Love and Tears: Augustine’s Project of Loving without Losing

Grief as Moral Imperfection

Why does Augustine not want to weep when his mother dies? The first thing he narrates after her death in the ninth book of the Confessions is how he closed her eyes and kept his own eyes dry despite his grief: “I pressed her eyes [shut],” he writes, “and a huge sorrow flowed together into my chest and flowed over into tears, and at the same time by a violent command of my mind my eyes sucked back their fountain even to the point of dryness.”¹ In some ways it is the most shocking event in the Confessions. A modern audience can condone fornication and heresy, but suppressing his feelings--that’s truly offensive! And more seriously, even for those of us who think there are such things as wicked feelings that need to be suppressed, this does not seem to be one of them. Do the lessons in holiness he has been learning over the course of the narrative really lead to this: that he has become such an enemy of human love that he is ashamed of grieving for his mother?

My answer to this question will be a qualified yes. Yes, the author of the Confessions really does think there was something morally wrong with his grief for his mother, but he’s about to change his mind concerning the underlying ethics that leads to this conclusion.² For in later

¹ premebam oculos eius, et confluebat in praecordia mea maestitudo ingens et transfluebat in lacrimas, ibidemque oculi mei violento animi imperio resorbebant fontem suum usque ad siccitatem. Confessiones 9:12.29. All translations are mine.
² In my "yes" answer I follow the philosophical interpretation of the Confessions by Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Suffering Love" in T.V. Morris (ed.) Philosophy and the Christian Faith (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988). The developmental analysis, however, is my
writings Augustine becomes an eloquent defender of the natural, human need of grief. “How could the death of someone whose life is sweet not be bitter to us?” he writes in the *City of God*. “Hence the mourning of a heart that is not inhuman is like a kind of wound or sore….”³ In one sense of course we would prefer not to be wounded, but the cost of such invulnerability is inhumanity. As he puts it in one sermon, “It is possible for a human heart not to grieve when one who is most dear to it dies; but it is better for the human heart to be healed when it grieves, than to become inhuman by not grieving.”⁴ When Augustine talks like this, he speaks in terms we can readily understand. But in *Confessions* 9 he speaks in a way that is not so easy to understand--or accept. What is going on in this disturbing text? Why does he try not to weep?

Let me begin by saying a bit more about the narrative in *Confessions* 9. First of all, it is important to be clear that Augustine does not deny his grief, in the sense of denying he feels it. He knows all too well what he feels. But he does hide it from other people, and in particular he holds back his tears, which are the external expression of the grief in the heart. Partly he seems ashamed of behaving childishly like his own son Adeodatus, whose loud lamentations are forcibly silenced “by all of us,” he says.⁵ This external, social coercion is paralleled by Augustine’s inward efforts to get control of his own grief. “And in Your ears,” he writes to God,
“where none of them heard, I scolded my feelings as softness and restrained the flood of sorrow.”\(^6\) But what is there to be ashamed of in this softness or weakness (mollitiam) of his feelings for his mother? At first glance this looks like some ancient Roman type of macho—and there does seem to be some of that in the air, but there is much more as well. Augustine is quite explicit about why he fights his grief: “It intensely displeased me that these human things had so much power over me [more literally, “could do so much in me”], which necessarily happen by due order and the lot of our condition.”\(^7\) The human condition is mortal and it belongs to our lot, in the due order of things, to die. That is what his feelings, in their weakness, cannot accept. It is the same underlying problem that produced the torture of grief back in book 4, when his best friend dies: “He was dead, whom I had loved as if he would not die….I had poured my soul out on the sand, loving one who would die as if he would not die.”\(^8\) This is love out of touch with reality and disordered, Augustine thinks, and duly punished by the torment provided by mortality itself. That he has the same problem in book 9, after his conversion and baptism, exasperates him. It is as if to say: haven’t I learned anything yet?

And it really is a matter of a long process of learning. As Augustine the narrator comments, speaking again to God, “I believe You were reminding me, by a kind of object lesson, that the chain of every habit is against the mind, even a mind that no longer feeds on deceptive

\(^7\) mihi vehementer displicebat tantum in me posse haec humana, quae ordine debito et sorte conditionis nostrae accidere necesse est. *ibid.*  
\(^8\) ille, quem quasi non moriturum dilexeram, mortuus erat…. fuderam in harenam animam meam diligendo moriturum acsi non moriturum. *Confessiones* 4:6.11 and 4:8.13.
words.”

