

A Comparative Study of Augustine's *De Trinitate* and Ghazālī's *Kitāb al-maḥabba* on Human Knowledge of and Love for God

Hina Khalid, *University of Cambridge*

Within the framework of the Islamic and Christian traditions, the “grammar of divinity”¹ at once seeks to affirm intimate relation with a personal God and secure the ontological distinction between Creator and created. Any attempt to construct an account of the human-divine relationship thereby intersects with reflection on divine transcendence and immanence: given that God cannot be rendered another category among worldly categories, how does one formulate the human path of proximity to the divine? In this paper, I examine this paradox of human relationality to the divine as it is elaborated in Augustine's *De Trinitate* (On the Trinity) and al-Ghazālī's *Kitāb al-maḥabba wa'l shawq wa'l uns wa'l riḍā* (Love, Longing, Intimacy and Contentment, Book 36 of Ghazālī's *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn*, Revival of the Religious Sciences).

By tracing the different ways that these texts render the perfection of self-knowledge and self-love as the knowledge of, and love for, God, I hope to demonstrate that for both Augustine and Ghazālī, the knowledge of God emerges as a dynamic mode of loving,² such that the fulfilment of human life lies not in the abolition of desire but in the rightful orienting, through a process of spiritual purification, of that desire to God.³ Both texts seek to

1. David B. Burrell, *Knowing the Unknowable God: Ibn-Sina, Maimonides, Aquinas* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), 2.

2. In outlining a necessary connection between knowledge of, and love for, God, Ghazālī and Augustine present a corrective to the Neoplatonic (and Avicennian) model of a purely intellectualised ascent to God. Moreover, Ghazālī's reflection on the intimate, personal love of God for humanity is in direct contention with Avicenna's notion that God can only apprehend particulars in a “universal” way.

3. Indeed, in his fourth homily on the First Epistle of John, Augustine asserts that the “entire life of a good Christian is a holy desire” (Augustine of Hippo, *Homilies on the First Epistle of John*, trans. Boniface Ramsey [Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2008], 69). The language of

clarify the truthful mode of human love for God: that is always a *conscious* movement of desire, in fulfilment of that end for which human beings were created. This human yearning, in both texts, rests on a particular relation with God's own love – a love that cannot imply any change in God but is that which undergirds, and is the prior condition *for*, humanity's love for God. Through the vocabulary of love as it pertains to the creature and God, Ghazālī and Augustine invite the reader to an inner understanding of what it is to live harmoniously in orientation towards the “One who truly is.”⁴

1. Context

1.1 Augustine: The Trinity as Relational Framework for Human Knowing and Loving

Completed some time after 420 CE, Augustine's *De Trinitate* does not appear to have been written for any polemical purpose. Augustine's primary aim in this work is not to offer a systematic exposition of how to reconcile three and one, nor even to present a final trinity in the human mind that can accurately serve as an analogy for the divine Trinity (though there is considerable reflection on mental triads in Books IX-XI).⁵ Rather, Augustine's purpose in reflecting on the various lexical conventions that

desire features pre-eminently in Augustine's *Confessions*: “You have drawn me out of all my most evil ways, that You might become a delight to me above all the allurements which I once pursued; that I may most entirely love You, and clasp Your hand with all my affections” (Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, 1, 15, trans. E.B. Pusey, ed. Tom Griffith [Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 2016], 15. All following quotations from the *Confessions* will be taken from this translation). Ghazālī also articulates his yearning: “though love afflict me, yet it is not grievous, for death to self means life in Thee, my lover, to suffer thirst, if that shall by thy pleasure, to me, is sweeter far than all refreshment” (quoted in Margaret Smith, *Al-Ghazālī: the Mystic* [London: Luzac & Co.], 84). Both Augustine's *De Trinitate* and Ghazālī's *Kitāb al-maḥabba* employ the language of longing for the “face” of God, or to “gaze” upon the divine Beloved, and the pleasure/delight thereof.

4. Saint Augustine, *De Ordine*, 2, 2, 6, quoted in Emilie Z. Brunn, *St. Augustine: Being and Nothingness* (New York: Paragon House Publishers, 1988), 101.

5. As Rowan Williams states, “Augustine is no less concerned than any Greek theologian to secure the unity and simplicity of the divine nature, but as a *polemical* concern, this appears very rarely in the *De Trinitate*. There is certainly no trace at all of a Neoplatonist interest in the One at work here” (see Rowan Williams, *On Augustine* [London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2016], 186).

are implied in Trinitarian discourse is to show how the divine tri-unity intelligibly shapes and orients our turning towards God in faith, and what it means to “receive” the activities of the three persons concretely and consciously in an active mode of participation.

