

## CHAPTER 5 – A PROBLEM WITH AUGUSTINE’S ARGUMENT

### 5.1 INTRODUCTION

In Chapter One, I explained the following argument from Augustine’s *De doctrina christiana*:

- (1) The degree to which we love something should be proportional to the value it has.
- (2) Every person has equal value.
- (3) Therefore, we should love all people equally.

After engaging two responses to the argument, I there concluded that although the argument does not succeed—premise (1) seems to have clear counterexamples—it seems difficult to say exactly what is wrong with it. As a result, the following important question emerged: if the degree to which we love something need not be proportional to the value it has, what, exactly, *is* the correct relation between love and value? The failure of Augustine’s argument also raised a second, perhaps related question: if love need not be equal, why, exactly, should we love some people more than others?

Thus far in the dissertation I have deferred answers to these questions in order to lay the groundwork necessary to answer them properly. Specifically, in Chapters Two and Three I gave an account of love and in Chapter Four I gave a pluralistic account of love's proper grounds—those features in response to which love properly arises or is sustained. With these accounts in hand, I am now, finally, in a position to address the two questions raised in Chapter One, which has been the central aim of the dissertation.

In Chapter Five, then, I will try to point out more clearly what is wrong with Augustine's argument and thereby begin to articulate the proper relation between love and value. My thesis will be that Augustine's premise (1) assumes too narrow a view of the kind of value to which love for people is properly a response. The premise seems to assume that love should be a response *only* to the value of a person as such when, in fact, as argued in Chapter Four, love may also quite properly be a response to the value of certain qualities of a person (e.g., wit, talent, virtue, etc.), or to the value of certain relationships (e.g., friendships and familial or romantic relationships). While this problem with premise (1) illuminates something of the proper connection between love and value, it leaves open the question of whether love should be *proportional* to value, as Augustine suggests in premise (1), even if we broaden the kinds of value in view. I will leave discussion of this aspect of the relation between love and value for subsequent chapters (Six and Seven). Let us begin, then, by considering what is wrong with Augustine's argument.

## **5.2 LOVE AND KINDS OF VALUE**

Recall from Chapter One that premise (1) of Augustine's argument—"the degree to which we love something should be proportional to the value it has"—assumes that love is properly a response to the value possessed by an object as such, i.e., the value it possesses

according to its nature. So, according to Augustine, love for a human being should be a response to the value she possesses as a human being. It is because of this assumption that Augustine thinks that we should love things to a greater degree that possess such nature-value in greater degree (e.g., God more than people) and that we should love equally things that possess it to an equal degree (e.g., we should love all people equally).

However, if my argument in Chapter Four is correct, it should now be clear that love is properly a response to a range of kinds of value, not merely to the value an object possesses according to its nature. Recall that in Chapter Four I gave an account of love's proper grounds—those features the apprehension of which properly produces or sustains love, or, less precisely, those features to which love is properly a response. There I argued that love for a person may properly be a response to certain of his qualities (such as beauty, virtue, wit, or talent), to a relationship that the lover bears to him (such as a friendship, or a familial or romantic relationship), or to his mere humanity (as in the case of love for a stranger). Furthermore, I suggested, following Aquinas, that these features are only proper grounds of love insofar as they are valuable. Thus, the picture emerging from Chapter Four was that love may properly be a response to a range of different kinds of value.

To be sure, the case in which love is a response to the value of a person's mere humanity fits well with Augustine's assumption. To love in response to that value amounts to the same thing as loving in response to the value the person possesses by nature. But, the other cases—love as a response to valuable qualities or relationships—seem not to fit Augustine's picture. In those cases, love is properly a response to instantiations of value that do not necessarily constitute the value of the person as such. That a person exhibits the valuable qualities of beauty, virtue, wit, or talent to a greater degree than another person does not make the first more valuable *as a person* than the second. Similarly, the value of a special relationship that your

beloved has to you does not make him more valuable *as a person* than anyone else. Thus, if love may properly be a response to such valuable features as qualities and relationships, it seems Augustine is wrong to assume (in premise [1]) that love should be a response only to the value of a person as such.

The way I have put the point so far suggests that love need not be a response to value possessed by a person, but rather that it may be a response to value inhering in qualities or relationships. However, it may strike some that this way of putting it is not quite right. For example, it might be suggested that a person's good qualities or valuable relationship to someone are features in virtue of which the person himself is made valuable in some sense. For example, to say that a person is beautiful or virtuous might be understood as saying that he has a certain aesthetic value or character value. Similarly, to say that one person has a valuable relationship to you might be understood as saying that she has a certain relational value to you. On this view, each feature that I argued may serve as a proper ground of love would be understood as a feature in virtue of which the relevant person is made valuable in some distinct and corresponding sense of value. This way of putting things would be similar to Augustine's distinction—which I explained in Chapter One—between the value scales of nature, utility, and justice. These scales of value identify three different kinds of value that an object may have. For example, a person may have a certain nature-value simply in virtue of being human, a certain use-value in virtue of his ability to satisfy the needs and desires of other humans (e.g., as a servant may), and a certain justice- or character-value owing to his virtue (e.g., whether courage, temperance, wisdom, justice, etc.). Thus, according to Augustine, people may possess a range of different kinds of value, not merely the value owing to their human nature.

