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## Amicitia Dei

### Abstract

The love of God is usually interpreted as analogous to the loving relationship between human beings. However, since God is not like other people, his love cannot be identical with the love between human beings. We need therefore to explore the limits of the analogy between human and divine love. In this paper I first of all discuss five key features of love between human persons. Then I discuss three crucial difference between God and human persons and show what these imply for the difference between divine and human love.

### 1 Introduction: A Paradigm Revolution

In a recent essay, Kevin J. Vanhoozer refers to what he calls a ‘paradigm revolution’ in contemporary theology<sup>1</sup>. One of the characteristic features of what Vanhoozer calls ‘classical theism’ is that unconditioned sovereignty is taken to be the central model for our understanding of God. The divine aseitas entails that God is absolutely self-sufficient and in no way dependant on or in need of anything beyond himself. He is sovereign Lord of all. As in Plato, the divine perfection is taken to mean that God has everything and is in need of nothing. Therefore, as Plato claims, the Gods can desire nothing. In terms of this model, divine love cannot be the desire for goodness. In this sense, as Plato claims, the Gods cannot love. Divine love cannot be anything else than the unconditioned outpouring of benevolence. Like the One of Plotinus, God is understood to be an eternal fountain of goodness. In Christian theology, a well-known defender of this view on divine love is Anders Nygren.<sup>2</sup> According to him there is no eros in God. Divine love is nothing else than the unconditioned outpouring of agape. Eros or need love is characteristic for imperfect humans. God in his self-sufficient perfection can only have agape or pure gift love.<sup>3</sup>

Vanhoozer points out that a growing number of contemporary theologians have come to doubt the adequacy of this view of God and have argued for a more relational form of theology in which mutual love rather than unconditioned sovereignty becomes central to our understanding of God. Here love is understood as not merely a benevolent attitude but rather as a relation of mutual fellowship or *amicitia*. The love of God is then a reciprocal relationship in which God does not merely love us but also desires that we should freely reciprocate his love. God does

1. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ‘The love of God – its place, meaning and function in systematic theology’, in Vanhoozer (ed.), *Nothing Greater, Nothing Better: Theological Essays on the Love of God*, Grand Rapids 2001. Keith Ward argues that a similar paradigm revolution can also be found today in Judaism, Islam and even in Hinduism. See chapter 1–4 of his *Religion and Creation*, Oxford 1996.

2. Elsewhere I have analysed these views on love in detail. See my book *The Model of Love*, Cambridge 1993, chapter 5 on Plato and chapter 6 on Nygren.

3. The terms ‘need love’ and ‘gift love’ come from C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*, London 1981.

not merely care for us benevolently but also cares about how we freely respond to his love. God suffers when his love for us remains unrequited and therefore incomplete.

It is clear that these theologians reject Nygren's radical antithesis between divine and human love. Divine love should be understood as analogous to human love and loving fellowship between God and human beings should be understood as analogous to loving fellowship between humans. God has a human face. Of course this does not mean that God is like other people and that divine love is in all respects just like human love. Human love can be no more than a metaphor or conceptual model for our understanding of divine love, and like all models, this one requires to be qualified in various ways.<sup>4</sup>

Let us first examine the nature of loving fellowship between human being and then enquire whether and to what extent this kind of fellowship can be an adequate conceptual model for understanding the Divine-human relationship. To what extent is *amicitia Dei* analogous to human love?

## 2 Human Love

What is the nature of a relationship of mutual love or fellowship between humans?<sup>5</sup> For our present purposes we could distinguish five aspects which are characteristic for such fellowship.

First of all, in such fellowship each partner strives to know and to serve the true interests of the other, and not primarily his or her own interests. Or rather, each partner *identifies* with the other by treating the interests of the other as his or her own interests. By this identification, your interests have become my own and I serve them as being my own. By thus serving your interests as my own, I love you as myself. In this sense such fellowship is primarily a relationship of mutual identification. It is a necessary feature of such love that it should be mutual in order to be complete. Lovers necessarily desire their love to be reciprocated. Unrequited love is incomplete.