The newly-bereaved Augustine is torn, exasperated and ashamed because he knows better, yet he still cannot help himself. He knows that he has not really lost his mother, who is safe with God, yet he still misses her presence as if he were a motherless child. The force of carnal habit (*consuetudo*), the great enemy of the moral life from whose chains he was freed in book 8, is still not entirely vanquished. It seems what he needs to learn, according to the reflections of Augustine the narrator some ten years later, is not how to overcome all grief but how to live with his own moral imperfection. The day when no carnal habit causes us to be pained by the loss of temporal things is the day when our loves are no longer morally disordered, and that day does not come in this life. So Augustine the narrator puts the shame and exasperation of Augustine the character in proper perspective: yes, this paroxysm of grief may indeed be due to moral imperfection, to “carnal feelings” as he puts it, but no, it is not an imperfection one can simply eliminate so long as one is still on the road of this mortal life—though all of us should be working to overcome it as we progress along the road which leads us to life eternal, where nothing is lost.

Hence Augustine the narrator defends the weakness of Augustine the character, who finally does let himself weep when he is all alone. The narrator rebukes any reader who would “proudly interpret my crying” as something to deride. But this same narrator, we should notice, never expresses grief of his own when describing the death of loved ones. The grief portrayed in the *Confessions* is always the character's, not the narrator’s. For while the main character of the *Confessions* has a lot to learn and is often presented as an example of how not to

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9 *credo commendans memoriae meae vel hoc uno documento omnis consuetudinis vinculum etiam adversus mentem, quae iam non fallaci verbo pascitur.* *Confessiones* 9:12.32.
10 *carnalis affectus,* *Confessiones* 9.13.34.
11 *hominis superbe interpretantis ploratum meum,* *Confessiones* 9:12.33.
do things, the narrator of the *Confessions*, at least up through book 9, is presented implicitly as a spiritual model for us to follow. By “narrator” I do not mean the historical Augustine, the author of the *Confessions*, whose thoughts and feelings we must guess at by a process of historical inference. ¹² (Who knows how he really felt about his mother’s death at the time he was writing the *Confessions*? I don’t.) I am referring rather to the narrative voice or literary persona to whom we are listening when we read the *Confessions* aloud. That’s the one from whom we are to learn by imitation, and he expresses no grief for temporal losses. So when we make the necessary distinction between the narrator and the character in *Confessions* 9, we still have the same problem, though more complexly posed: the narrator does defend the character’s grief, but also treats it as a weakness to be excused rather than a strength to be imitated.

Why? That’s my question. Why are tears shed at the death of one’s mother a sign of moral imperfection rather than an appropriate model to follow? To answer this question, I think, is to uncover something fundamental about the development of Augustine’s ethics of love, and also to come upon one of the strangest and most beautiful features of the narrative structure of the *Confessions*.

**The Development of Augustine's Ethics of Love**

Let’s start with the fundamental point about Augustine’s ethics of love. The first of Augustine’s extant writings to be completed is a little treatise on happiness, *On the Happy Life*,

¹² The literary distinction between the author and the narrator, obvious once it is stated, has usually been overlooked in Augustine scholarship, including my own. I have learned its value for reading the *Confessions* from Robert McMahon, "Book Thirteen: The Creation of the Church as the Paradigm for the Confessions" in K. Paffenroth and R.P. Kennedy (eds.) *A Reader's Companion to the Augustine's Confessions* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003).
which argues that the goal of human life is achieved only when we have what we can’t lose. For the goal is true happiness, which is not merely what we want but what we *ought* to want above all things. So what we must learn to do if we are to be happy is not to want what we can lose. This key thesis of Augustine’s early ethics should be mapped against the background of classical philosophy, for there is certainly nothing specifically Christian about it. The thesis is essentially Stoic: true happiness is to have a good you cannot lose against your will, because you have it precisely by willing it.\(^{13}\) But Augustine immediately points out that this Stoic ethics needs a Platonist ontology at its foundation, for “whatever is mortal and can fall, is something we cannot have whenever we will it and as long as we will it.”\(^{14}\) The only thing we can have without fear of loss is something that can never perish, which really means, Augustine proceeds to argue, something immutable and divine. Hence what we need to have, in order to be happy, is nothing less than God—not the very physical god of the Stoics, which is a divine fire (rather like the Manichaean worship of physical light which Augustine condemns so frequently in the *Confessions*) but a God who is incorporeal and immutable, transcending the times and changes of the physical world.

