

Plotinus and St. Augustine: Love as Unifier, Love as Triunifier

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ABSTRACT • Love is, on the top-level of thinking, relevant as unifier and as triunifier. Love structures, directs, unifies. This is so on many levels, as is obvious at least from and since the development of the ladder of love in Plato's *Symposium* (210a–212a). Love in the end—beyond all subordinate efforts at unification—unites with or at least points to our origin. It is the inbuilt *redditus*-, *anamnesis*-, recollection-structure in being, the return of the lost son. So love generally makes us transcend ourselves. It is the transcending movement of soul and mind. Love also intrinsically differentiates. It can at least be seen in strong examples and actualisations of love that the *relata*—lover and beloved—are not being lost and absorbed in a sentimental love-sauce or soup, but intensified in their being. If this is so, it seems at least thinkable that there is an instance of so perfect love that in it lover, love and beloved are three and one. Love is then the inner life of the most perfect mind. The first of these two systematic points—love as transcending—is in this paper developed with the pagan Platonic tradition, culminating for our purposes in Plotinus' theory of the *nous eron* (*Ennead* VI 7). The same movement within Christian thinking is spelled out in looking at the early St. Augustine's thinking of love. This development can be seen as being typically there in the *De quaestione octoginta-tribus* q. 35 and as being resumed and summed up in *Confessiones* XIII 9. The second point—love as intrinsically differentiating—is here arrived at with aspects of *De Trinitate* IX 1. It can perhaps be seen that 'modifications' in the thinking of love form a not inconsiderable part of the turn from pagan to Christian Neoplatonism.

KEYWORDS • Plotinus, St. Augustine, Love, Unification, Oneness, Trinity.

Love as Unifier 1: Plato and Plotinus

First, as always in thinking, it is necessary to start to think. With this and very soon very many things change, and quickly at that. This starts with the first great thinkers of first origins, Anaximander, Xenophanes, Anaxagoras, Heraclitus, especially of course Parmenides.¹ And it culminates in Plato.

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¹ See the wonderful first history of metaphysics: Plato, *The Sophist* 242–245.

What these thinkers do, is this: Thinking, completely radicalized, universalized, without any limits outside. What results, is therefore necessarily πρώτη φιλοσοφία, so principle theory respectively origin metaphysics.

Metaphysics is thinking of last thoughts that intend to grasp the whole of what is at all via spelling out this whole's last and first cause or origin.

Now Plato—and Plotinus in his wake—unfolds origin metaphysics as unity metaphysics, as henology in which his theory of being as being, so his ontology is grounded.

And this systematically fundamental relation reflects reality itself: The drive into, the love for the oneness of their origin is the true essence of things.

The principle of principles therefore is the One. All ideas are radically subordinate. It is nonsense to speak of Plato's doctrine simply as doctrine of ideas. The centre of Plato's unwritten doctrine, his teaching of the One as the universal principle, stands behind and underpins as foundation his whole written work.²

Aristotle and all the other witnesses report unanimously that for Plato the true essence of the Good—this being the culmination-point of Platonic metaphysics in the central books V-VII of the *Republic*³ and beyond—is the One itself, αὐτὸ τὸ ἓν, the absolute One.⁴

The thought of the One is the only completely independent thought. There is nothing that is or can be thought, conceptualized, imagined, felt, that would not yet be subordinate to and participating in the One.

All forms of unity that are compatible with plurality⁵ can only be thought and be as unities, if they are modifications or restrictions of the pure essence of unity which itself cannot be anything else than absolute simplicity.⁶

² See Jens Halfwassen, *Auf den Spuren des Einen* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015), part II passim.

³ See most esp. Plato, *Republic* VI 508–509.

⁴ See Aristotle, *Metaphysics* XIV 1091b13–15; *Eudemian Ethics* I 1218a 15–32.

⁵ So everything that is self-identical. For Plato, identity is unified duality: Aristotle, *Metaphysics* V 1018a7–9 addressing Plato, *The Sophist* 254d.

⁶ See Plato, *Parmenides* 158a3–6.