A second characteristic of such fellowship is that the partners are for each other unique and irreplaceable. I do not serve your interests in order that you might serve mine in return. In that case, I would be trying to buy or earn your services and you would have for me a merely *instrumental value* as a means to further my own interests. You would then be replaceable for me by any other means as effective for this purpose. In that case I am not concerned with furthering your interests but with procuring your services to further my interests. My relationship is not with you as irreplaceable individual but as replaceable means to further my interests. Anybody else who could do the same would do as well. In love, however, I further your true interests because through identification they have become my own. In this way you and the realisation of your true interests have acquired *intrinsic value* for me. For me you cannot be replaced by anybody else.

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4. On metaphors, models and the way they need to be qualified, see chapter 1 of my *The Model of Love*.

5. For an extended analysis of the nature of such relationships, see chapters 7–9 of my *The Model of Love*.

You are for me, in the words of Immanuel Kant,<sup>6</sup> an end in yourself ('Zweck an sich selbst') with unconditional value and not something which only has value for me on condition that it is useful for furthering my interests. By thus identifying with each other in love, we bestow on each other a unique value as irreplaceable and indispensable individuals. In brief, we are not only dependant on the recognition of others for our identity as persons<sup>7</sup> but our value as persons is also determined by their identification with us. 'To be esteemed by another secures one's own self-esteem, and gives body to one's own sense of identity. To know that one is loved is to be able to anchor one's own existence in the affections of others. 'Who am I?' 'I am the person that Mother loves' or 'that Jill loves' or 'that God loves'. It means that my actions matter, not only to me but to someone else in the outside world, and that therefore they have a significance which is not solely solipsistic.'<sup>8</sup> It is clear that loving fellowship with others is a necessary condition for happiness and fulfilment in our lives.

A third characteristic of such relationships is that they can only be established and maintained in mutual freedom. Love cannot be earned or coerced. Jean-Paul Sartre<sup>9</sup> points out that someone who longs to be loved does not want to turn his beloved into his slave. He does not want to become the object of a passion flowing forth mechanically from his beloved. He does not want to possess an automaton, and if we want to humiliate him, we need only try to persuade him that his beloved's passion is not freely bestowed on him but is the effect of a psychological determinism. The lover will then feel that both his love and his being are cheapened. If the beloved is transformed into an automaton, the lover finds himself alone. This is well illustrated in the popular song 'Paper Doll':

I'm goin' to buy a paper doll that I can call my own,  
 A doll that other fellows cannot steal.  
 And then those flirty flirty guys  
 With their flirty flirty eyes  
 Will have to flirt with dollies that are real.  
 When I come home at night she will be waiting.  
 She'll be the truest doll in all the world.  
 I'd rather have a paper doll to call my own  
 Than have a fickle minded real live girl.

Far from being a love song, this is a lament on the absence of love. In the words of Sartre: If the beloved is transformed into an automaton, the lover finds himself alone—alone with his paper doll. It is clear that a relationship of love can only be maintained as long as the personal integrity and free autonomy of *both* partners is maintained. As soon as I try to control you as an object or allow you to treat me as an object, our relationship is perverted into something other than

6. Immanuel Kant, *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*, zweiter Abschnitt.

7. On personal identity, see my essay on 'Religious belief and personal identity' in *Neue Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 38, 1996.

8. John Lucas, *Freedom and Grace*, London 1976, 60.

9. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, New York 1956, 367.

love. Love must by its very nature be a relationship of free mutual give and take; otherwise it cannot be love at all.

This remains true even when my control over you is benevolent. Of course love entails benevolence towards the beloved, but it cannot be reduced to mere benevolence. Pure agape by itself becomes a form of benevolent tyranny. John Macmurray argues this point as follows: 'If in my relation with you I insist on behaving generously toward you and refuse to accept your generosity in return, I make myself the giver and you the recipient. This is unjust to you. I put you in my debt and refuse to let you repay the debt. In that case I make the relation and unequal one. You have to have continual cause to be grateful to me, but I am not to be grateful to you. This is the worst kind of tyranny, and is shockingly unfair to you. It destroys the mutuality of the personal by destroying the equality which is its negative aspect. To maintain equality of persons in relation is justice; and without it generosity becomes purely sentimental and wholly egocentric. My care for you is only moral if it includes the intention to preserve your freedom as an agent, which is your independence of me. Even if you wish to be dependent on me, it is my business, for your sake, to prevent it.'<sup>10</sup> Love must therefore not only desire reciprocation. It must also desire the beloved to reciprocate freely.