What *is* central for Augustine, as regards the coherence of the Trinitarian doctrine, is that the divine substance cannot conceivably be separated from “the life of the divine persons...[thus defining] that substance in such a way that God cannot be other than relational/Trinitarian.”⁶ In other words, the divine essence is neither “an abstract principle of unity, nor a ‘causal’ factor over and above the hypostases,”⁷ rather to *be* God at all is “to be desirous of and active in giving the divine life.”⁸ This fact of the inseparability of divinity from the relationality of the triune life, holds primacy for Augustine not as a piece of abstract metaphysical theology but rather as a pointer to the character of human relationality with the divine, who is relationality in and of His very essence. Principally, Augustine correlates the Word with knowledge and the Spirit with love (*caritas*) – and if both are “inseparable in the unity of the Trinity, so...must knowledge be inseparable from [the] love of God.”⁹ In other words, the inseparability of knowledge and love within the Godhead offers a paradigm for the unitive nature of human knowledge: “who will say there is any wisdom when there is no love?”¹⁰

1.2 Ghazālī’s *Iḥyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn*: A Spiritual Path Informed by Love

Just as Augustine takes love to be constitutive of wisdom properly understood, Ghazālī’s *Iḥyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn* attacks the purveyors of the formal Islamic disciplines¹¹ whose scholarship, in his view, is driven by the ego

6. Williams, *On Augustine*, 180. For this reason, the image too must necessarily be triune, in light of Genesis 1:26: “Let us make man in *our* image, in *our* likeness” (emphasis added).

7. Williams, *On Augustine*, 180.

8. Williams, *On Augustine*, 180.

9. A. N Williams, “Contemplation,” in *Knowing the Triune God: The Work of the Spirit in the Practices of the Church*, ed. James J. Buckley and David S. Yeago (Michigan & Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), 126.

10. Augustine, *De Trinitate*, XV. 12, trans. Edmund Hill (New York: New City Press, 1991). All following quotations from the *De Trinitate* will be taken from this translation.

11. In this regard, Ghazālī’s *Iḥyā’* appears to be polemical in a way that the *De Trinitate* is not:

rather than the heart. Setting forth a “revivified” image of Islamic practice, Ghazālī emphasises the inward sincerity that must animate the proper observance of external rituals (such as prayer and charity) – the exoteric forming a “polish” to reconfigure the intention of the heart.

One can situate Ghazālī’s concern in the *Iḥyā’* within his epistemological “crisis”: in his autobiography, *Munqidh min al-ḍalāl* (The Deliverer from Error), Ghazālī describes his doubts in the deliverances of his own mind, which might be mistaken (and thus subject to a higher authority of “knowing”), just as sense perception is often mistaken in its encounter with external reality. Ghazālī states that he was cured “not by systematic reasoning...but by a light which God the exalted cast into [his] chest.”¹² That it is only through God’s “casting” of light that Ghazālī overcame his scepticism points forward to a theme that is central to both authors: the human search for truth is grounded in God’s grace. For Ghazālī, the encounter with this divine “light” shaped his conviction that the mystics alone could cultivate proximity to God – precisely because the spiritual path demanded a whole-hearted, experiential seeking of the divine: a path of knowing, in other words, shaped by love. Ghazālī’s text sets out the path by which that love might take root in the human soul.

2. The Relationship of the Self to Knowing and Loving God

2.1 Augustine: Truthful Self-Knowledge and Self-Love as Knowledge and Love of God

Augustine’s notion of the human as oriented towards the divine begins to crystallise in Book VIII, laying the foundation for his account of relationality. Where the first seven books analyse the Trinitarian mystery through scripture and conceptual clarification, in Book VIII, Augustine declares his intention to examine the same territory *modo interiore* (though

he writes against those who subvert the character of true religion in pursuit of worldly status and prestige, and is in this sense in dialogue with his own former self. He states in his autobiography, “we sought learning for the sake of something other than God, but He would not allow it to be for anything but Himself” (quoted in Joseph Politella, “Al Ghazālī and Meister Eckhart: Two Giants of the Spirit,” *The Muslim World* 54, No. 4 [1964]: 243).

12. Abu Hamid al-Ghazālī, *Munqidh min al-ḍalāl*, quoted in Alexander Treiger, *Inspired Knowledge in Islamic Thought: Al-Ghazālī’s Theory of Mystical Cognition and its Avicennian Foundation* (London & New York: Routledge, 2012), 20.

never in such a way as to set scripture aside),¹³ grounding the utterances of faith in the human experience of its own interior life. Augustine begins with a reflection on the character of the ordinary beliefs we hold in faith, and how they all, if they are to be intelligible, demand prior categories of knowledge – i.e., one can believe that Jesus was born of a virgin and died on the cross precisely because one has some knowledge of what men/virgins/crosses are and what birth and death signify. Yet, when we turn toward the Trinity, there are no prior conceptual categories to which we can refer, leading to the pivot of Augustine’s epistemology: how can one love what one does not know?