The One is the “king of all things”, πάντων βασιλεύς,⁷ the absolute αἰτία “the king of heaven and earth”, βασιλεύς ἡμῖν οὐρανοῦ τε καὶ γῆς,⁸ it transcends all things, even being.

It is, therefore and rationally intelligibly, absolutely transcendent. This is something that cannot be surpassed, it can only be further formulated, which is, exactly, what the Old Academy, what Middle and then much more radically and clearly Neoplatonism did.

So, the development of thinking as transcending, the development of thinking as *ascensus* is closed and complete with Plato.

What has this to do with love?

In order to see how Plato thinks love, three points are necessary:

1) What do we want, always want, will, always will, love, always love? It is a) the good: τὸ ἀγαθόν,⁹ it is b) this, that we participate in the good, are connected with it, have it: ἑαυτῷ εἶναι,¹⁰ and it is c) that we participate in the good forever, always: ἀεὶ.¹¹

2) Love is therefore defined in Plato as the activity of engendering and begetting upon the beautiful: τῆς γεννήσεως καὶ τοῦ τόκου ἐν τῷ καλῷ.¹²

3) This non-contingent desire, drive, directedness is, as are so many things in Plato, gradualized: the ladder of love.¹³ We start with simple, often also silly things. They are silly, because more or less, rather less, so also left soon. Every mixture of the beautiful and the non-beautiful presupposes the beautiful. So the ladder of love is a ladder of transcending. We want to arrive at the beautiful, again: non-contingently, the beautiful itself: αὐτὸ τὸ καλόν.¹⁴

In which persuasion [says Socrates, having been persuaded by Diotima] I pursue my neighbours, to persuade them in turn that towards this acquisition the best helper that our human nature can hope to find is Love: Πεισιμόνοιο δὲ πειρᾶμαι καὶ τοὺς ἄλλους πείθειν ὅτι τούτου τοῦ κτήματος τῆ ἀνθρωπεία φύσει συνεργὸν ἀμείνω Ἔρωτος οὐκ ἂν τις ῥαδίως λάβοι.¹⁵

⁷ Plato, *Epistolai* II 312e.

⁸ Plato, *Philebus* 28c.

⁹ Plato, *Symposium* 207a.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid. 206e.

¹³ See *ibid.* 210a–212a.

¹⁴ Ibid. 211d.

¹⁵ Ibid. 212b.

This is, of course, deeply embedded in Platonic thinking as such, no specific doctrine of the *Symposium*. I just point to the original beloved: πρῶτον φίλον in the *Lysis*¹⁶ and to this as also a part of the preparation-work for the theory of the good: ἀγαθόν in the *Republic*.

Plotinus: All searching, mental, intellectual, emotional, desiring, whatever, ends with “Him”,¹⁷ with the highest principle, with God. This is just fine. One could add the, should we say: Boethian and St. Augustinian: *Te cernere finis*.¹⁸

But: The identification of willing, being, will and essence with the One is, in Plotinus, always connected with the—I use Werner Beierwaltes’ word-combination—“*hoion-reservation*” [“*Hoion-Vorbehalt*”].¹⁹ In itself, it transcends all will, all being, all essence, all actuality.²⁰

It is therefore in itself not unified duality, but pure, absolutely nonplural oneness. This brings with it, should we say: a quasi-relation to everything that is subordinate, so to everything: There is love towards itself, inclination towards itself. Love is directed inwards and upwards, in the case of the highest principle of course not upwards, but quasi-inwards, *hoion*-inwards, because, recall: the One is not in itself, strictly speaking.²¹

The Christian, so the downwards-directed love, *caritas*, it is very far away, the love not of the lost son, but of the good Samaritan.

To put it placatively: Whenever in principle-theory we have a pure One on top, then there is a *descensus*-problem. Whenever in principle-theory we do not have a pure One on top, then we have an *ascensus*-problem.²²

Now everything depends on thinking the triune God as three and as one. Then both problems are solved.

¹⁶ Plato, *Lysis* 219c, and see the important stressing of this component in some papers in the super-strong volume: Hans Krämer, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zu Platon* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014).