The voluntary nature of love suggests a fourth characteristic, namely its vulnerability. If I cannot force or oblige you to return my love, I remain vulnerable in relation to you. Loving fellowship is vulnerable because it depends for its initiation as well as its maintenance on the freedom and the dependability of both partners. This vulnerability causes doubt, uncertainty and suffering in the lovers because of the tension between the desire to be loved and the inability to bring this about. This tension often becomes unbearable with the result that we are tempted to coerce or oblige our partners to return our love. By giving in to this temptation, the quality of our loving identification with each other is seriously impaired. I no longer seek to serve your interests purely because I have made them my own, but also in order to oblige or even coerce you to serve my interests in return. In many subtle ways I try to earn your love and your services or somehow to *make* you commit yourself to me. In this way I fail to treat you consistently as a person, and you often become for me an object which I somehow seek to control. Because of our fallibility and finitude, our human love is therefore rarely pure. We have argued that love can be a source of great happiness. It is now clear that it can also be source of sorrow and affliction. In the words of José Ortega y Gasset: 'Who doubts that the lover can find happiness in his beloved? But it is no less certain that love is sometimes sad, as sad as death—a supreme and mortal torment.'<sup>11</sup>

This raises a fifth characteristic of loving fellowship: It is a relationship between *persons*. Here personhood has two sides to it. On the one hand a person is a being who is treated in a personal way. I am a person to the extent that others treat me as a person and do not use me as an object, as an end in myself and not as a means to be used for some further end. Here Martin Buber<sup>12</sup> distinguishes two fundamental attitudes we adopt in relation to our environment: 'I-thou' and

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10. John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation*, London 1961, 189–190.

11. José Ortega y Gasset, *On Love. Aspects of a Single Theme*, London 1959, 12.

12. Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, Edinburgh 1952.

'I-it'. Persons differ from objects because we adopt an 'I-thou' attitude towards them and not the 'I-it' attitude we adopt towards objects. So too P.F. Strawson distinguishes the attitude constitutive for personal relations from the 'objective attitude' in which we treat something as an object. 'To adopt the objective attitude to another human being is to see him, perhaps, as an object of social policy; as a subject of what, in a wide range of sense, might be called treatment; as something . . . to be managed or handled or cured or trained'.<sup>13</sup> Although we can adopt an objective attitude toward all entities (including people) by treating or controlling them as objects, we cannot adopt a personal attitude toward all entities. Only free agents, who as moral beings are able to initiate and bear responsibility for their own actions, can be approached as persons. This entails that persons are also self-conscious rational beings because these characteristics are a necessary condition for purposive and responsible agency. Although persons are on the one hand the intentional objects of a personal attitude, they are on the other hand also the bearers of all those personal characteristics that are the necessary condition for being approached as persons. In approaching someone as a person, I therefore presuppose that he or she is the bearer of these characteristics. Only with persons in this double sense can we enjoy personal fellowship in which we, in mutual freedom, identify with each other in love and assume responsibility for each other's true interests. I can have a strong emotional attachment to my dog, or my home or my country, but I can only enjoy loving fellowship in the above sense with persons. Is such loving personal fellowship possible with God? Is God a personal being in the required sense?

### 3 Amicitia Dei

We have argued above that loving fellowship with others is a necessary condition for human happiness and fulfilment since we owe our identity and value as persons to such fellowship. However, we have also seen that human love is vulnerable and can therefore also be a source of sorrow and affliction. According to St. Augustine, it is at this point where the love of God differs radically from human love. It is only by loving God that we can achieve *ultimate* happiness and *complete* fulfilment in our lives. Augustine therefore characterises the love of God as *frui*, i.e. fulfilment or enjoyment.<sup>14</sup> Similarly a Christian mystic like St. Bernard of Clairvaux asserts that 'when God loves, he desires nothing but to be loved, since he loves us for no other reason than to be loved, for he knows that those who love him are blessed in their very love.'<sup>15</sup> Such blessedness, then, can only be found in the enjoyment of divine fellowship or *amicitia Dei*. Why is this the case? What are the differences between *amicitia Dei* and human fellowship in virtue of which we can enjoy ultimate happiness and fulfilment in the former