In the early years of Augustine’s career as a Christian writer, he develops this Platonist ontology as the foundation of an ethical project of loving what can’t be lost.\(^{15}\) At the conclusion

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\(^{13}\) *ei comparandum est, quod cum vult habet.* *De beata vita* 2.11. The Stoic conviction that true happiness is immune from the vicissitudes of fortune is central to Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations* 5, a book which, if it stood alone, would aptly bear the title *De beata vita* and stands as the immediate precursor to Augustine's treatise by that name. The idea that this Stoic conviction has a Platonic foundation is already broached by Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* 5:34-36.

\(^{14}\) *Nam quidquid mortale et caducum est, non potest a nobis, quando volumus et quamdiu volumus, haberi.* *De beata vita* 2.11.

\(^{15}\) In addition to *De libero arbitrio*, book 1, and *De moribus ecclesiae catholicae* (see especially paragraphs 5 and 10), the philosophical foundation for this ethics of not loving what can be lost
of the first book of his treatise *On Free Choice* (a book written about a year after *On the Happy Life*) he presents an account of the eternal law which commands us “to turn our love away from temporal things…and toward eternal things.” For it is only eternal things that we can have simply by willing them. Since only God is eternal and immutable by nature this means, quite simply, that we should love nothing but God—a conclusion he draws explicitly in the treatise *On the Morals of the Catholic Church*, written at about the same time. At this point Augustine has really dug himself into a hole: for if it is wrong to love anything but God then Jesus must be commanding us to sin when he tells us to love our neighbors. This is only one example of the way in which ancient philosophy, and especially Platonism, is much more spiritual than Christianity—and certainly more spiritual than Christ. Augustine has a lot of work to do to adjust his ethics to Christianity. If your project is to love what you cannot lose, then how it is legitimate to love your friends and neighbors, not to mention your enemies, becomes a major point of inquiry.

The basic tack Augustine will take to solve this problem emerges already in the treatise *On the Morals of the Catholic Church*, where he proceeds to contrast loving God with merely using temporal things: “God alone is to be loved, and all this world, i.e., all things of the senses, is developed in *De vera religione* 86-89 and perhaps most illuminatingly in *De diversis quaestionibus* 83, 33-36, built around an analysis of fear and love that becomes fundamental for Augustine's later treatment of the Pauline theology of grace in *ibid*. 66, *Expositio quarundam propositionum ex epistula apostoli ad Romanos* 44-52, and *De spiritu et littera* 8.13.

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16 Jubet igitur aeterna lex avertere amorem a temporalibus et eum mundatum ad aeterna convertere. *De libero arbitrio* 1:15.32.
18 *De moribus ecclesiae catholicae* 20.37. See quotation below.
should be despised—but should be used for the needs of this life." In this treatise using is contrasted with loving, but in the solution Augustine develops a decade later, in the first book of *On Christian Doctrine*, using is classified as one kind of loving. This yields the famous Augustinian ethics of use and enjoyment, *uti* and *frui*, both of which are forms of love. So now Augustine can say we should love temporal things, for precisely in using them the right way we are loving them as we should, not despising them. But we are loving them without any permanent attachment, which means we will not be grieved by losing them. For use is related to enjoyment as means to end, so that the right way to use temporal things is temporarily, as a means of arriving at lasting enjoyment of eternal things. (Incidentally, the plural should not mislead us: “eternal things” means nothing but God, who alone is immutable, being eternal Truth and Goodness and Beauty and Righteousness and Wisdom and so on. Thus the eternal things we are to love are Platonic Ideas in the mind of God, as Augustine makes clear in his little essay “On Ideas”.