If Augustine is committed to asserting that the created self is only truly itself in communion with the triune life, then the knowledge of God must be somehow, even if dimly, accessible to the human being – for it is only in knowing that we can love. Augustine thus frames his search: “what we are asking...is from what likeness or comparison of things known to us we are able to believe, so that we may love the as yet unknown God.”¹⁴ Citing the example of our love for the apostle Paul, Augustine affirms that the reason we are able to love his just soul, even if we are not just ourselves, is because justice is present to the soul: not as an abstraction from matter or as a “body reality,”¹⁵ for “it is in ourselves that we have learnt what ‘just’ is.”¹⁶ One need not recall past sensory images or imaginatively construct new ones; justice is simply the “‘interior truth’ (*veritas interior*) that is a *forma* present to the mind.”¹⁷ This unmediated presence alone can account for why the unjust man wishes to be just.

It remains, then, to demonstrate how this innate orientation towards justice is, properly speaking, an innate orientation towards God. When an unjust soul recognises and loves justice in another, “the pattern [one] perceives is [precisely that which one seeks] to realise in [oneself].”¹⁸ If justice itself is loving, since it by nature wills the “good of all,”¹⁹ what our

13. Augustine, *De Trinitate*, VIII. 1.

14. Augustine, *De Trinitate*, VIII. 8.

15. Augustine, *De Trinitate*, VIII. 9.

16. Augustine, *De Trinitate*, VIII. 9.

17. Lewis Ayres, *Augustine and the Trinity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 282.

18. Williams, *On Augustine*, 159.

19. Williams, *On Augustine*, 160.

moral yearning longs for “is love itself, in that it is directed to persons who are loving...[and] to love loving generosity as the goal and standard of our humanity is to love it as the good, which is to love it as God.”²⁰ Augustine concludes (alluding to 1 John 4:16), “if a man is full of love, what is he full of but God?”²¹ Similarly, when we who are not just ourselves love the just man, what we love (even if unconsciously) is the unchanging Good in which all finite goods varyingly participate – the Good “in which we love and move and are.”²²

For Augustine, therefore, inasmuch as the mind moves towards what is finitely good, there is a natural orientation to what is absolutely and unchangingly Good. The central concern, however, for Augustine, is how we step beyond this innate – and possibly unconscious – participation in the Good that is God towards a conscious, integrative movement of *desire*: and it is this task of entering into conscious relation with the ever-present ground of our being that animates the subsequent unfolding of the *De Trinitate*. Though – for Augustine – the human is (ontologically) good on its own, its nature is only fulfilled when it may be called a *good* soul. This happens when the will consciously participates in the triune life, such that “the good the soul turns to [in love] in order to be good is the good from which it gets its being soul at all.”²³

Having identified the fulfilment of the human relation to God as an active, conscious mode of knowing and loving, Augustine settles on the triad of the mind remembering, understanding, and willing itself as the mental activities that most intimately reflect the triune life of God.²⁴ The pattern of human understanding is framed in terms of an inner “word” prior to the spoken word. In the process of conceiving something in the mind, one produces a mental word that is “either for sinning or for doing good,”²⁵ either

20. Williams, *On Augustine*, 161.

21. Augustine, *De Trinitate*, VIII. 12.

22. Acts 17:28.

23. Augustine, *De Trinitate*, VIII. 5.

24. For Augustine, this is because if humanity itself is the image, no part of the triad can be extrinsic to the human being. He thus rejects the faculty of sight as the image in humanity - the triad of sight, the object seen and the will that unites the two relies on an external other (namely, the object) as one of its constituents.

25. Augustine, *De Trinitate*, IX. 13.

in “covetousness”²⁶ or in “charity.”²⁷ If the generated word is uttered in love for material objects, its satisfaction²⁸ is contingent on something outside the mind and thus restless until this something is grasped. However, for the one who loves spiritual truths, there is a certain “fullness” or “resting” insofar as the birth of the word is equivalent to its conception, such that “someone who perfectly loves justice is...already just even if no occasion exists for him to do justice externally.”²⁹ The concept of inner “words” means that although the mind is, in some sense, always remembering, understanding and willing itself,³⁰ this trinity is only truly actualised when an inner word is generated by active thought and is held in being by the will that unites the memory to that word. In short, the mind cannot be understood as an abstract entity independent of its desiring; it images the Trinity only as it is oriented towards the eternal good.