13. P.F. Strawson, *Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays*, London 1974, 9.

14. This Augustinian view on ultimate happiness is perfectly reflected in the answer to the first question in the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* of 1647: 'Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever (*Deum glorificare en eodemque frui in aeternum*). For a detailed analysis of Augustine's views on love, see chapter 5 of my *The Model of Love*.

15. Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, 4 vols. Kalamazoo 1971–1980, sermon 83.

but not in the latter?

God is not like other people. Unlike us, finite humans as we are, God is unlimited in his goodness, knowledge, power and faithfulness. This has important consequences not only for the nature of his personhood, but also for the nature of the fellowship we may enjoy with him. As persons we are finite and limited in our relations with each other and also in our relations with God. God, however, is infinite and free from the limitations of our finite human condition. This does not mean, however, that God is an impersonal being. On the contrary, as infinite and perfect being, he is also perfect in his personhood. With an impersonal God, we cannot enjoy personal fellowship nor find ultimate happiness in his love. Only with a personal God who is also free from the limitations of our human condition, can we find that perfect fellowship the enjoyment of which is ultimate happiness. Let me explain this in the light of three fundamental differences between God and ourselves and the implications which these differences have for the kind of fellowship which we might have with God.

The first crucial difference is the following. Love between humans entails that by mutual identification each partner makes the interests of the other his or her own. However, the interests of my beloved are not necessarily identical with his or her wishes and will for the same reason that my interests are not necessarily in accordance with my wishes and will. As humans we are fallible and weak, and consciously or unconsciously we often will things which are not good for us and not in accordance with our true interests. Therefore love between humans does not necessarily require that I always grant my beloved what he or she wills, but only that I should try to serve the *true* interests of my beloved as I honestly but fallibly understand these to be. Of course, this does not mean that I am indifferent to the will and wishes of my beloved. In my practical deliberations I will always take the wishes and will of my beloved into account, but this does not mean that I will always automatically grant these. The wishes and will of my beloved always remain fallible in the same way as my own wishes and will remain fallible.

In contrast to our human will, the will of God is perfect and infallibly good. In fact, for believers the will of God counts as the ultimate standard of goodness. To do the will of God *is* to do what is good. Our love for God is therefore our identification with his perfect will. It is only when through love we have made God's will our own, that we can find ultimate happiness in a life in accordance with his will. This suggests an essential requirement for ultimate happiness: it can only be achieved when as persons we realise our *true* interests and these consist in realising the ultimate good in our individual lives. In the words of Augustine: 'No one can be happy who does not enjoy what is man's chief good, nor is there anyone who enjoys this who is not happy'.<sup>16</sup> For Augustine 'man's chief good' is to do the will of God, since to do that *is* to do what is ultimately good.

This does not mean, however, that in seeking to do the will of God we always do so out of love and not merely out of duty. When we do the will of God out of duty, we experience it as an external law imposed on us from outside and not as something which through the identification of love has become our own. Then

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16. St. Augustine, *De Moribus Ecclesia Catholica*, 3.4.

the 'good life' can be for us no more than being virtuous out of duty and not doing the will of God out of love. We then do the will of God because we ought to and not because we find our ultimate happiness in doing it. This suggests a further essential requirement for ultimate happiness: to be ultimately happy it is not enough to do what is ultimately good in our individual lives. We should also do so authentically because we choose it with integrity. Realising the good in our individual lives as a duty imposed on us from outside, cannot make us ultimately happy. Sartre is right in his claim that we should choose our individual identity with integrity and not allow it to be imposed on us from outside. But then we can only be happy when we do the will of God out of love and not merely out of duty.