Now comes the really tricky question. We are of course to love our neighbors, just as Christ says—but does that mean using them or enjoying them? After introducing the *uti*/frui distinction Augustine is actually willing, for the first and only time in his career, to argue for the startling conclusion that the proper way to relate to our neighbors is to use them. For human beings are not eternal and therefore not to be enjoyed. Even God does not enjoy human beings

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19 amandum igitur solus Deus est; omnis vero iste mundus, id est omnia sensibilia contemnenda; utendum autem his ad huius vitae necessitatem. *ibid.*
20 The *uti*/frui contrast is introduced in *De doctrina christiana* 1:10.10, but *uti* is not explicitly classified as a form of love until Augustine asks the question, in what sense we are to love our neighbor, *ibid.* 1:22.20. Evidently Augustine classifies *uti* as a form of love only in order to explain how loving something besides God can be legitimate.
21 *De diversis quaestionibus* 83, 46.
22 *De doctrina christiana* 1:22.20-21.
but uses them—for their own good, Augustine immediately explains, since God, being perfect goodness, needs nothing from his creatures but gives them all the good they need. The explanation is convoluted and not very convincing, and indeed it does not appear to have convinced Augustine himself, because he never repeats it. In later writings Augustine abandons the thesis that the proper way to love our neighbors is to use them, adopting instead a suggestion made at the end of the discussion of love in *On Christian Doctrine* 1, to the effect that “all of us who enjoy God may be said to enjoy one another in Him.” This means that what we are really enjoying when we take delight in our Christian friends, with whom we seek to enjoy God, is God Himself, not our friends.

**The Strange and Beautiful Assurance**

Something like this concept of enjoying our friends in God must be what Augustine has in mind when he speaks of loving our friends “in God” in the *Confessions*, which was written about the same time as *On Christian Doctrine*. Notice this is the reverse of the common modern phrase, “to love God in our friends,” which is more explicit about making sure that we do not allow anything human to be the object of the verb “to love.” (This business of being more spiritual than Christ has a long history in the Christian tradition, which cannot be pinned on

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23 *De doctrina christiana* 1:31.34-32.35.
24 As Oliver O'Donovan argues in his fundamental study of the development of Augustine’s language of use and enjoyment, this attempt to classify human beings among the things to be used is "quite simply a mistake, with which Augustine cannot live." O'Donovan, "Usus and *Fruito* in Augustine, *De doctrina christiana* 1" in *Journal of Theological Studies*, n.s., 33/2, Oct. 1982, p 390.
25 *omnes, qui eo fruimur, nobis etiam invicem in ipso perfruamur. De doctrina christiana* 1:32.35.
26 *quum autem homine in Deo frueris, Deo potius quam homine frueris. De doctrina christiana* 1:33.37.
Augustine or even on ancient philosophy). Augustine’s phrasing at least allows him to raise the question: what about the problem that the human beings we love are mortal, temporal creatures and therefore can be lost? If Christ is right that we are to love them and not God alone, then it does appear that we will get attached to them, and therefore that we cannot but grieve when we lose them. Here comes the really striking claim, which I described earlier as both strange and beautiful. After explaining what was wrong about his desperate grief for his best friend in *Confessions* 4, Augustine tells us how things go right if we love our friends in God: “Happy is he who loves You, and his friend in You, and his enemy because of You. For he alone loses nothing dear to him, to whom all are dear in Him who is never lost.”

If you love your friends in God, you cannot lose them. How wonderful, if only it were true! I still do not understand how Augustine thinks he can get away with making this claim. It is not one he defends or even repeats in other works. And his defense of it here lies not so much in the arguments he makes as in the narrative structure of the *Confessions* itself. The *Confessions* is the story of a character who starts out miserable because of his attachment to temporal things—for in Augustine’s thinking love is a kind of spiritual glue which unites your soul with what you love, and when you love things that perish the inevitable result is that your

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28 The soul is joined to whatever it loves by "the glue of love" (glutine amore) in *Confessiones* 4:10.15. The metaphor of love as glue is common in Augustine, though not always rendered in the translations; cf. e.g. De libero arbitrio 1:33, De Trinitate 10:7, Enarrationes in Psalmos 62:17, as well as the study by Lienhard, "The Glue Itself is Charity: Ps 62:9 in Augustine's Thought" in Augustine: Presbyter Factus Sum (New York: Peter Lang, 1993) pp. 375-384. That love is a kind of unitive force is a key feature of Augustine's psychology, well-explained by Burnaby, *Amor Dei* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1938) pp. 100-103. It is also fundamental to Augustine's account of the relations of self and other; see Cary, "Augustine's Social Ontology" in *Augustine and Politics* (Lexington, 2004).
soul is torn apart when they are taken from you. That rending pain of loss is both the sign of our disordered loves and the goad which drives young Augustine away from his carnal love for transitory things to find that Beauty which is eternal, both ever ancient and ever new, and not found among external things. But to love this Beauty is also to love all those who love it with you, to be united with them in the inward fellowship of love which Augustine later calls the City of God. This fellowship too you cannot lose, except in the most superficial and transitory sense.

