

Creation as Communion: Augustine on Love, Goodness, and Unity in Dialogue with Plato and Plotinus

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The title of this study speaks to the three interrelated topics investigated therein: love, goodness, and unity. Our interest in this constellation of concepts centers on their metaphysical and theological import. The focus is on the essence of love, goodness, and unity as Augustine understands them, and how this factors into—and is in turn shaped by—his understanding of the God-world relation. Creation is thus the overarching theme, understood as at once the *act* of creation (explored in Chapter Two, on the question of why God creates), and the *result* of this act, i.e., creation itself (explored in Chapter Three, on the metaphysical structure of created being understood in terms of communion). To these two considerations Chapter One, on love and goodness in Plato and Plotinus, forms an essential prelude.

While Augustine freely took up certain Platonic insights—regarding eros as ecstatic desire for the good; the good as diffusive; and the relationship between the one and the many—he consciously did so in the light of Christian faith, recontextualizing them within a Christian vision of reality and thereby giving them a new meaning that they did not have before. This transfiguration results in an understanding of creation as communion, understood primarily as communication: a genuine *free giving* to the other (rather than the One’s passive “giving off”) so as to evoke a response of love *from* the other, thereby establishing communion between giver and receiver. Such generous communication means that the creature is constituted as a good in its own right, and thus evokes a response of pleasure or delight from God.

From the side of creation, Platonic epistrophe is transfigured into a return of love (*redamatio*) and a creaturely cleaving to God (*adhaesio*), in imitation of the Son’s eternal adherence to the Father. This implies an active receptivity on the part of the creature, and coheres with Augustine’s understanding of love as a bond, which serves to unite while maintaining distinction. This unity-in-difference (communion) coincides with the Augustinian idea of love as *fruitio*, in particular with love as mutual fruition. It entails a “communication of idioms” or “certain exchange, as it were, of love,” in which what is proper to one (*proprium*) becomes common to all (*commune*) without losing its uniqueness.