A second relevant difference between God and ourselves is related to the limits of our human knowledge and capacities, which in turn sets limits to the range and intensity with which we can identify with others. Thus 'real friendship takes time and energy which human beings have in limited amounts. We cannot have too many friends for the same reason as we cannot do too much work. We cannot spread ourselves too thin.'<sup>17</sup> Apart from such restrictions of time and energy, it is especially the limits of our knowledge of others, which determines the range and intensity of our fellowship with them. I can only identify with your good to the extent that I know what your good is, and I can only take your feelings, desires, intentions, dispositions, values, preferences, character etc. into account in my own practical reasoning to the extent that these are known to me. For this reason 'love cannot do without information. The lover is relentlessly curious as to his beloved's sorrows, joys, and desires, which concern him as his own.'<sup>18</sup> There is a limit to the number of people whom we can come to know and the amount of knowledge we can acquire about them. There is also a limit to the number of people with whom we can achieve real fellowship and great differences in the intensity of the fellowship we are able to establish and maintain with different people. We know very few people well enough to identify with them intensively, and even our knowledge of our nearest and dearest is finite and fallible. We can be mistaken about the true interests of others in the same way as we can be mistaken about our own. We know very little about most people with whom we interact in life, and the few things we do know about them, we also find in others. Hence they remain for us not much more than comparable bearers of those characteristics and interests which they share with others and as such replaceable by those with the same characteristics and interests. It is therefore difficult for us to treat them as irreplaceable persons.

For believers this is different in their relationship with God. For God all hearts lie open, all desires are known and no secrets are hid. God cannot be mistaken about our true interests, and since all our feelings, desires, intentions, dispositions etc. are fully known to him, he can infallibly take them into account in his dealings with us. Since God knows every one of us fully, he need not treat us as though we were all equal in his sight and therefore able to replace each other in his

17. Helen Oppenheimer, *The Hope of Happiness*, London 1983, 136. Cf. Emil Brunner's statement that 'a person who claims friendship with everyone has not begun to understand the meaning of friendship.' *The Divine Imperative*, London 1949, 518.

18. Roger Scruton, *Sexual Desire*, London 1986, 231.

affection. ‘No human being is worth less than another in God’s sight, not because they are all worth the same, but because each one is irreplaceable.’<sup>19</sup> In this way God’s love for us is not impartial but partial in the sense in which ‘partiality is a matter of looking to see what the special individuality of the other person really is and attending positively to it. God can have this kind of special love for each of his creatures.’<sup>20</sup> Elsewhere Helen Oppenheimer expands this point as follows: ‘God loves each creature: but even “each” is still too abstract here, and to bring out the full sense one must risk the subjective, “God loves *me*”: not externally but with a “partial” love which enters completely and as of right into my unique point of view. . . God abides in me in this sense, that he associates himself to the point of identification with the pettiness as well as the glory of every creature he has made. . . To form the idea that God is the “ground of one’s being” in the sense that he is more concerned for one, more “partial” to one, more on one’s side, than one is oneself; that one’s humanly private point of view is so to say anchored onto the divine: is assuredly to feel that one has “got more than one bargained for”.’<sup>21</sup> In this way God’s love is ‘partial’ to every single one of us.

Nicholas of Cusa<sup>22</sup> illustrated this ‘universal partiality’ of God’s love graphically with reference to the kind of portrait paintings in which the person in the painting looks the onlooker straight in the eye. A well-known example would be Leonardo da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa*. If you stand before the *Mona Lisa*, she looks straight at you in a way that makes you feel that you are the only person in the world to whom she is attending. If you move over to the right or to the left, she will still be looking at you like that. It is as if her eyes follow you wherever you go. However, if I were to look at her from the right and you from the left, she would look at each of us separately as if each of us were the only one to whom she was attending! Because of this effect, Nicholas calls this kind of portrait painting an ‘icon of God’: God looks on each of us *individually* since each one of us is irreplaceable in his sight. By contrast, the Pope on his balcony looks inclusively at the whole crowd of people on St. Peter’s Square without looking at anyone in particular. God’s love, however, is both inclusive and exclusive at the same time. For believers God alone know each one of us well enough to be able to identify with the true personal interests of each of us individually. God alone is able to treat each one of us individually as a person, as a ‘thou’. In this respect too God is perfect as a Person and free from the limitations of our finite personhood. This suggests a further important reason why ultimate happiness can only be found in loving fellowship with God: God alone knows me well enough to consistently treat me as an irreplaceable individual and hence to bestow individual identity and value on me as a person.