The Christian friends whom you love in God can die, but you have not really lost them. You have lost only their mortal bodies, and that only temporarily. You cannot lose their souls. And that is a strange, bold, questionable claim. To see why, we need to look beyond the usual consolations of Christian Platonism, which are still very much with us.

It is easy enough to say we will see our Christian friends by and by, and Augustine in fact makes much of this traditional claim in later works, such as his sermons on grief. Pious hearts are permitted to grieve for a while, he says, with a pain willing to be healed and tears willing to be consoled, for the Christian faith tells us that our losses are only temporary. We do not mourn as those who have no hope, as Paul says. Likewise when Augustine holds back his tears for his mother, it is because he is convinced he must not grieve over her as if she had died in misery or even as if she were fully dead. Once again, it is as if to say: why haven’t I learned this yet? What he needs to learn, to put it in Platonist terms, is that he has lost only her body, not her soul. The narrator of the Confessions reinforces this Platonist interpretation of Christian consolation by emphasizing Monica’s own freedom from concern about her body. She once was anxious to


\[30\] 1 Thess. 4.12 See Augustine’s sermon 172 on grief, which has this passage as its text.

\[31\] at illa nec misere moriebatur nec omnino moriebatur. Confessiones 9:12.29.
be buried next to her husband in Africa, but as she lies dying in Italy she no longer cares where they lay her corpse. The physical proximity of bodies is not what matters to her any more. Her attitude, as our narrator portrays it, resembles Socrates’ unconcern about his corpse in Plato’s *Phaedo* more than the attitude of the women going to tomb at Easter, for whom the physical location of Jesus’ body is everything. Once again, this Platonist lesson is far more spiritual than the Christian Gospel. And this Platonist lesson is the one which young Augustine, the grief-stricken character in *Confessions* 9, has not yet fully learned—he has learned it with his head, we might say, but not with his heart. His tears are a sign of carnal feelings because they are evoked by the loss of his mother's body, her physical presence, not her soul.

So far we have the traditional motifs of Christian Platonism, where life after death is interpreted not just in terms of the resurrection of the body, as in the Gospels, but also in terms of the immortality of the soul, as in the *Phaedo*. The problem is that in Christianity there is such a thing as the death of the soul, its eternal death in punishment and separation from God, and the fear of that loss is a central concern of the narrative in *Confessions*. The reason Augustine the narrator is consoled rather than grief-stricken at the death of his best friend so long ago is that his friend was thereby saved from efforts by young Augustine the Manichaean to lead him into heresy and therefore (in the judgment of the mature Augustine, the bishop) into eternal death.

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33 Plato, *Phaedo* 115c-e.
34 Compare the description of Monica's death as the release of the soul from the body in *Confessiones* 9:11.28 (anima...corpore soluta est) with Plato's definition of death as the separation of soul from body in *Phaedo* 64c. The fact that Augustine (almost certainly) learned this language from the Christian tradition rather than by reading it directly in Plato does not change the fact of its ultimately Platonic origin; it simply means that much of Augustine's Christian Platonism is not original with him.
35 Augustine is an eloquent exponent of this concept, *De civitate Dei* 13:2 and 20:6.
But that didn’t happen, because Augustine’s friend died a Catholic, abjuring Augustine’s heresy—a great grief for Augustine the character, but a great consolation for Augustine the narrator: “He was snatched away from my madness, to be kept safe with You for my consolation.”

