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# Augustine and Friendship

Andrey Tashchian

Though Augustine left no special work on friendship, his written heritage is rather rich with meditation on this subject. Of particular interest are his *Confessions* since these “memoirs” offer a number of valuable autobiographical glimpses helping to better assess his theoretical reflections. The first in the row was the mischievous midnight adventure of shaking and robbing a neighbor’s pear tree undertaken by a gang of youngsters, Augustine among them, out of mere companionship<sup>1</sup>. Another unforgettable experience of his youth was the death of his unnamed coeval friend, extremely dear to him through their common studies<sup>2</sup>. It is as well indispensable to bear in mind Augustine’s fellow countryman and disciple Alypius, “his heart’s brother”<sup>3</sup> whose faithfulness and devotion were lifelong and unflinching. But, perhaps, the most telling image of Augustine’s practice of friendship documented in these books is the famous Christian life of leisure<sup>4</sup> in the circle of his closest friends and family at the village of Cassiciacum where he was preparing for baptism<sup>5</sup>. It is in this most friendly environment that Augustine happened to be a prolific writer composing a whole series of philosophical dialogues. Besides the facts described in the *Confessions*, one must not pass by, at last, that period of his biography upon his return to North Africa from Italy during which he managed to gather his Christian friends for the purpose of living a cenobitic life and established a lay monastery at his hometown Tagaste (and later at Hippo). There is no need to go into more detail to realize that

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1 *Confessiones*, 2, 4, 9.

2 *Ibid.* 4, 4, 7.

3 *Ibid.* 9, 4, 7.

4 *Retractationes*, 1, 1, 1.

5 *Confessiones*, 9, 3–4.

his experience of friendship was to be in close connection with his reflection on it.

Judging by Augustine's educational background and his overall spiritual evolution it would be only natural to suppose that his views on friendship were developed under the authority of the traditional classical conception of *amicitia* and through the assimilation of the Christian notion of *caritas*. Ancient cogitation on friendship and its essence started by early Greek "physiologists", reformed by Plato, systemized by Aristotle, enriched by Stoics and even Epicurean philosophy was resumed and apophthegmatized in Cicero's academic standpoint. So, taking into account how much influential the Roman classic was, one shouldn't be surprised to discover that Augustine's initial consideration of friendship immediately depends on Cicero's formulas.

This dependence shows itself, first of all, in the saint Father's derivation of *amicitia* from *amor* (love)<sup>6</sup>, which is an "undisguised" borrowing from Cicero's own etymology<sup>7</sup>. The Roman writer's passage interpreting the true friend as "another self, as it were" (*tamquam aliter idem*)<sup>8</sup> is almost literally reproduced in Augustine's reminiscences of his lamentations over the deceased friend in which he speaks of himself as "another self to him" (*ille alter*) and as a "half-soul" (*dimidium animae*)<sup>9</sup>.

Augustine's doctrine of friendship reveals its intellectual kinship with the classical viewpoint in what may be called in a Hegelian way "love of the concept of friendship", that is in striving for "disinterested" friendship. Thus, for Cicero a true friendship must be based on the principle of virtue<sup>10</sup>, which is the form of universality in the sphere of human practice and is unquestionably beyond the value of particular interests and profit. That's why he states that those people who fancy profit to be the reason for friendship dissolve its very bonds<sup>11</sup>, for if it were profit that glued together friendship, the former, undergoing a change, would as well ruin

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6 *Contra duas Epistolas Pelagianorum libri quatuor*, 1, 1, 1.

7 *Laelius*, 8, 26

8 *Ibid.* 21, 80.

9 *Confessiones*, 4, 6, 11.

10 *Laelius*, 27, 100

11 *Ibid.* 14, 51.

the latter<sup>12</sup>. Augustine apparently subscribes to his theory criticizing the utilitarian approach to friendship by replicating a Ciceronian maxim: "Friendship is the desire for good for somebody whom one loves and for his own sake"<sup>13</sup>. In other words, the Christian thinker invariably follows the classical tradition, arguing that a true friendship mustn't be reckoned from the point of view of transitory benefits<sup>14</sup>, and that a friend is to be loved gratuitously for himself<sup>15</sup>.

Another aspect in Cicero's exposition of friendship, which seemed valuable to Augustine, is the importance of the reciprocity of goodwill felt by friends for each other. The African bishop doesn't restrict himself to a formal repetition of the "Ciceronian" term *mutua benevolentia*<sup>16</sup>. In the books of the *Confessions* the sought-for mutual benevolence can be traced in the depiction of the aspiration of his soul for another one as the desire for the pleasure of loving and being loved<sup>17</sup>; and in his avowal that upon his return from Tagast to Carthage after his young friend's death the thing that attracted him most in his relations with new friends was reciprocal benevolent respect<sup>18</sup>.

There is still one more side in the antique theory of friendship that is inherited by Augustine's conception, and that's intellectuality. For ancient philosophy the universal form of human activity, i.e. virtue, consists in thought, and not in sensual pleasures, so it is wisdom, or truth, achieved by moral exercise and education, that is the leading light of friendly relations. And it is quite relevant that, characterizing wisdom as the best gift bestowed upon the humans by immortal gods, Cicero passes to virtue as the generating and maintaining principle of friendship<sup>19</sup>. Augustine's backing for intellectuality is even more determined. He is convinced that no one can be a true friend to another one, unless he first be-

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12 Ibid. 9, 32.