A third relevant difference between God and us has to do with God’s immutable faithfulness. If I love you, I commit myself to serving your true interests as being my own. In this way serving your interests becomes part of my chosen identity as a person. It is incorporated into the ideals I strive to realise in my

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19. Oppenheimer, *The Hope of Happiness*, 81.

20. Oppenheimer, *The Hope of Happiness*, 135.

21. Oppenheimer, *Incarnation and Immanence*, London 1973, 191–192.

22. Nicholas of Cusa, *The Vision of God*, New York 1969, 3f.

life and in which I find my identity. However, this is only possible as long as my chosen identity remains compatible with serving your interests. As humans, however, we are not only able to become unfaithful to each other and to our identification with each other, but the circumstances of our lives could give rise to changes in our chosen identity which make it difficult for us to continue to identify with each other. Our chosen identity as persons is not immutably stable. Thus you may change in the course of time in ways which make it increasingly difficult for me to identify with you with integrity. Or I myself may change in ways that prevent me from continuing to identify with you as before. Lovers and friends can grow apart in the course of time. According to Ortega y Gasset such changes in personal identity are normal and naturally give rise to changes in our amorous commitments. 'This is the normal case. A personality experiences in the course of its life two or three great transformations, which are like different stages of the same moral trajectory. Without losing solidarity, or even the fundamental homogeneity of yesterday's feelings, we notice one day that we have entered upon a new phase or modulation of our characters... Our innermost being seems, in each one of these two or three phases, to rotate a few degrees upon its axis, to shift towards another quadrant of the universe and to orient itself towards new constellations. Is it not a meaningful coincidence that the number of true loves which the normal man usually experiences is almost always the same in number: two or three? And, moreover, that each of these loves appears chronologically localised in each of these stages in character?'<sup>23</sup>

Ortega is right that people can change in this way. However, he is wrong in thinking that such changes simply happen to us and are beyond our control. Changes in our personal identity do not follow with unavoidable necessity from changes in the circumstances of our lives, but they do result from the ways in which we decide to respond to such changes. If lovers respond to changing circumstances in ways that are incompatible, they will grow apart. If however they seek to respond in ways that are compatible, their personal identities will change and develop in concert and they will grow together in the course of time. In this sense a relationship of love or fellowship is a joint venture. In the long run it can only be maintained to the extent that both partners commit themselves to it and manage to grow together with integrity in the ways in which they respond to changes in the circumstances of their lives. However, the partners in such a relationship can never have any cast-iron guarantee that neither of them will ever change in ways that might lead them to grow apart. Not only do fair weather friends let each other down. Real friends and lovers also remain finite and fallible in their commitments to each other. In this way our human love always remains risky and vulnerable. Not only can lovers fail to maintain their loving identification with each other but, as we argued in the previous section, the quality of their mutual identification also remains finite and impure. I try to limit the risk of losing you against my will by somehow coercing or obliging you to maintain your identification with me.

In this respect too, God is not like other people. Love of God is not risky like human love since we can not only count on God to remain faithful to his character,

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23. José Ortega y Gasset, *On Love. Aspects of a Single Theme*, London 1959, 82–83.

but his character is also stable and unlike ours it does not change. Hence believers would claim that estrangement from God could never result from God changing and growing apart from us, but only from our becoming unfaithful to God and turning our backs on him. In the words of Augustine: 'No one can lose you, my God, unless he forsakes you.'<sup>24</sup> This suggests a further reason why *ultimate* happiness can only be found in the love of God. No one will deny that we can anchor our identity and self-esteem in the affections of others and hence that we can find happiness in human fellowship and love. Nevertheless, human love remains finite and fallible. Since God's love is eternally dependable, we can never lose it against our will. For this reason believers claim that *amicitia Dei* is the only eternally dependable anchor for our ultimate happiness.<sup>25</sup>

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24. Augustine, *Confessions*, IV.8.

25. Paper presented at the fiftieth annual conference of the Society for the Study of Theology at the University of Lancaster in April 2002.