The obvious problem here is that not everyone you love gets saved in the end. Or so it would seem—unless loving your friends in God is some kind of guarantee against the eternal damnation of their souls. The strange and beautiful thing about the narrative in the Confessions is that it presents a world with just such a guarantee. For the great test of the claim that we cannot lose what we rightly love is of course the story of Augustine himself, as the object of his mother’s love. Indeed, everything that is puzzling about his grief for his mother becomes clear in the light of her grief for him. In the early books of the Confessions she is always weeping for him, because he is a heretic in danger of the eternal destruction of his soul. Hence “she wept for me before You…more than mothers weep for bodily deaths.” There is no hint of moral disapproval of these tears, though they have to be sharply distinguished from the more carnal tears she weeps when she misses her son’s bodily presence. There is no hint of macho in Augustine’s attitude toward this kind of tears—he will never disapprove of weeping for the soul, one’s own or another’s. Quite the contrary: these tears are signs of deep spiritual power. For if Augustine’s project of never loving what you can lose is to make sense of human love, then the

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37 pro me fleret ad te mea mater, fidelis tua, amplius quam flent matres corporea funera. Confessiones 3:11.19.  
38 See esp. Confessiones 5:8.15.  
39 Hence in Confessiones 9:13.34 Augustine the narrator wholly approves of the “far different sort of tears” (longe aliud lacrimarum genus) that he currently weeps when he prays for his mother’s soul. Likewise there is no hint of shame or embarrassment when the narrator tells us about the tears of repentance copiously shed in Confessiones 8.
inward prayer of the heart for the soul of one’s beloved, of which such tears are the outward expression, cannot be rejected.

This stunning claim is the explanation Augustine gives for why he was safe even from bodily death as long as he was a heretic. Despite a life-threatening illness, he could not die as a heretic and thus suffer the eternal death of his soul. That would break his mother’s heart and therefore God cannot allow it.

If *that* wound had struck my mother’s heart, it would never have healed…I can’t see how she could be healed if such a death had pierced clear through the bowels of her love…. [And then he asks God:] Could You despise the tears by which she prayed not for gold or silver, nor any mutable and transitory good, but for the salvation of her son’s soul, and push her away from Your help—You, by whose gift she was like that? No, Lord, not at all.  

God *cannot* refuse the prayer of love for another soul. Strong words! But we have heard this same message earlier in the *Confessions*, in the famous words with which a Catholic priest comforted Monica, saying, “It *cannot* be that the son of these tears should perish.” Augustine, I think, means us to take this word of comfort quite literally: God *cannot* refuse the prayers expressed by such tears, for God *cannot* break the heart of such a mother, who is such a mother, full of such prayers and tears, by God’s own gift of grace. And so the passage in book 6 continues:

40 quo vulnere si feriretur cor matris, numquam sanaretur…. non itaque video quomodo sanaretur, si mea talis illa mors transverberasset viscera dilectionis eius….huiusne tu lacrimas, quibus non a te aurum et argentum petebat, nec aliquod mutabile aut volubile bonum, sed salutem animae filii sui, tu, cuius munere talis erat, contemneres et repelleres ab auxilio tuo? nequaquam, domine. *Confessiones* 5:9.16-17.

41 fieri non potest, ut filius istarum lacrimarum pereat *Confessiones* 3:12.21.
But rather You were present and You heard and You did all things in the order that You had predestined them to be done. Far be it from You to deceive her in her visions and Your replies to her.  
Augustine alludes here to visions Monica had assuring her that she would see her son a Catholic before she died. But he is also interested in a yet deeper assurance. The reason the son of Monica’s tears cannot perish is because of the character of the grief her tears express, which is the effect of her love for his soul, not his body, a love which is hers by virtue of a divine gift of grace which was predestined from all eternity. So behind Monica’s tears is her grief, behind her grief is her rightly ordered love, behind this love is divine grace, and behind divine grace is God’s own predestination. That is the surest possible foundation for the conviction that we cannot lose what we love in God. For what God cannot do is violate his own predestined plan—because he is immutable, not someone whose mind changes with circumstances. And if he predestines you to love someone with Monica’s kind of love, then you cannot lose what you love. At least that is the message of the Confessions—without which the whole story falls apart.

Monica’s visions, as our narrator uses them, serve to confirm the general principle of the narrative: that “he alone loses nothing that is dear to him, to whom all are dear in God.” Monica is exceptional only in that she has direct assurance of the deep truth so often hidden from us: that when you love other human beings with a rightly-ordered love, you cannot lose what you love. This truth is the backbone of the narrative of the Confessions, essential for its happy ending and also for the explanation of what is so wrong about the main character’s experience of carnal love.

and tormented grief. For this is a providential narrative, and essential to the concept of providence built into it is the conviction that it would be contrary to God's predestined plan for a heart like Monica’s to be broken.