This becomes especially significant by Book XIV, where Augustine recasts his image of the mind’s remembering, understanding and loving itself to its remembering, understanding and loving God: “this trinity of the mind is not really the image of God because the mind remembers and understands and loves itself, but because it is able to remember and understand and love him by whom it was made. And when it does this it becomes wise. If it does not do it, *then even though it remembers, understands and loves itself, it is foolish.*”³¹ Although the elaboration on justice in Book VIII indicates that the human being is always in some sense knowing and loving God insofar as one moves toward the good, if a mental “word” cannot be generated without active thought, only when the “word” or object of human thought is

26. Augustine, *De Trinitate*, IX. 13.

27. Augustine, *De Trinitate*, IX. 13.

28. Augustine asserts, however, that satisfaction of selfish desires can never bring fulfilment in the truest sense, for the one who acts against God necessarily acts against the self: anyone who “loves himself unjustly [i.e. acts against love]...no longer really loves himself; for ‘the man who loves iniquity hates his own soul (Ps 11:5)’” (*De Trinitate*, VIII. 9). Ghazālī too affirms that if a man loves himself, i.e. his own desires, but does not love God, “it is due to his ignorance *both of himself and of his Lord*” (Abu Hamid al-Ghazālī, *Kitāb al-maḥabba wa’l shawq wa’l uns wa’l riḍā*, trans. Eric Ormsby [Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 2011], 24, emphasis added). All following quotations from the *Kitāb al-maḥabba* will be taken from this translation.

29. Augustine, *De Trinitate*, IX. 14.

30. Much like a man trained in multiple disciplines can be said to remember, understand and love them all even when he is only engaged in the active thought of one.

31. Augustine, *De Trinitate*, XIV. 15, emphasis added.

God, who is *interior intimo meo* (more inward to me than my most inward part)³² can one be said to image the triune life and thus be *with* God truly: “it is man’s great misfortune not to be with him without whom he cannot be. Obviously he is not without him in whom he is [God’s presence to each creature is the very possibility of its existence]; and yet if he fails to remember and understand and love him, he is not with him.”³³

2.2 Ghazālī: God Alone Merits Love

In the *Kitāb al-maḥabba*, Ghazālī employs a rather different technique to present the fulfilment of the human being as a conscious knowing and loving of God. Ghazālī begins his argument by outlining the five causes of love intrinsic to the nature of the human being, which will ultimately converge on God as the true, and most worthy Beloved. The first cause is the “natural inclination of man”³⁴ to the continuance and perfection of his existence. The second cause of love is the love one has for whoever benefits him (*iḥsan* or benevolence), for this serves the foremost love of one’s existence and perfection. Thirdly, one loves the other who is good in himself though “his benefaction does not extend to [one] personally.”³⁵ The fourth cause appears as an extension of the third: there is the love for a thing in virtue of itself, not as a means to an end. Here, Ghazālī cites the “perception of the beautiful,”³⁶ which occasions pleasure, as that which is quintessentially “loved for itself”³⁷ (he offers the example of one gazing on flowing waters). The fifth, and final cause of love is a “hidden” or “spiritual” affinity between the lover and beloved.

Ghazālī then turns to demonstrate how these five causes “in their fullest unity and perfection are inconceivable except in the case of God the Exalted.”³⁸ In the first instance, the love one has for one’s own existence and perfection is only intelligible as love for the “Self-Subsistent One Himself

32. Augustine, *Confessions*, 3, 6.

33. Augustine, *De Trinitate*, XIV. 16.

34. Binyamin Abrahamov, *Divine Love in Islamic Mysticism: The Teachings of Al-Ghazālī and Al-Dabbāgh* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2003), 45.

35. Ghazālī, *Kitāb al-maḥabba*, 28.

36. Ghazālī, *Kitāb al-maḥabba*, 16.

37. Ghazālī, *Kitāb al-maḥabba*, 16.

38. Ghazālī, *Kitāb al-maḥabba*, 22.

(*Al-Qayyūm*),”³⁹ who alone sustains man’s existence at every moment of his being, and graciously bestows the perfections of his inner nature: “how can a man love himself and not love his Lord through whom his very subsistence occurs?”⁴⁰ On the second cause of love, if one loves another who benefits him, God alone can rightly be said to merit this love in fullness. Ghazālī’s Ash’arite cosmology led him to assert that “there is no agent but God the Most High”⁴¹: although a human agent is moved by considerations of the good, “the real benefactor is He [God]...who gave those driving and impelling motivations power over him so that he might act. *His hand was but the instrument by which God’s goodness came to you.*”⁴² On the third cause of love, the love for another whose goodness does not bring personal benefit, Ghazālī argues that God alone merits this type of love: the divine generosity provides not only what is necessary (internal organs), but extends to what is useful (hands) and beautiful (curve of the eyebrows). This threefold division extends through the depths of the created order, such that God’s abundant mercy becomes the very structural fabric of creation itself.