13 De diversis quaestionibus octoginta tribus, 31, 3.

14 Epistola 155, 1, 1.

15 Sermo 385, 4.

16 Laelius, 6, 22.

17 Confessiones, 2, 2, 2.

18 Ibid. 4, 8, 13.

19 Laelius, 6, 20.



comes a friend of truth<sup>20</sup>, and, albeit this truth is God (as befits a religious thinker), it cannot be grasped but intellectually. From this it is logical that the "side" by means of which a person can communicate as a friend with another one is mind, and it can be comprehended not by the senses but exclusively by the intellect<sup>21</sup>. And, what is especially typical and paradoxical at a time, is that Augustine confesses that as the central subject of his love and striving is the intellectual totality, that is wisdom, which can solely be loved for itself, friends are not to be loved for themselves but only for its sake<sup>22</sup>. The apparent paradox consisting in that there has just been mentioned a seemingly opposite moral commandment prescribing to love a friend for himself cannot yet become a contradiction and is easy to disentangle. The point is that "disinterested" friendship, which is pure love for a friend's own sake, must be in fact "amor intellectualis", the aforesaid "love of the concept of friendship". The substance of this specific love is the universal love of wisdom. Therefore, a friend can be truly loved only on this totally intellectual basis. So, Augustine is quite consistent with his conclusion that if a person doesn't find a mutual interest in wisdom on the part of his "friends" who, being unwilling or incapable, happen to be an impediment to his study of wisdom he has to be ready to part from them<sup>23</sup>.

Having considered the supporting elements of the concept of friendship in the classical component of Augustine's doctrine, we can now pay attention to its final formula, which is Ciceronian by its origin, too: friendship is an "agreement on human and divine things together with benevolence and love" (*rerum humanarum et divinarum cum benevolentia et caritate consensio*)<sup>24</sup>. It should be added that the given wording remains virtually the same and serves as a base for his later specifications stipulated by his Christianized version of the conception of friendship.

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20 Epistola 155, 1, 1.

21 Soliloquia, 1, 3, 8.

22 Ibid. 1, 13, 22.

23 Ibid. 1, 12, 20.

24 Contra academicos, 3, 6, 13.

However, it is time to put the question of its Christian religious determinacy. So, what are the traditionally accepted features that transform his doctrine of friendship into a definitely Christian one?

Augustine's translation of the heritage of antiquity into the "sign system" of Christian religious consciousness required, first and foremost, his becoming proficient in its vocabulary. So, in the particularity of Augustine's views on friendship the first thing to take notice of is whether there can be found corresponding lexical modifications.

The most conspicuous novel in Augustine's language of friendship lies in a characteristic amendment to the Ciceronian definition, so that the renovated formula of friendship runs as follows: "... an agreement on human and divine things together with benevolence and love in Christ Jesus, our Lord..." (*rerum humanarum et divinarum cum benevolentia et caritate consensio in Christo Iesu Domino nostro...*)<sup>25</sup>. The same idea may, of course, be expressed in somewhat other words but he invariably accentuates the religious thought that it is only God that is the substantial foundation of friendly relationship.

Another *apparent* innovation (as compared to Cicero's conception), which seems to be very typical of Christian religious thinking, is the introduction of the notion of *grace* into the verbal argument connected with friendship. In the *Confessions* Augustine overtly remarks that the humans cannot achieve true friendship unless God makes them stick together by virtue of the love shed in their hearts through the Holy Spirit<sup>26</sup>. That's why it is impossible for us, solely out of our aspiration, to become "God's friends": God's friendship is bestowed through His grace, and not through our merit<sup>27</sup>.

At last, there is one more significant facet of his developed views on friendship evidencing their Christian religious trend. It is commonly admitted that in the writings composed after the *Confessions* Augustine prefers expanding on *caritas* to talking on *amicitia*. It should be remembered, though, that the term *caritas* was a part of the classical definition of friendship as designed by Cicero, and yet it is obvious that in the way the

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25 Epistola 258, 4.

26 Confessiones, 4, 4, 7.

27 Sermo 335H, 2.

ancient formula sounded *caritas* played the modest role of a backing vocalist while the first part belonged to the duet of agreement (*consensio*) and goodwill (*benevolentia*). But then there happened the shift in the distribution of the roles.

By *caritas* Augustine indubitably means, firstly, the love for God and, secondly, the love for the neighbor, the former being the ground of the latter. So, the Christianized version of his teaching on friendship, weaving both into his understanding of true friendship, starts from the love for the neighbor in the immediate sense of the word and advances as far as to the love for the alien and, finally, for the enemy. Upon consideration, as Augustine puts it, we all have one father and one mother, therefore no one is alien to anyone, and every man is neighbor to every other man: "If a person is unknown, he is still a human being. If he is a foe, he is still a human being. If he is an enemy, he is still a human being. Is he a friend? May he remain a friend. Is he an enemy? May he become a friend"<sup>28</sup>. It is clear then that the distinguishing feature of the Christian *caritas* consists in its abstract universality, formally independent of the moment of mutual benevolence, which was indispensable for the antique theory.

This drift of Augustine's doctrine of friendship from its purely classical variant to a religiously updated reading, taken "as is", is quite *plain*, and there remains nothing to *explain*, if this explanation doesn't go beyond the historical *causae efficientes* giving no answer as to why this change was to take place. But since behind those finite "efficient causes" failing to explain their own appearance and existence there is a totalizing *causa finalis*, which is concept, it is of vital importance to understand the historical instances of Augustine's attitude to friendship as manifestations of its universal concept. Hence is the necessity of a logical (properly philosophical, "metaphysical") approach to his interpretation of the nature of friendship, but this is a matter of another issue.

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28 Sermo 299D, 1.