¹⁷ Plotinus, *Ennead* VI 8 11.

¹⁸ Directly in Boethius, *De consolatione philosophiae* III 9, but see also St. Augustine e. g. *Confessiones* I 1 1, or I 5 5.

¹⁹ See Werner Beierwaltes, “Causa sui. Plotins Begriff des Einen als Ursprung des Gedankens der Selbstursächlichkeit”, in: *Das wahre Selbst. Studien zu Plotins Begriff des Geistes und des Einen* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2001).

²⁰ See the Aristotle-criticism and Plato-affirmation in both *Enneads* VI 8 and VI 9.

²¹ See Plotinus, *Ennead* VI 8 16 and most esp. VI 8 15.

²² I just point to Plato, *The Sophist* 236d–259d for its extremely strong thinking in this context.

Plotinus: The One is eternally-awake *ὑπερνόησις*. There is nothing that follows on or out of it via just so happening. It transcends, it is beyond chance and so free.²³ On the other side: If there is the Many, then this has just so happened, has turned out thus, dreamingly.²⁴ Downward-bending love, *caritas*, *ἀγάπη*, this is what is missing, even though, of course, the *νοῦς ἐρῶν* is so important in Plotinus, even though *ἔρωσ* transcends *φρόνησις*, because it more intensely one, more intensely unitive.²⁵ But, as we saw, it is always as striving directing and directed inwards and upwards, never downwards.²⁶

I try to summarize an excellent presentation by Jens Halfwassen: The absolute in Plotinus is grasped as the final origin and cause of freedom. The discursive movement of the soul is its own activity and so free. The eminent freedom of the mind consists in this that it has always already actualized its own essence without any impediment. But its twoness as unity presupposes absolute unity and the transcendence-relation to this. Self-actualization, in order that the component “self” is being radically thought, presupposes the transrelational One which is no longer differentiated in itself.²⁷

The thought-process here is excellent. Human freedom, freedom of soul or even of mind, is impossible without transcendence-relation. But if one then goes on to say that a strictly transrelational One is presupposed, then we are exactly in the Plotinian apory of the “It just so happened.”

Love as Unifier II: St. Augustine

I start here with the very early *De beata vita: Beatitudo* is the end, the final end.²⁸ But of course not everything that we desire or that we strive for makes us happy. Therefore, St. Monica in this St. Augustinian dialogue in-

²³ See esp. Plotinus, *Ennead* VI 8 15 f.

²⁴ With this, I am just pointing to Plotinus, *Ennead* III 8, of course knowing that nature’s half-awake producing is several steps below what I am discussing here.

²⁵ See esp. Plotinus, *Ennead* VI 7 35.

²⁶ Here, it would, in my opinion, be excellently helpful to compare many things in one of the (apart from very few very late pieces) foremost Neoplatonists of the 20th century, Rainer Maria Rilke. Cp. my text on Rilke in *Von Platon bis Rilke* (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann 2016).

²⁷ Siehe Halfwassen, *Plotin und der Neuplatonismus* (München: Beck, 2004), 135–141.

²⁸ See St. Augustine, *De beata vita* 2 10.

sists on felicity or happiness resulting from the presence of goodness: *bonum*.²⁹ But also the presence of this or that good is very fleeting. And so, if we want to speak of happiness in an intellectually serious sense, the permanence of the presence of the good needs to be guaranteed. There are two points included here: The good needs to be always present to him who can truly be called happy. And the good which is to guarantee permanent happiness needs to be eternal and unalterable.³⁰ This good can only be the first principle and origin, can only be God.

We therefore always love, need to love God, as this love is our link to our happiness which we necessarily desire. Very much later words, St. Augustine in *De civitate Dei*: Every being that is not God can only be happy or, more generally: reach its aim, its *causa finalis*, “not out of itself, because it has been created out of nothing, but through him who created it—*non ex se ipsa potest, quia ex nihilo creata est, sed ex illo, a quo creata est.*”³¹

Plotinus: Everything reaches its aim via self-transcendence.