39. Ghazālī, *Kitāb al-maḥabba*, 24.

40. Ghazālī, *Kitāb al-maḥabba*, 24. For Augustine, the subsistence of one’s existence powerfully testifies to the enduring love of God for creation: creatures are only sustained insofar as God imparts existence and life to them, and this “sharing” by which God enables creatures to *have* what he eternally *is*, can only be deemed an act of love.

41. Abu Hamid Al-Ghazālī, *Al Ghazālī on Faith in Divine Unity and Trust in Divine Providence*. Translation of Book 35 of *Iḥyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn*, trans. David Burrell (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2000), 15-16. The Ash’arite school of Islamic theology (*kalām*) affirmed broadly that God alone can be the “creator” of actions, while human beings only “acquire” them at the point of the physical instantiation of the act. This doctrine is known as the theory of acquisition (*kasb*). For more on this, see Neal Robinson, “Ash’ariyya and Mu’tazila,” *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy: Islamic Philosophy*, accessed on September 2, 2019, <http://www.muslimphilosophy.com/ip/rep/H052>.

42. Ghazālī, *Kitāb al-maḥabba*, 26, emphasis added. Though a full consideration of Ghazālī’s ontology is outside the scope of this paper, it is worth noting that Ghazālī does not deny the “reality” of created existence but affirms that Allah alone possesses being in the true sense. At various points, particularly in his *Mishkāṭ al-Anwār* (The Niche for Lights), Ghazālī develops the notion that divine existence is “real” (*ḥaqīqī*), while created reality is “figurative” (*majāzī*). To understand God as the sole agent is to see that everything “is in His service, for not even the smallest atom in the worlds of heaven and earth is independent of Him for its movement” (Ghazālī, *On Faith in Divine Unity and Trust in Divine Providence*, 15-16). This is not to negate the existence of the world but is simply to secure the transcendence of God as the only self-subsistent Being, while all else can only be said to exist insofar as it derives from Him.

The fourth cause of love, that for beauty in itself, is elaborated in terms of the beauty of the inward form perceived by the “eye of the heart” (*‘ayn al-qalb*) or the “light of insight” (*nūr al-basīra*).⁴³ The beauty of any external or inward reality is determined by its possession of the perfections “which are possible and befitting”⁴⁴ its nature. Just as Augustine sees the just man as naturally beloved to us (based on a recognition of the inward form of goodness), Ghazālī states, “our natures are innately constituted to love the Prophets and Companions, even though they cannot be seen directly with the eyes.”⁴⁵ In virtue of their beautiful traits, which necessarily prompt love, there is a natural movement of love towards the noble qualities of others: qualities which Ghazālī renders as the knowledge of spiritual matters (God, His angels, His scriptures), performance of virtuous deeds, delivering guidance to others, and refraining from vicious habits.

Again, these perfections in virtue of which we love others can only truly be said of God: God alone possesses knowledge, not just in the sense of knowing quantitatively “more” than human beings, but because the objects of God’s knowledge are infinite. (In theory, the knowledge of the most knowing person can be aspired towards and attained by the most ignorant man through his efforts, in a way that cannot be said of the infinite knowledge of God). Though Ghazālī does not employ the language of the unchangeable Good we find in Augustine’s work, he nonetheless insists on the radical, ontological difference of God’s knowing. On the capacity for virtuous actions and the avoidance of evil, we return to Ghazālī’s insistence that God alone bestows these perfections on creatures, and God alone can be said to exemplify these qualities most fully. Thus, the causes of love, for Ghazālī, converge on God in two ways: insofar as we love the perfections/benefits in others, they are bestowed wholly by God (the benefactor moves only through the will of God, so God alone can *truly* be said to act), and because God alone fully possesses those perfections that we love in others (so if we love one who is virtuous, we ought to love God whose virtue surpasses that of any finite being). Concerning the latter, Ghazālī insists that God’s possessing of these perfections should not be understood in the same mode of being as creaturely perfections (as in the case of God’s

43. Ghazālī, *Kitāb al-maḥabba*, 30.

44. Binyamin Abrahamov, *Divine Love in Islamic Mysticism*, 49.

45. Ghazālī, *Kitāb al-maḥabba*, 19.

infinite knowledge): while the perfection of God is absolute, the perfection of creatures is relative “to what is more defective than it.”⁴⁶ Thus, “a man possesses perfection in comparison to a horse,”⁴⁷ but cannot be said to be unqualifiedly perfect.