**An Apparent Change of Mind**

It would be wonderful if it were true, wouldn’t it? If you love someone the right way, you can’t lose them. But Augustine cannot really give us an argument for thinking this is true as a matter of general principle. His mature theology of predestination in fact clearly rules out any such principle, for the simple common-sense reason that nobody knows the future well enough to predict who will remain a faithful Christian until the end of their lives. None of us knows, even in our own case, whether we will receive the divine gift of perseverance in the faith—much less in the case of our friends. Augustine is not a Calvinist, thinking that believers can know they are among the elect (that is Calvin's radical innovation in the doctrine of predestination).

Unlike most Protestants, therefore, Augustine is in no position to assume that once converted we are sure to be saved. On the contrary, Christians in this mortal life are saved in hope (*in spe*) but not in reality (*in re*), which means precisely that they are "not yet saved" (*nondum salvos*). So the conversion narrative of the *Confessions* cannot be read as if it were a Protestant story about how Augustine got saved.

This means that even the narrative of the *Confessions* fails, in the end, to substantiate Augustine's claim that those who love their beloved in God, as Monica does, cannot lose what

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45 See my "Why Luther is not Quite Protestant: The Logic of Faith in a Sacramental Promise" in *Pro Ecclesia*, forthcoming.
46 *De civitate Dei* 19:4.
they love. For Augustine is in no position to narrate the ultimate happy ending of his life, his eternal salvation. As book 10 of the *Confessions* makes quite clear, the dangers and temptations ahead of him on the road of this mortal life are real, and he has no ironclad guarantee that he will overcome them. That is why the *Confessions* must conclude by leaving Augustine's individual life behind and expounding the Scriptures, which indicate the ultimate happiness of the human soul by describing its blessed beginning. Books 11-13 of the *Confessions*, with their astounding exegesis of the opening chapters of Genesis, provide the only possible happy ending of Augustine's story. He is not certain of his own individual destiny, and therefore does not really know whether the son of Monica's tears will be saved or perish in the end. If his mother remains attached to him even in heaven, then it is still within the realm of possibility that God might break her heart.

In light of this failure to sustain such a key thesis, it is not surprising that (so far as I have been able to see) the *Confessions* is the last time Augustine makes a serious effort to work out his ethical project of not loving what you can lose. For in fact, the project doesn’t work—not if we are to love our neighbor. In the long run Augustine cannot avoid the conclusion that it is possible to love as we should, and yet lose what we love. So after the *Confessions*, Augustine’s writings contain no more scoldings for those who grieve. This opens up a deep human sympathy for human losses, including even the loss of beloved souls. The defense of grief in the *City of God*, which I quoted at the beginning, belongs to an extended meditation on the grief suffered in this life even by the saints—including how even the best friendships, which involve the love of two kindred Christian souls, can go sour.47

47 *De civitate Dei* 19:5-9.
Along with deeper sympathy for human grief comes less hostility toward temporal loves. In the last book of the *City of God*, written near the end of Augustine’s life, he devotes chapters not only to the misery of the afflictions of this mortal life but also to the blessing of its consolations, temporary though they be.\(^{48}\) The contrast with *Confessions* has always struck me. In the discussion of temptation in the second half of *Confessions* 10, grief is always taken as the sign that we have attached ourselves too much to some temporal good. For Augustine at this point in his career even the light of day is a temptation, as shown by the fact that we miss it if it is absent too long. It goes near to breaking my heart that a man who obviously loved the light so much should come up with the wonderful epithet “queen of colors” to describe the physical light—in the course of explaining why it was an enticement and a temptation to him.\(^{49}\) I don’t suppose he ever gives up the notion that any temporal good is something to which we can become too attached. But at least at the end of his life, in the last book of the *City of God*, he can speak of “the abundance of light and its wonderful beauty”\(^{50}\) and it is simply a word of praise and thanksgiving, accompanied by no moral warning. Though there is much to say about the development of Augustine’s thought from the *Confessions* to the end of the *City of God*, some three decades later, one crucial change that explains a great deal, I think, is that he no longer talks as if there is something wrong with loving what you can lose.

\(^{48}\) *De cititate Dei* 22:22-24.
\(^{49}\) *Confessiones* 10:34.51.
\(^{50}\) in ipsius lucis tanta copia tamque mirabili specie! *De cititate Dei* 23:24.