

Is Love Transcendent in Augustine's Confessions?

Love is clearly a motivating force in Augustine's *Confessions*. It is love, in one form or another, that repeatedly revolutionizes Augustine's life as he moves from Africa to Rome and back again. *Pondus meum amor meus*, as he puts it Book XIII: "My love is my weight."ⁱ Love it is that draws him this way and that, turning him about through the various conversions that give shape to his narrative. But, for all that, is Augustinian love truly transcendent in the *Confessions*? Or could it be the case that the force of love is something more immanent? Perhaps it is precisely this immanence, rather than any proper transcendence, that gives love its force in the *Confessions*.

There are a number of possible moments of transcendence in the *Confessions*, not the least of which are the attempts at ascent we find in Books VII and Book IX. In Book VII, Augustine's search for transcendence seems to be motivated primarily by a desire to find some practical application for teachings he found in the *libri Platonicorum*. If the weight of love can still be seen in such a passage, it would have to be a kind of intellectual *eros* or, to stick with the Latin, an *amor mentis* that (if left unchecked) could veer dangerously close to *curiositas* or *concupiscentia oculorum*, the anxious prying of desiring eyes. What Augustine finds, of course, is that this kind of intellectual passion only takes you so far. For now, his attempt can only be frustrated. That does not make his effort pointless, but it does remind us that this kind of ascent stops short of transcendence.

The attempt at transcendence we find in Book IX, however, is driven even more explicitly by love. There, at Ostia, Augustine and Monica sat by the window and talked. Their familial love welling up from a deeper font of divine love, they stopped to sip from that fountain

with the mouths of their hearts (*ore cordis*).ⁱⁱ But even then, can we say that their love brought them transcendence in the here and now? Moving beyond speech, they passed through so many levels of the cosmos and further past the layers of their own minds. At long last, with the utmost effort of their hearts (*toto ictu cordis*) they seemed to touch upon wisdom, if only a little bit (*modice*, writes Augustine), before being bounced back down into the world of immanence.ⁱⁱⁱ

Was this transcendence? It remains difficult to say. So much is riding on Augustine's use of *modice*. How 'moderate' was their attainment of wisdom in that moment? What measure or *modus* of wisdom was reached? The outcome of Ostia should prove decisive for the question of whether or not love is indeed capable of this-worldly transcendence in the *Confessions*.

In the end, Augustine would probably have us wait for the eschaton before claiming to have achieved too much transcendence. If Augustinian love is indeed transcendent, then ultimately we might have to appreciate it in its eschatological dimension. When faith has been proven and hope fulfilled, love will remain, binding the redeemed city of God together in a deeper and more abiding form of social love than can be found on this side of the eschaton. Yet at that point, would it make any more sense to speak of transcendence? Or would love as found in something like the beatific vision simply be another form of immanence, far closer and more intimate to us than the apparent immanence of our lives in this *saeculum*? If we attend closely to this tension between transcendence and immanence, then a closer look at this supposed moment of ascent in the *Confessions* might allow us to better appreciate the revolutionary potential of Augustinian love—not only as a potential passageway to something beyond, but also as a motive force in these present lives we live.

End-Notes

ⁱ Augustine, *Confessions*, XIII. ix.

ⁱⁱ *Conf.* IX. 10.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Conf.* IX. 10. There are premonitory echoes of Gregory the Great's *reverberatio* throughout these passages.