Ghazālī’s presentation of the five causes of human love and the ways in which God alone is truly deserving of this love might be seen as mechanistically reducing the love for God to a logical extension of the various categories that elicit our love for things of this world. However, not only does Ghazālī refer to the categorical *difference* of the divine perfections, his anthropology points us away from a static understanding of human love for God, and towards a conscious mode of yearning for the divine Beloved in perfection of that relationality for which human beings were made. For Ghazālī, the heart or *qalb*, represents the “subtle tenuous substance, spiritual in nature,”⁴⁸ which was created to know and love God. The heart “belongs to the world of the Unseen,” enabling “ascent to the invisible, spiritual world for him to whom God has opened the door.”⁴⁹

Though the spiritual heart of man is thus created for the love and knowledge of God, this human potentiality is only perfected when one consciously dwells “in fellowship with God [which] is the heart’s joy and delight in the contemplation of His Beauty.”⁵⁰ In Chapter Eleven of the *Kitāb al-maḥabba*, Ghazālī elaborates on the “distinguishing marks”⁵¹ of one’s love for God, and this is framed explicitly as a conscious desiring of the divine, a constant search that animates one’s life. One mark of man’s love, for instance, is that one is constantly engaged in the *dhikr* (remembrance) of God through the utterance of His name,⁵² just as Augustine’s image is not truly complete until our inner “word” actively settles upon God. Though the

46. Ghazālī, *Kitāb al-maḥabba*, 35.

47. Ghazālī, *Kitāb al-maḥabba*, 35.

48. Walter James Skellie, “Introduction,” in Al-Ghazālī, *Kitāb sharḥ ‘ajā‘ib al-qalb* (The Marvels of the Heart), trans. Walter James Skellie (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2010), 16.

49. Ghazālī, *Iḥyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn*, Vol. 1, quoted in Politella, “Al Ghazālī and Meister Eckhart,” 236.

50. Smith, *Al-Ghazālī: the Mystic*, 139.

51. Ghazālī, *Kitāb al-maḥabba*, 107.

52. “With his tongue he talks to people but his inmost self is absorbed in mention of his beloved” (Ghazālī, *Kitāb al-maḥabba*, 116).

“root” of love’s “tree” is firmly planted, its “[fruits] emerge in the heart”⁵³ only as one actively longs for the divine. Notably, for both thinkers this path of human proximity to the divine is made possible only by the bedrock of God’s own love. It is this theme to which our attention now turns.

3. God’s Love for Humanity

3.1 Augustine: The Gift of the Spirit

Augustine’s analysis of the generation of inner words reveals a Trinitarian dynamic of desire within the human mind. This process of active thought is necessarily preceded by a “prior” love that is neither separate from, nor reducible to, the love that follows – this initial love directs the attentive gaze upon its object. In his *Confessions*, Augustine reflects that just as things are “urged by their own weights to seek their own places,”⁵⁴ so too is he directed by his own “weight, which [is] love,”⁵⁵ to move ever closer to God. The creature’s love of God marks not an ascent of the solitary individual into communion with the loved object, for the divine transcendence precludes His being an object to be “grasped”: rather, human desire is “inflamed” by the “gift of God,” through which one is “carried upwards, we glow inwardly, and go forwards.”⁵⁶ The Holy Spirit is the *caritas* that is the agent of our purification and ultimate participation in the triune life – such that “the mind’s object is also its means to that object.”⁵⁷

For Augustine, this human need for divine *caritas* is a matter of the fundamental created ontology (viz., the transcendence of God)⁵⁸ and the sinful nature of the human being (since the soul’s congenital debility means it cannot rise on its own in the same way that it fell).⁵⁹ Sanctification by the

53. Ghazālī, *Kitāb al-maḥabba*, 107.

54. Augustine, *Confessions*, 13, 9.

55. Augustine, *Confessions*, 13, 9.

56. Augustine, *Confessions*, 13, 9.

57. A.N Williams, “Contemplation,” 139.

58. For John Cavadini, the awareness of the infinite ontological gap between humanity and God, an awareness that is the fruit of contemplation, becomes a coincident recognition of the love of God that bridged this gap in the Word becoming flesh (see John Cavadini, “The Structure and Intention of Augustine’s *De Trinitate*,” *Augustinian Studies* 23 [1992]: 109).