St. Augustine: He who loves God is directed towards his objectively existing *causa finalis*. This is his happiness.

This *imitatio Dei* is not only the ethical principle, but the principle of being as well. St. Augustine has—from very early on—this excellent neoplatonic *redditus*-conception which in the end governs all creatures. He speaks of the gravity or weight: *pondus* of the soul. This weight is delight or joy: *delectatio*; the real *delectatio* is to delight in God towards whom the soul of man is directed by nature. So to love God is the weight of the soul, the perfect spelling out of this universal truth is this: *pondus meum amor meus*.³²

There is the neoplatonic connection between self-knowledge and return from exile, return from strange lands; it could be and was connected in many ways and schools with be it the Babylonian exile and the prophets announcing return, the Psalms singing the desire of a whole people for the distant fatherland and destroyed temple,³³ be it the complex of νόστος and ἀναγνώρισις in the Ulysses-mythology³⁴ in stoic and other contexts, with an

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ See *ibid.* 2 11.

³¹ St. Augustine, *De civitate Dei* XII 1.

³² St. Augustine, *Confessiones* XIII 9.

³³ See e. g. Kurt Flasch, *Augustin* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1994), 27 ff.

³⁴ See e. g. the excellent presentation in Thomas A. Szlezák, *Homer oder Die Geburt der abendländischen Dichtung* (München: Beck, 2012), part III.

easy possibility to link in with Aristotle saying that the whole of the *Odyssey* is ἀναγνώρισις.³⁵ For St. Augustine, this connection between self-knowledge and return from strange lands is of even greater importance because it can clearly be linked with the parable of the lost son in Luke 15:

Seeing in ourselves his image, let us return to ourselves and rise like this younger son in the gospel and go back to him from whom we have separated ourselves off through sin.—*In nobis autem ipsis eius imaginem contuentes tamquam minor ille evangelicus filius ad nos met ipsos reversi surgamus et ad illum redeamus, a quo peccando recesseramus.*³⁶

A little bit back again in time, and looking most directly at the topic of love in St. Augustine. There is the important *quaestio* 35 out of the complex and complicated and intriguing text-convolute *De diversis quaestionibus octoginta tribus*. St. Augustine defines:³⁷

For to love is nothing other than to desire something for its own sake.—*Nihil enim aliud est amare quam propter se ipsam rem aliquam appetere.*³⁸

Also here there is, of course, gradualization.

Even more important than this, though, is this piece of text:

Should love itself also be loved? Of course, since apart from this those things are not loved.—*Idne solum an amor quoque ipse amandus est? Ita vero, quando sine hoc illa non amantur.*³⁹

But this is pointing forward into my chapter three already. At this point we need to first concentrate on gradualization:

Since love is a kind of motion, and there is no motion unless it be towards something, when we look for what should be loved, we ought to look for the thing towards which the motion is directed.—*Cum amor motus quidam sit, neque ullus sit motus nisi ad aliquid, cum quaerimus quid amandum sit, quid sit illud ad quod moveri oporteat quaerimus.*⁴⁰

³⁵ Aristotle, *Poetics* 24.

³⁶ St. Augustine, *De civitate Dei* XI 28.

³⁷ One of his definitions of love. See also e. g. *De Trinitate* VIII 10.

³⁸ St. Augustine, *De diversis quaestionibus octoginta tribus* q. 35.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

St. Augustine combines the two statements just quoted, qualifying types of love via looking at the different objects of love:

Hence, if love should be loved, by no means all love should be loved.—*Quare si amandus est amor, non utique omnis amandus est.*⁴¹

The whole question 35 has the title: *Quid amandum sit.*⁴²

What is the thing whose love should be loved if not what cannot disappear while it is being loved? But to possess that is nothing but to know it.—*Cuius ergo rei amor amandus est, nisi eius quae non potest deesse dum amatur? Id est autem quod nihil est aliud habere quam nosse.*⁴³

Love is desiring an object, a contents for its own sake. It is decisive that this contents is in the end the highest contents, the *summum bonum*, God himself. Otherwise we run into a muddle and errors concerning the important distinction between the *uti* and the *frui*, between striving for something as end or as means:

Everything that is rightly ordered, which is also named virtue, is enjoying what should be enjoyed and using what should be used.—*Omnis ordinatio, quae virtus etiam nominatur, fruendis frui, et utendis uti.*⁴⁴

The relation between means and end is also, among other things, a relation between the many and the one.