On this different construal, the problem I am suggesting with Augustine's argument would be that Augustine assumes love should only be a response to the nature-value of a person

when in fact it may quite properly be a response to someone's use-value or character-value. Moreover, on this construal, there would also be a problem with Augustine's premise (2), which claims that every person has equal value. Indeed, it seems quite obvious that some people are more useful than others and that some are more virtuous than others, and thus that not everyone possesses equal value of every kind. I take it that this alternative way of putting things voices essentially the same objection to Augustine's argument noted at first, and thus I take no issue with it. Either formulation will do for my purposes. The basic problem is that Augustine takes too narrow a view of the kinds of value to which love may properly be a response, whether we understand that value to inhere in qualities, relationships, or people.

### 5.3 AN AUGUSTINIAN REPLY: SELFISH LOVE

A proponent of Augustine's argument would doubtless reply to the objection I have raised. The following passage from *De vera religione* (partially quoted in Section 1.9) suggests a basic shape for such a reply:

If a person were to love another not as himself but as a beast of burden, or as the baths, or as a gaudy or garrulous bird, that is for some temporal pleasure or advantage he hoped to derive, he must serve not a person but, what is much worse, a foul and detestable vice, in that he does not love the person as a person ought to be loved... A human being is not to be loved by people even as brothers after the flesh are loved, or sons, or wives, or kinsfolk, or relatives, or fellow citizens... Let no one think that is inhuman. It is more inhuman to love someone because he is your son and not because he is a human, that is, not to love that in him which belongs to God, but to love that which belongs to yourself. What marvel if he who loves his private advantage and not the commonweal does not obtain a kingdom?<sup>243</sup>

As it pertains to my objection, Augustine's basic idea in this passage is that when we love in response to qualities such as beauty, wit, or talent, or in response to friendships, familial relationships, romantic relationships, or even common citizenship, our love is essentially seeking after "temporal pleasure," or our own "private advantage." In the language of Chapter One,

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<sup>243</sup> Augustine, *De vera religione*, 87-88. Translation adapted from Augustine, "Of True Religion (*De Vera Religione*)," 270.

Augustine would call all such loves instances of use-love, i.e., love in response to use-value, since it is essentially aimed at satisfying certain needs or desires of the lover. Moreover, Augustine would likely suggest that our loving beneficence—i.e., the activity deriving from our tendency of will toward the good of the beloved—would be ill-motivated. If we love someone, then we should seek his good not because it serves our own interests to do so, but rather because we care about the welfare of the beloved itself. Part of Augustine’s point, then, might be that use-love infects our beneficence with the wrong motives. In that case we “serve not a man but... a foul and detestable vice,” since our motive is not to serve the other person but rather to serve ourselves. As a result, the sort of use-love I deem appropriate in my objection—i.e., love that is a response to qualities and relationships—hardly seems noble or appropriate. Instead, Augustine might say, we should love a person in virtue of his human nature and thereby avoid the selfishness of use-love.<sup>244</sup>

#### 5.4 COUNTER-REPLIES

Augustine seems correct that pleasure and personal advantage typically figure in our assessment of the value of operative grounds of love like beauty, wit, virtue, talent, and special relationships. When such features serve as operative grounds of love, more often than not they do bring us pleasure or advantage, this fact figures in our assessment that the features are valuable, this fact is part of what our love is a response to, and thus our love is self-regarding to some extent. The beauty, wit, or talent of our romantic partner brings us pleasure and so we find the quality to be good. Similarly, our friendship or spousal relationship is both pleasurable and advantageous to us, and so we find it to be good.

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<sup>244</sup> I am indebted to Bonnie Kent for the basic shape of this reply, and for pointing me to *De vera religione* as a source of this view. Importantly, although Augustine articulated this kind of view in *De vera religione*—one of his early works (389-390 CE)—it seems that he abandoned it toward the end of his writing career. Specifically, it seems that he retracted the view that we should not love family members in virtue of their familial relationships to us. See his *Retractiones* Book I, 12.8.

However, at least with respect to the relevant pleasures, it seems Augustine's picture is somewhat distorted. My worry is that Augustine puts too much distance between the pleasure and the quality or relationship in which we find such pleasure. It is not as though the lover is on a general hunt for pleasure and finds the beloved's qualities or her relationship to him merely to be a convenient means of securing such pleasure. In other words, in most cases where pleasurable qualities or relationships are operative grounds of love, it is not as though the lover is simply *using* the beloved (and his qualities and their relationship) for pleasure, viewing the qualities and the relationship as mere instrumental goods.<sup>245</sup> Indeed, the qualities, the relationship, and the pleasure a lover takes in them seem more bound up together than this picture allows. It seems rather that the pleasure contributes to the lover's assessment that the quality or relationship is non-instrumentally good, i.e., good because of what it is and not because of what it gets for the lover. While pleasure surely figures in the lover's assessment of the qualities and relationship, the lover is typically focused on the qualities and the relationship themselves and not the resulting pleasure.