59. Ghazālī also refers to the weakness of the human creature in its inability to behold the divine light: just as a bat is dazzled by the ever-present light of day, human minds cannot perceive the “radiant” and “effulgent” beauty of God’s presence that “immerses and encompasses

Holy Spirit is thus cast as an extension of the same loving movement of God that constitutes the creature's very being. To "know" God is to know oneself as held in being and renewed "by this self-communicating action of God,"⁶⁰ whereby God imparts the love that is His very essence in order that creatures might share in existence. The paradox of living as the image of God is that we are drawn to an awareness of our fundamental *difference* from God, such that to "know" and "love" God is to move ever more deeply "into our createdness."⁶¹

If the existence and renewal of humanity are held in the movement of divine love, one must clarify (as best as is possible) the character of this love so as to secure God's transcendence. This is essential for Augustine, who maintains across his works that God cannot "need" creation for there is no lack in the infinite plenitude of God. God's love for creatures is an entirely free gift that wills the participation of created life in the Good that is the divine life. In Book VIII, Augustine identifies that in the created realm, being "true" and being "great" are not the same thing, whereas in God, "greatness is simply truth itself,"⁶² such that God *is* that unchangeable Goodness and Truth in His very essence. Thus, Augustine asserts that one can say "new" things of God, but this does not imply a temporal alteration of the divine essence: the change is on the part of the creature "with respect to which God is said to be."⁶³

This is particularly significant in Book V of the *De Trinitate*, where Augustine elaborates on the meaning of God as man's "refuge" (cf. Psalm 90). In keeping with his insistence on the divine immutability, Augustine states: "the change takes place in us; we were worse before we took refuge in him, and we become better by taking refuge in him. But in him [there is] no change at all."⁶⁴ When the animating flow of the Spirit purifies our desire such that we might gaze upon God, it is *we* who are reformed in the act of conscious participation in the divine life, while God remains "altogether

utterly" (Ghazālī, *Kitāb al-maḥabba*, 83).

60. Williams, *On Augustine*, 174.

61. Williams, *On Augustine*, 175.

62. Augustine, *De Trinitate*, VIII. 2.

63. Roland J. Teske, "Divine Immutability in Augustine," in *To Know God and the Soul: Essays on the Thought of Saint Augustine*, ed. Ronald J. Teske (Washington, D.C: The Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 136.

64. Augustine, *De Trinitate*, V. 17.

immutable”⁶⁵: “it is unthinkable that God should love someone temporally, as though with a new love that was not in him before.”⁶⁶ This is not to deny the divine love but it is simply to clarify the ontological mode of God’s loving: indeed, in its very immutability, God’s love infinitely surpasses that of the creature, as that which grounds the possibility of all relation per se.

3.2 Ghazālī: God’s Lifting of the Veils

Ghazālī’s *Kitāb al-maḥabba* also seeks to integrate the divine transcendence with an account of God’s personal and intimate love of the creature. In Chapter Nine, Ghazālī cites several texts that point to the reality of God’s love – a love that emerges as a deep longing for relation with the human beloved. In one tradition quoted by Ghazālī, God addresses the human being thus: “Hold Me before your eyes and look at Me with the vision of your heart.”⁶⁷ For Ghazālī, the love of God “refers to [God’s] removal of a veil from the heart, so that one sees with his heart, and to God’s *enabling* a person to draw near to Him, and to God’s willing that for him from eternity.”⁶⁸ Closeness (*qurb*) to God, for Ghazālī, thus entails both “affective closeness and intimacy” and “the proximity resulting from knowledge and lifting of the veil.”⁶⁹ This process of renewal (elsewhere framed as a “polishing” of the mirror of the heart) is dependent upon the grace of God, for God alone unveils the “partition from man’s heart”⁷⁰ so that one might see God reflected therein.

Like Augustine, Ghazālī is concerned with defining the proper ontological modality of this love, lest one should suppose that God is in “need” of creation. If love is “the soul’s inclination towards what is fitting,”⁷¹

65. Ronald J. Teske, “Properties of God and the Predicaments in *De Trinitate* 5,” in *To Know God and the Soul: Essays on the Thought of Saint Augustine*, ed. Ronald J. Teske (Washington, D.C: The Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 100.

66. Augustine, *De Trinitate*, V. 17.

67. Ghazālī, *Kitāb al-maḥabba*, 97.

68. Ghazālī, *Kitāb al-maḥabba*, 102.

69. Fadlou Shehadi, *Ghazālī’s Unique Unknowable God* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1964), 30. Love and knowledge thus become “mutually transfiguring” at this stage – as Ormsby states, “love [for God], in the end, is a matter of *passionate cognition*” (see Ormsby’s Introduction in his translation of Ghazālī’s *Kitāb al-maḥabba*, 32, emphasis added).