For love is a kind of appetite, and we see that in other parts of the soul as well there is an appetite which, if it is in agreement with the mind and with reason, will allow the mind to contemplate what is eternal in exceptional peace and tranquillity. Therefore the soul must love with its other parts also this great thing that should be known by the mind.—*Namque amor appetitus quidam est; et videmus etiam ceteris animi partibus inesse appetitum, qui si menti rationique consentiat, in tali pace et tranquillitate vacabit menti contemplari quod aeternum est. Ergo etiam ceteris suis partibus amare animus debet hoc tam magnum quod mente noscendum est.*⁴⁵

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² A question as classically objectivistic as the one underlying Plato's gradualizing ladder of love, as seen above.

⁴³ St. Augustine, *De diversis quaestionibus octoginta tribus* q. 35.

⁴⁴ Ibid. q. 30.

⁴⁵ Ibid. q. 35.

It is going to be “easy” in the end: Love is object-directed. Towards the best object. If this object is in itself love, then love is loved, not “only” as our way to our end, but as characterizing this very end within itself.

As soon as we see this, we make the step from thinking the first cause of everything as the One (Plato, Plotinus) or the mind (Aristotle) to seeing it as—within itself—willing as well (St. Augustine). As soon as we see this, we make, in this my narrative, the step from chapter II to chapter III.

Love as Triunifier: St. Augustine

One could see the developments described in the two chapters up to now as parallel: The pagan Platonists and St. Augustine, they both transcend polytheism, the many, worldly ends. They see and think love as the motivation-aspect, the powering-aspect of thinking as transcending.

I jump into *De Trinitate* IX: If there is mind, and this as perfect, so without the many privative aspects which we experience in ourselves and then always sillily anthropomorphistically attribute to mind itself,⁴⁶ then there is this:

The mind therefore and its love and knowledge are three somethings, and these three are one thing, and when they are complete they are equal.—*Ipsa igitur mens et amor et notitia eius tria quaedam sunt, et haec tria unum sunt, et cum perfecta sunt aequalia sunt.*⁴⁷

Threefold complete self-relatedness: self-presence, self-knowledge, self-love. If and as these are perfect, these three are one. If this is true, then it is impossible that two of them are only attributes. What we have, therefore, is one and the same being, but unmixed. This can hardly be addressed in a better way than speaking of a tri-personal substance. The same thing can be seen in the triad *amans, amatus, amor*: thought as perfect—so, again, without sillily anthropomorphic eggshells—we see and think: three who are one.⁴⁸ This is Tri-Unity, Trinity thought in a completely non-arbitrary and rational way.

⁴⁶ For these important purification-aspects central for all times: Aristotle, *Metaphysics* IX 6.

⁴⁷ St. Augustine, *De Trinitate* IX 1 4.

⁴⁸ This is the way more specifically in St. Augustine, *De Trinitate* VIII.

And if this is true, then with it we have immanently Trinitarian thinking of freedom, will, love. One could use the formulation, the words at the very beginning of the Catechism of 1992: “God, infinitely perfect and blessed in himself”.⁴⁹

St. Augustine shows in *De Trinitate* V⁵⁰ already, discussing category-problems, including especially the necessity to think hard about the connection between Aristotle’s categories numbers one and four, substance and relation: Thinking three persons related to each other and all of them perfect, perfect, that is, within each of them themselves and in all their relations to each other, we see that they are identical as to their substance.

