice, becomes the fuel that transforms the public space, making it the fruit of a continuous love of the human, and at the same time presenting the bond that makes this love possible, and this factor of profound unity is the love of God.

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