70. Abrahamov, *Divine Love in Islamic Mysticism*, 84.

71. Ghazālī, *Kitāb al-maḥabba*, 101.

this can only be conceived in “a deficient soul which lacks whatever is congruent with it.”⁷² There is no imperfection in God, however, in whom “all beauty...glory, and majesty”⁷³ are “present, actual and necessarily existent for all eternity.”⁷⁴ Ghazālī offers an analogy: two people may be close to each other either because of the simultaneous movement of both, or one remains stationary while the other moves. In the case of the latter, “nearness results from alteration within one of them, but without any such alteration on the other’s part”⁷⁵: a profound resonance with Augustine’s claim that the relational attributes of God reflect a change only on the part of the creature, not the divine essence. In ascribing love to God, “one [must] not anticipate any alteration in God whenever nearness to Him is renewed,” as though God “draws near after being far.”⁷⁶ The path of purification reforms the human subject in orientation to the God who is immutably loving.

Conclusion

Ghazālī’s *Kitāb al-maḥabba* and Augustine’s *De Trinitate* embody a profound relationality between the human being and God, setting forth the movement of contemplative desire for God as the fulfilment of human life per se. Both Augustine and Ghazālī locate the perfected “image” or “mirror” of the human being as a *conscious* knowing and loving God. Although human beings are oriented towards the divine in their very nature as created beings, it is only when one’s yearning is actively directed towards God, that one truly abides in that relationality that undergirds our very being: in Augustine’s words, “You made us for Yourself, and our heart is restless until it repose in You.”⁷⁷ For both thinkers, this pattern of desire that characterises the human being’s movement towards God is sustained by the divine grace at each moment: such that “unless and until God meets our longing out of

72. Ghazālī, *Kitāb al-maḥabba*, 101.

73. Ghazālī, *Kitāb al-maḥabba*, 101.

74. Ghazālī, *Kitāb al-maḥabba*, 101.

75. Ghazālī, *Kitāb al-maḥabba*, 103.

76. Ghazālī, *Kitāb al-maḥabba*, 103.

77. *Confessions*, 1, 1. Ghazālī echoes this theme of the restless character of human love for God: “a lover is someone who is never tranquil except in the presence of his beloved” (*Kitāb al-maḥabba*, 116).

his own love for us,”⁷⁸ our desire cannot be purified in contemplation of the divine.

Notably, both Ghazālī and Augustine interpret the final perfection of the human image as a matter of eschatological fulfilment; in Ghazālī’s interpretation, this is framed as a final lifting of “the veils” in full, whence “that in which there is some clarity [is] made consummately clear.”⁷⁹ For Augustine, we make progress now “through a puzzling reflection in a mirror,”⁸⁰ but then we shall be “face to face.”⁸¹ Crucially, Augustine’s understanding of man as in the “image” of God necessarily includes the idea of likeness,⁸² because “nothing can be said to be an image of something else unless it is in some way like it.”⁸³ Ghazālī’s notion that the knowledge of this world and the next differ only in their clarity⁸⁴ means that the eschatological fulfilment of the human being cannot, of necessity, be deemed a categorical “break” from the likeness that unfolds in the present. If the human being is only truly itself when it “gazes” upon the “face” of God, the final perfection of the created image becomes the fulfilment of a likeness already present as divine gift. Ghazālī’s *Kitāb al-maḥabba* and Augustine’s *De Trinitate* remind us that it is only through God’s own movement of love that our desire is re-directed towards its truthful end, thus demonstrating the ontological priority of the divine love that creates, renews and fulfils in a single “act” of grace.

78. Williams, *On Augustine*, 208.

79. Ghazālī, *Kitāb al-maḥabba*, 89.

80. Augustine, *De Trinitate*, XIV. 25.

81. Augustine, *De Trinitate*, XIV. 25.

82. Augustine departed here from the tradition of his day, which sharply separated the image – as what was bestowed at creation – from the likeness, “an ultimate goal, a task to be realised” (R. A. Markus, “‘Imago’ and ‘Similitudo’ in Augustine,” *Revue d’études augustiniennes et patristiques* 10 [1964]: 126).

83. Augustine, *De Diversis Quaestionibus*, LXXXIII, quoted in R.A. Markus, “‘Imago’ and ‘Similitudo’,” 125.

84. Though Ghazālī adds that there are divine matters that are infinite in nature and remain inaccessible to human beings, both in this life and the next.