[Book review of:] Ian Clausen, 'On Love, confession, Surrender and the Moral Self'

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a una compilazione il cui autore è noto e le cui fonti sono spesso conservate in originale. Solo rammarico, l'assenza di un indice dei nomi e di un bilancio finale.

Marina Giani

CLAUSEN, Ian, *On Love, Confession, Surrender and the Moral Self* (Reading Augustine), Bloomsbury, London/New York 2018, 140 p.

In 2018 a lovely book on Augustine's theology appeared. Written by Ian Clausen and entitled *On Love, Confession, Surrender and the Moral Self*, the book is the next volume in the series *Reading Augustine*, edited by Miles Hollingworth. The book focuses on the early works of Augustine and has as its central theme the discovery of the moral self, symbolized in the question, Where am I? This symbolic question implies that I am somewhere, at a certain place, and this place defines my relation to the outer world, to other people. In short, once I have defined where I am, I am already involved in a movement of conversion, because the question cannot be answered without referring to the other. The book is subdivided into four sections, in which Clausen discusses the *Confessions*, the Sceptics, the Manichaeans, and the Pelagians. As a whole, this book represents a delicate analysis of some early works of Augustine, and it also confronts us with an original approach, one that is clearly inspired by the wish to connect the Augustinian heritage to our modern times.

Clausen starts by introducing as the main topic the notion of love, considered to be the ultimate awakening of our moral self. This love, once it has been discovered, leads humans to confess it as the ground of their existence and being. This confession in turn entails a surrendering, and all this boils down to the question, Where are we? which means, Where is our moral self located, and where do we stand as moral beings? These questions refer not to a static point, but to a journey. Such a journey starts with the awakening of a heart that is seeking shelter, a home where the heart can find peace. The heart thus becomes a seeker, sometimes even a restless force. The first home Augustine found for his restless heart was wisdom. The quest for wisdom, as Augustine has pictured it, is the first step towards a home, a place of which one can say, Here I am. This quest, however, necessarily implies some kind of self-knowledge. The quest is in fact

a confrontation with our inner being, to which it is not always easy to respond. That is the reason Adam refused to answer when God asked, Where are you? When Adam finally answers, his answer is an accusation: the woman God gave him led him astray. In the words of Clausen: "Adam commits the blasphemous error of *accusing God, the creator, of sin*" (p. 35, italics of the author). The consequence is that Adam is sent away, but a small light remains and defines us as moral beings. This definition becomes the starting point for Clausen to discuss the conversion scene in the *Confessions*. In this chapter, the author tries to avoid as much as possible "the old ghost of lord Alfaric" (p. 44). Once again, the moral self can only shape itself by belonging to Christ, who is the real "place of security," a place that is certainly contrary to the heights of intellectual Platonism or Neoplatonism. Next, the author deals with the Sceptics we encounter in the *Contra Academicos*. He shows that Augustine dares to confront the skeptical approach to truth, while keeping close to the Scriptures. Augustine uses quotations from the Scriptures in dialogue with Cicero's *Academica*. This dialogue is Augustine's great battle concerning the possibility of finding the truth, and his conclusions are of course contrary to those of the Sceptics. Once again, this debate is not only theoretical; it is also and primarily a spiritual discovery in which prayer plays an important role. The next chapter deals with the Manichaeans; Augustine's encounter with the Manichaeans in fact illustrates a crucial moment in the discovery of one's moral self. Morality is not something that realizes itself outside of us; it is in our hands and hearts. Clausen therefore dwells on the relation between Adam and Christ; the first failed to act in the right way, while the second is the ultimate example. We should therefore turn to Christ and in that sense become responsible for the place where we are. The last chapter, then, is devoted to the question of evil and free choice. The author explains how Augustine slowly transforms the question, Where does evil come from? (*unde malum*) into the question that God puts to Adam, Where are you? This is a very fine interpretation of the way Augustine overcomes Manicheism, and it is a very subtle transformation of the question of theodicy. The conclusion is that the question, Where am I? has to be answered by saying that the place where the moral self is at home is not a place we can discover ourselves; that place is given to us. In this sense, finding the moral self is all about surrender.

This book has clearly been written by someone who loves Augustine and who tries to read him in the most charitable way.

Clausen's work includes some very fine and delicate approaches, among which the question regarding the moral self is an original one. It is indeed a question that haunts us in our times, and it is therefore with good reason that Clausen relates the Augustinian approach to our own day. In that respect, one might regret that the author ends his book with the analysis of *De Libero Arbitrio* book I and that he does not dwell on the further question of the capacities of this moral self. Once I have discovered that I am a moral being, am I also able to live up to the standards of this moral self? In other words, how does Clausen resolve the contradiction between Augustine's refutation of the Manicheans and his avowal that man is not capable of living a good life, at least not without the grace of God? It would be much appreciated if the author were to deal with this question in a sequel. All in all, this book is a precious analysis of the early Augustine.

Nevertheless, even though the author's overall picture is convincing, there are some points that remain open for discussion. In his love for Augustine, Clausen sometimes paints Augustine in colors that only seem to reveal an inner beauty, and sometimes that beauty is exaggerated. When the author writes that even "those who disagree with him (i.e. Augustine) call him their friend" (p. 3), I am not sure that authors such as Kurt Flasch or James O'Donnell, let alone Erasmus, who clearly preferred Origen to Augustine, would agree with Clausen. He also tends to see our modern times as hopelessly lost. He quotes, e.g., David Bentley Hart (p. 9), who insists that the good no longer interests people, who are therefore facing an unfathomable abyss that only produces its own impulses and decisions. That is a dark and pessimistic picture of our times that might need some nuance. Finally, I also regret that in some of the best passages in this book, the influence of Neoplatonism on Augustinian theology has been played down. Carol Harrison is quoted with much approval; Philip Carey receives less approval than he deserves for his very important research. To conclude, one technical remark: I did not find it easy to work with the titles of Augustine's work in English (for instance, not *Contra Academicos* but *Against the Academics*, abbreviated TA). Clausen's readers undoubtedly know the Latin titles of Augustine's works.

Clausen's main idea remains a convincing and attractive one. The questions we live by are to know where we are, what we represent as moral beings, and what the weight of love is in discovering and answering these questions. Strongly recommended book.

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