As, to also put it also a little historically, as a Christian Neoplatonist, with St. John for his authority, St. Augustine is quite sure that God is love substantively. God is mind: πνεῦμα ὁ θεός. (Jo 4:24) God is love: ὁ θεὸς ἀγάπη ἐστίν. (1 Jo 4:8 and 4:16) God as love needs to know himself; otherwise he could not love himself. Now, to know and to love, neither of these is in a subject like colour or size, because they are transcending their subject, they are ways of beings things, intellectually in the one, voluntarily in the other case. The extent of self-knowledge and self-love in God seems to be necessarily identical, namely perfect. And then it seems to follow: Love can and does exist substantively. But if so, it pluralizes in a timelessly eternal way within its oneness. This is love as triunifier.

In commentary on John 7:16 St. Augustine writes:

What is so much yours as you? And what is so much not yours as you, if you are of another?—*Quid tam tuum quam tu? Et quid tam non tuum quam tu, si alicuius est quod es?*⁵¹

This is spoken from the side of the God-man Jesus Christ in relation to the Father. But it is also from the experience of his divine being, which simply consists in belonging to the Father. And then this can be taken as explanation-background also for the other intra-Trinitarian relations.

St. Augustine speaks alternatively of will and love in Trinitarian theology. To will and to love, these are extremely close in St. Augustine.⁵² To will

⁴⁹ Promulgated in 1992, first English edition published 1994.

⁵⁰ See St. Augustine, *De Trinitate* V 5; see also *De civitate Dei* XI 10.

⁵¹ St. Augustine, *In Evangelium Ioannis Tractatus* CXXIV, tract. XXIX 3.

⁵² One could compare the relation between *philia* and *eros* in Plato.

very strongly seems to be to love. And the stronger the types of love are, the more they are self-transcending, because there is no way of direct self-love or direct self-knowledge.⁵³ Therefore:

Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.
—ὁ εὐρὼν τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ ἀπολέσει αὐτήν, καὶ ὁ ἀπολέσας τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ ἔνε-
κεν ἑμοῦ εὐρήσει αὐτήν. (Mt 10:39)

We could perhaps say—also taking things out of the super-strong encyclical *Deus caritas est* by Pope Benedict XVI.⁵⁴ into consideration—that ἀγάπη is exactly love bowing down. It is endlessly self-giving which is what we have in the intra-Trinitarian relations. Now, this endless self-giving is within the Trinity love of the endlessly loveable. But it is love. And so we have a motivator for bowing down. Whereas φιλία and ἔρωσ are human ways of trying to reach this level of love. They are horizontal⁵⁵ and they are inwards and upwards.⁵⁶

To sum up: The question of this paper was simply: Is the object of love itself love? Or is love our mover towards the ultimate good only? If the second, then it would seem that this ultimate reality itself is non-intentional. Then it is a) not plural within itself, and then it is b) not descending.

The argument and conclusion of this paper is simply: Love as transcending is completed in love as self-giving.

Love is always intentional. As is thinking. Plotinus—and I here want to draw a parallel between the last two texts in Porphyry’s edition of the *Enneads*—shows in *Ennead* VI 8 that human freedom is impossible without transcendence-relation. This is also true for freedom on the highest possible level, namely the one of the νοῦς. This is so, because only in the One, the pure One that transcends thinking, there is more than correspondence of essence and actuality. And this specific “more than” is presupposed for any correspondence whatever. Plotinus shows in *Ennead* VI 9 that human thinking is impossible without transcendence-relation. This is also true for thinking on the highest possible level, namely the one of the νοῦς. This is so, because only in the One, the pure One that transcends thinking, there is more

⁵³ Perhaps Plato is the first human being who wrote this down: *Alcibiades* 132e–133c.

⁵⁴ Promulgated in 2006.

⁵⁵ Esp. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* VIII and IX.

⁵⁶ Esp. Plato, Plotinus, and Aristotle, *Metaphysics* XII 7.

than correspondence of essence and actuality. And this specific “more than” is presupposed for any correspondence whatever.

Love is always intentional. If the highest reality transcends intentionality, then it transcends love. Then there is a strictly irrational jump from it to second-highest reality. So it must certainly be seen as transcending certain types of intentionality: Why should the world be necessary for God being God? But it cannot be seen as transcending a type of intentionality which does not destroy pure unity.

And this is exactly what we seem to have in the divine triune love.