Moreover, what is so wrong with pleasure or advantage being at the root of love? As I suggested in Chapter Four, in many cases the beloved typically *wants* the lover to take pleasure in him. Consider, first, the case of taking pleasure in certain qualities of the beloved. What beautiful, witty, or talented person hopes his romantic partner or friend takes no pleasure in these good qualities? Of course, there are limits to this desire: as noted in Chapter Four, if, after 30 years of marriage, all your spouse could see in you was your wit you might think her love was shallow. But, such cases are atypical. As suggested in Chapter Four, cases of committed long-term love typically exhibit many operative grounds, only some of which are pleasurable qualities like beauty, wit, or talent. Thus, I see no reason to worry if qualities like beauty, wit, or talent are part of the story.

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<sup>245</sup> I do not deny that there could be such cases, just that they are necessary or typical.

The case of seeking the pleasures or advantages of relationships also need not raise worries. Again, what friend, lover, or family-member would take offense at the fact that someone who loves him does so, in part, in virtue of how enjoyable they find their relationship? Do we not *want* our friends, lovers, and family-members to take pleasure in our relationships with them? The idea that our friends, lovers, or family members would find advantage in us seems equally inoffensive. The truth is, it is part of human nature to need others. This is just part of what it is to be social animals with limited resources. Indeed, it seems humans need close relationships themselves: without them, we fail to develop and flourish. Given this fact, why should I take offense when someone finds our relationship useful or advantageous, and when that fact figures in her love for me? Again, there may be limits here: we typically hope that those who love us also do so in virtue of features they admire about us, or that they take pleasure in, and not merely in virtue of our use to them. Nevertheless, that the advantage of a relationship figures among the operative grounds of love seems unproblematic.

As a final counter to Augustine's reply, it seems incorrect that our motives in loving action are necessarily self-regarding if self-regarding pleasure or advantage figures in our assessment of love's operative grounds. The key point here is that the operative grounds of love are typically distinct from the lover's motives in loving action.<sup>246</sup> Consider a person's love for her friend. While the operative ground of her love may be the value of certain qualities of the friend and of the relationship she has to him—the value of both of which may be related to the fact that she finds them pleasurable—when her friend needs something, it is not necessarily the case that she acts to provide it in order to receive pleasure. Rather, if the friendship is healthy, her motive

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<sup>246</sup> I say "typically" because, as Niko Kolodny has pointed out, there seem to be cases in which the operative ground of love is also one's motive in loving action. For example, suppose the operative ground of your love for a friend is your valuable relationship to him. In a case where you are not sure how you should act toward him, after some deliberation your motive for action might be that you think this is what a friend ought to do. In other words, the relationship also turns out to be the motive, in some sense. See Kolodny, "Love as Valuing a Relationship," 161. One might quibble that the operative ground of love, in this case, is the *specific* relationship between the two friends while the motive is the *ideal* of friendship. However, perhaps the case could be modified to address this issue.

is, more than likely, simply to further her friend's good. This motive need not be compromised by the fact that the operative ground of her love is pleasurable qualities and a pleasurable relationship. Similarly, if the operative ground of a child's love for her parent is the relationship she has to the parent—in which the child sees considerable personal advantage—it does not follow that the child's motives in loving action must be her own personal advantage. Rather, again, the child's motive could still be her parent's good. This is because, in most cases, the operative grounds of love are one thing while the motives of loving action are another.

## 5.5 CONCLUSION

I conclude, then, that the Augustinian reply need not worry us. It seems perfectly appropriate for qualities and relationships that lovers find both pleasurable and advantageous to serve as operative grounds of love. The upshot is that part of the problem with Augustine's argument is now evident: the argument assumes that love should be a response to the value of an object when in fact love may quite properly be a response to the value of certain qualities of the object, or of a relationship to the object, neither of which necessarily constitute the value of the object itself. Or, put another way, love may properly be a response to a range of kinds of value possessed by the object (e.g., relational value, character value, etc.) and not merely the kind of value Augustine has in mind—value according to nature.

This problem with Augustine's argument also makes clear part of the story of the proper relation between love and value. However, much of that story remains opaque. In particular, what are we to make of Augustine's suggestion in premise (1) that the degree of one's love should be *proportional* to the relevant value? Even if love may properly be a response to other kinds of value—e.g., the value of qualities or relationships—should it be proportional to such value? My next aims will be to address this question and to explain why we should love some

people more than others. However, in order to do so I will need to lay further groundwork. In particular, I will need to say more about the kinds of relationships to which love may properly be a response and the value that they exhibit. I will take up this task in Chapter Six.